

Sermon: *Introduction of Mark and his Gospel*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 12.3.23

Happy New Year! Yes, it's the start of our new Church year. The secular calendar starts the New Year on January 1<sup>st</sup> but the Church calendar starts its new year on the first Sunday of Advent. That is today. Happy New Year!

The liturgical color of Advent is blue. It's also the color of All Angels. The stain glass window behind me has the central color of blue. Our choir seats and their robes are blue. If you look for it, blue is all over this beautiful place. And, it's on the altar and my stole too. We celebrate Advent in blue but I'd like to point out, that Advent is a perpetual season until Christ returns. Advent is a time of waiting and preparation for both the annual celebration of the birth of Christ as well as anticipating Christ's return to earth. As such, we are perpetually in Advent until his return. When he does return I am not sure what we're going to do with all this blue. But, that will be a celebration – to take down Advent permanently – because Christ has returned.

It's a new year and a new Gospel. Okay, it's the same Gospel; but, we are switching from reading Matthew to reading Mark. Big deal, you might say; one Gospel is like the other. I'm here to introduce Mark to you and to show you that it is a big deal and that each Gospel has its own flavor.

Mark was the first Gospel. Period. That is noteworthy of perhaps an entire sermon (although not today). Prior to Mark, no one had written a complete text of Jesus' life, words, ministry, healing, death and resurrection. It is believed that Matthew had Mark's Gospel when he wrote his; likewise, for Luke. John's Gospel, in my studies, has some text that was written before Mark's Gospel but clearly the entire text of John's Gospel was written well after Mark's. So, he was the first.

He had a particular view that was born out of a particular time. In his day, oral tradition was king. Writing these things down was an anomaly. So why did he do it? First, let's start with when did he do it. From all of my studies, it appears he did so in the year 64. Let's say that Jesus died and was resurrected in the spring of 32 (it happened in the spring and it was around 31, 32 or 33-ish so we'll go with 32; which is why people thought Jesus was 32 years old, or 33 or 31, when he was crucified; again, that's a different sermon). Oddly enough, 32 years later, the movement of Jesus Christ was growing by leaps and bounds. At the same time Emperor Nero began persecuting the Church. There was a fire in Rome that he blamed on the Church and set forth the first widespread persecution. It is believed that in 64, the Apostle Peter, and probably Paul, was martyred around that time. It is also believed that Mark was martyred too in this time by Nero – who, it appears, much of the Book of Revelation was written about; again, a different sermon.

Mark wrote this story, this Gospel, the Good News of Jesus the Christ for a particular reason. Persecution is one reason. He saw what was happening and wanted create a durable story that

could be passed from region to region and now from generation to generation. The movement was in its third decade. This means children were being born into it. Any movement, at this point, can lose its fervor and enthusiasm. Mark wanted to capture the reason for Jesus and all that he did. He wrote it in Greek so that it could last and be easily copied and distributed. He also, in my (and many others) opinion wanted to remind the Body of Believers of all that he had been told so that we won't just remember the really flashy stuff of Jesus' ministry; instead, we'll have a more complete picture of who he is.

There are some distinctive qualities of Mark's Gospel that you won't get in the others. Jesus' suffering is highlighted more in his text than anywhere else. Mark focused on Jesus's suffering perhaps as a way to highlight the suffering that his community and his readers were either going through or would go through. We read about Jesus' suffering today as a way to give us hope during our own suffering – even if what we are going through couldn't hold a candle to what they, and Jesus specifically, went through.

Another quality of Mark is Peter; specifically, all the times Peter got it wrong. No other Gospel treats Peter in the way that Mark's does. I (and, again, many others) think this is because Mark was with Peter. From the history of this Gospel, Mark, or, as he is called John-Mark, was a Jewish convert to the Messianic belief system of Jesus. John-Mark traveled with Paul and was probably related (maybe a brother) of Barnabas who, except for Paul, was the greatest church planter of all time. At some point, it appears that Mark left Paul to be with Peter; some believe he was in Rome when Peter was imprisoned there. In Second Peter, the apostle is attributed with writing that he intends to write an orderly account of Jesus called a Gospel. From what we have gathered, he never did. But, what if that account was recorded by Mark. His Gospel gives a special, first hand look at what it was like to be around Jesus as only Peter could relay. And, Peter would be the first to show his failings in order to highlight the grace of God working through him (and through all believers).

Critics of Christianity point to Mark's Gospel. They say that since Mark didn't write about the nativity – he starts with the baptism of Jesus – that it didn't occur. Also, the earliest versions of Mark's Gospel do not have chapter 16 that shows the resurrection. The original version, it appears, ends with the empty tomb. Critics say that Mark himself did not believe in the resurrection or in the miracle of his birth. To all of that, I vehemently disagree. Mark wanted to write about the stories that people had forgotten or were not talking about. The birth narrative and the resurrection account were widespread by this point. He wrote about the teaching of Jesus and how we are to relate to God and to one another; especially when one is suffering.

Here's another way to look at it. If someone wanted to write an account of Abraham Lincoln, you wouldn't go with the same old stories that everyone knows. You'd have to find stories that people didn't know. And, I believe, that is what John-Mark did; he told the stories that were in danger of being lost to time.

If we can now jump back into our time, into 2023, how do we read Mark nowadays? What lesson does he have for us?

Mark is going to tell us this church year that just because you believe doesn't mean that you won't have to have a hip replacement. Just because you have come to know the Lord Jesus as your Savior won't mean that the stock market won't drop, or that you won't get sick, or that you will never have disappointment; no, those things can happen to believers and non-believers alike. The difference – and this is a big difference – is that with Christ we can find peace in amongst life's troubles. We can find meaning in life when others would simply walk away. We can find community in Christ as a loving and supportive place to pray for us, to help us, to comfort and guide us when we are down, or sick, or scared or lonely. Mark makes it clear that bad things can happen to good believers; but, with Christ, we will have a Companion, a Comfort and a Guide to help us through.

Lastly, Mark was writing about hope in a time when the Church was facing a perilous and uncertain future. Jesus, in Mark, is full of hope when times are bad. The message of pardon and peace, of forgiveness and salvation, in Mark, is passed from generation to generation. That gives us hope in our day and time that we will make it through this period of uncertainty and fear. Mark's Gospel will light the path of hope, of joy and peace, that we will carry for all our lives and pass to the next generation.

To that I say Happy New Year!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.