



Surprised by Love

An exploration of
Mark's Gospel

Oct 8 - Nov 26

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Discussion questions for week 1: The Beginning and the End

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. The Gospel of Mark was written anonymously, and despite a wealth of conjecture and opinion over the centuries, no one knows who wrote it. Why might someone write about a matter they clearly care about so deeply without disclosing their identity? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this anonymity to readers in the first century and readers like us today?
3. Read Mark 1:9-15. What is the author trying to communicate here? What are we being made aware of as readers? What darkness, conflict and foreboding do you sense? What hope do you see here? Why do you think the author introduces these themes so early in this gospel?
4. Read Mark 1:21-22 and Mark 6:1-3. Given what an inspired and effective teacher Jesus is, why do you think the people seem to reject him? Can you think of any modern-day examples of this kind of rejection and dismissal?
5. Read Mark 3:20-22. How would you imagine Jesus felt about all this? Which of these two sources of rejection would have been most painful? Have you ever experienced this kind of misunderstanding and rejection yourself? What impact did that have on you? Have you ever misunderstood someone else and then later seen them in a completely different light? What changed your mind about them?
6. Read Mark 1:40-45 and Mark 8:27-30. Why do you think Jesus always seems to be keeping his identity secret?
7. Read Mark 8:31-35. Jesus surprises everyone by redefining what it means to be the Messiah. Why do you think Jesus says he has to suffer? Is this something that happens to him or something he chooses? Why do you think Jesus says his followers will inevitably suffer? In what ways could this be a positive, redemptive force in our lives and in what ways a destructive one?
8. Break into groups of 2-3 and share about ways in which you are struggling or suffering at the moment. Then take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone take a moment of silence to open your heart to God and share what is weighing on you. Breathe in God's love and acceptance and sit quietly in the comfort of God's presence with you and in you.

Practice for the week: Sacred Reading of Scripture – Mark 1:1-15

This is a way of praying with scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called "Lectio Divina" which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. A regular practice of Lectio Divina cultivates the ability to listen deeply to scripture and allow God's presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now, and to grow in awareness of God's presence with us, in us and around us. We interact with the text of scripture but unlike Bible study we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen in quiet and allow the words to settle into us as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

There are many ways to engage with Lectio Divina, but four steps are commonly used: read, meditate, respond, and rest. The scripture is printed below, and you might prefer to listen to it rather than read it (there are some great apps and websites for that such as www.biblegateway.com).

Read: Read the passage of scripture. This is best done slowly and intentionally with an awareness of God's presence speaking through the text. Simply listen for God's voice in this moment. Don't search or seek out the meaning on your own, but rather wait, and listen for something to emerge. When a word or phrase seems to settle on you, take it in and just sit with it in the silence.

Meditate: Read the text again for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" God in it. This is a deep searching of the heart. Ponder it, reflect on it, ask how this is applicable to your own experience, your own life? How is God reaching you right now, speaking to you in the word or phrase?

Respond: The third reading is for the purpose of responding back to God, expressing honestly whatever is happening in your heart and spirit as a result of listening. There may be joy, tears, awe, reverence, even confusion - give any emotion or thought that arises freely to God at this time. And listen for how God might want you to turn, move or act because of what you've heard.

Rest: Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, return to the word that stood out in the reading, and repeat it. Allow other thoughts to fade. Let this "sacred word" symbolize all your love for God, and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and to let the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

Mark 1:1-15 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way - a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13 and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Discussion questions for week 2: Friends and Foes

Take some time before you meet in your group (or before reflect on these questions yourself) to read this week's passage, Mark 1:16-3:35.

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you?
2. Read Mark 1:1. What do you think Mark means by calling Jesus Messiah and Son of God?
3. Read Mark 1:21-28.
 - How do you think Jesus' teaching differed from that of the teachers of the law such that people concluded Jesus taught "as one who had authority"? Why might people describe Jesus' teaching as "new"?
 - How is this authority demonstrated?
 - What relevance might stories about impure spirits have for us today, living in a more scientific age?
4. Read Mark 1:40-45. An important early manuscript has "indignant" as Jesus' emotion in v.41. Most other manuscripts have "pity." The NIV translators used "indignant" because they thought it was more likely that scribes copying the manuscript would change "indignant" to "pity" rather than the other way round. What might both of these emotions reveal about Jesus? Why might "pity" be a more acceptable word to readers?
5. Read Mark 2:1-12. How do you think the man felt when Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven"? How is Jesus' authority revealed throughout this story?
6. Read Mark 3:1-5. What does this incident tell us about Jesus' authority? What do you think explains Jesus' emotions in this story? Is there anything in our own church gatherings that might cause Jesus to look around "in anger" or "deeply distressed"? What can you do to help change that?
7. Mark returns to the themes of exorcism and authority in Mark 3:22-30. Read that passage now.
 - What do you think motivated the teachers of the law to say this about Jesus?
 - What do you think they assumed about Jesus' motives for driving our demons?
 - John the Baptist called Jesus a "stronger" man. How might that be relevant here?
 - The speaker on Sunday said that to "blaspheme against the Holy Spirit" was to deny hope in the victory of good over evil. Do you agree with this interpretation? How do you understand these words?
8. In these first 3 chapters, Mark presents Jesus as a powerful opponent to all that is dark, unhealthy, and oppressive. Break into groups of 2-3 and share about any areas of your life where you long for healing or liberation. Then take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone take a moment to express your longing to God. Then breathe in God's love and grace, and sit quietly in the comfort of God's presence with you and in you.

Practice for the week: "I am willing" breath prayer

He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" (Mark 1:41b)

Throughout this week take note of any instances when you feel hurt or weighed down. At such times, our breathing often becomes constricted, rapid, or shallow. Take a moment to practice breath prayer. Pause. Consciously breathe deeply, filling the whole of your lungs. Exhale deeply. Think of Jesus reaching out to touch the leper. As you inhale, hear Jesus say, "I am willing." As you exhale, hear Jesus say, "Be clean!" and receive the cleansing, life-giving breath of God.

Discussion questions for week 3: Stories of Confusion and Enlightenment

Take some time before you meet in your group (or before reflect on these questions yourself) to read this week's passage, Mark 4:1-34.

1. As you reflect on Sunday's message, what point, principle, or insight stands out as helpful, insightful, or challenging?
2. Reflect on this quote from the message: "The whole of Jesus' ministry was to establish a community so convinced of their Belovedness to God that they proclaim the Belovedness of others." What stands out to you? Do you feel loved by God? Why or why not?
3. Read the Parable of the Sower from Mark 4:3-9. Who do you think the sower is? Why do you think the sower is spreading seeds so carelessly?
4. Barbara Brown Taylor says: "If this is really the parable of the Sower and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite new. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere." Have you heard a message on this parable before? If so, did it emphasize the sower or the soil? How does it feel to know that God's generosity is not dependent on your responsibility?
5. In the message from Sunday, we saw that proximity matters when it comes to understanding the teachings of Jesus. Read Mark 4:10. What does it look like to be close to Jesus today?
6. Read Mark 4:11. What do you think Jesus means by, "The secret of the Kingdom of God?"
7. In several parables, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to seeds that produce an abundant harvest. Read Mark 4:26-32. What do you think these two parables teach us about the kingdom of God?

Practice for the week: Centered in Jesus

Sometimes, we are tempted to think that we have not accomplished enough, that we are not good enough, or that we are not deserving of anything good. In Mark 4, we are reminded that God sows the seed, and God is responsible for its growth. We just have to center ourselves in Jesus and rest in His presence. Resting in God is not about ceasing work but making space for God to work. This week, spend at least 5-10 minutes every day sitting in silence, quieting your mind, and trying to be present. Each day, at the end of your time of silence, write down how you feel and any thoughts that emerge.

Discussion questions for week 4: Miracles and Resistance

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. Read Mark 4:35-41: How do you "feel" this story? What emotions does it evoke in you? What emotions do you observe in the story? What are the emotions of the disciples? What about Jesus? What emotions does the storm evoke?
3. Read Psalm 89:8-10 and Psalm 107: 23-29. How might these relate to the passage above in Mark and why? How might this guide us in interpreting this the storm story?
4. Read Isaiah 51:9-10. In the storm story in Mark Jesus is asleep. Sometimes we might feel God is asleep or absent from our lives. What does this story do to inform our opinion about that?
5. The speaker on Sunday suggested that "salvation" might be best viewed as empowerment rather than rescue. Do you agree? What are the benefits and downsides of rescue? What are the benefits and downsides of empowerment?
6. Read Mark 6:47-52. In what way is this similar to the story we just looked at in Mark 4? In what ways is it different?
7. Read Matthew 14:25-33. Why do you think the writer of Matthew adds this part of the story? Why do you think the writer of Mark left it out?
8. Break into groups of 2-3 and share about ways in which you feel you are in a storm at the moment and/or how you feel about the storms and chaos you see in the world. Then take some time to pray for one another and the situations in the world. If you are reflecting on these questions alone take a moment of silence to open your heart to God and share what is weighing on you. Breathe in God's love and embrace the comfort of God's presence with you and in you.

Practice for the week: Centering ourselves in stillness

This week try to make a brief time each morning to center yourself and be consciously aware of God's presence with you. Sit quietly in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and center yourself by focusing on your breathing. As you breathe in, allow God's love to fill you. Imagine it as an unforced, unconditional gift that God is offering and receive it. As you breathe out, let go of fear, tension, pressure, or anything that feels forced on you. Relax and sink into God's peace. Feel the rhythm of your breathing as you breathe in love and breathe out tension and pressure. Slowly repeat the decreasing lines of Psalm 46:10 below, pausing for a minute between each line:

- Be still and know that I am God.
- Be still and know that I am.
- Be still and know that I.
- Be still and know.
- Be still.
- Be.

Now take a few moments to rest in God's peace.

Discussion questions for week 5: Old Ways and New

Take some time before you meet in your group (or before reflect on these questions yourself) to read this week's passage, Mark 7:1-8:21.

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you?
2. Read Mark 7:1-23 and consider the following questions:
 - Why do you think the Pharisees raised the issue of some of the disciples eating without ceremonially washing?
 - Jesus' response is direct and impassioned—even insulting! Why do you think Jesus reacted so strongly to their question?
 - What elements of hypocrisy within the Christian tradition today might elicit a similarly strong response from Jesus?
 - Are there any ways in which we as a community place more regard on our own traditions than on obeying God?
3. Read Mark 7:24-30.
 - When you read Jesus' response to the woman in v. 27, how does it make you feel? Why do you think Jesus said this?
 - Ruth suggested this was an example of "challenge-riposte" (a trick question designed to restore honor to the woman). What do you think about this theory?
 - Why do you think the author of Mark included this story?
4. Read Mark 7:31-37. This miracle is told in a way that highlights several of Mark's themes in this section: the use of unclean saliva, sighing, opening up, and the news spreading despite the Messianic secret. What do you think the author of Mark is trying to communicate through his telling of this healing?
5. The author of Mark closes this section on Jesus' work among Gentiles with an account of a second miraculous feeding in Mark 8:1-10. How is this miracle like the previous feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:30-44)? How is it different? What do you think is the significance (if any) of these differences and similarities?
6. In these chapters, the author of Mark has a lot to say about Jesus giving bread that satisfies to all kinds of people. Break into groups of 2-3 and share about any areas of your life where you feel dissatisfied, and long for more of Jesus' presence. Then take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone take a moment to express your longing to God. Then breathe in God's love and grace, and sit quietly in the comfort of God's presence with you and in you.

Practice for the week: Remembering God in the everyday

The Pharisees focused on external rituals and neglected matters of the heart. But the original intent had been a good one: to remind people that there are no distinct "sacred" and "secular" realms. God is with us in every aspect of our day-to-day lives. For the next week (or two!), introduce a simple practice

that might help you to remember God's loving presence with you in the midst of daily life. Some examples include:

- Set a chime on your phone at certain times in the day
- Stick a post-it note reminder on your fridge or bathroom mirror
- Put a small stone, shell, or other object in your pocket
- Tie a band around your wrist
- Change your phone wallpaper or computer screen saver to something you associate with God's love

If you meet regularly in a group, plan to let one another know how effective (or not!) this exercise was for remembering God's presence in the whole of your life.

Discussion questions for week 6: Shock and Horror

Take some time before you meet in your group (or before reflecting on these questions yourself) to read this week's passage, Mark 8:22-9:1.

1. According to Mark 8:27, Jesus was near Caesarea Philippi when he conversed with the disciples about his identity. This city was a predominantly Gentile community in the Roman Empire. It was named after Herod Philip, the son of King Herod the Great, and the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. As its name implies, Caesarea Philippi was dedicated politically and religiously to Roman rule. It even had a temple dedicated to honoring Caesar. Given its location and significance to the Roman Empire, what reason, or reasons, might Jesus have had for engaging in a discussion about his identity in this location?
2. In Mark 8:29, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Why is this question important? Who do you say Jesus is, and how has your answer to that question changed over time?
3. In this week's passage, Jesus predicts his death, which is met with "shock and horror." Peter refused to accept this news (Mark 8:32). Though you might not be able to imagine yourself rebuking Jesus to his face as Peter does, in what ways can your daily actions have the same effect?
4. Reread Mark 8:34-38. In these verses, Jesus introduces the disciples to the way of the cross. What do these verses teach us about being a follower of Jesus? What reasons does Jesus give for why people should follow him down this hard road?
5. How has your relationship with Jesus affected your lifestyle? Relationships? Priorities? Politics?
6. In 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an article for the Christian Century reflecting on his suffering. He says: *"My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue."* What do you think King means by "creative force?" Can you think of a time when you transformed your suffering into a "creative force?"
7. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychologist and holocaust survivor, wrote that "despair is suffering without meaning." According to Mark 8:34-35, what meaning can be found in suffering?

Practice for the week: Sacred Reading of Scripture – Mark 8:34-38

This is a way of praying with Scripture that has been used for centuries by followers of Jesus and is often called *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for sacred or divine reading. A regular practice of *Lectio Divina* cultivates the ability to listen deeply to Scripture and allow God's presence to open our lives. It helps us listen for the still small voice of God speaking to us personally here and now, and to grow in awareness of God's presence with us, in us and around us. We interact with the text of Scripture but unlike Bible study we do not analyze or dissect it. We listen in quiet and allow the words to settle into us as we quiet our thinking to receive them deeply into our hearts.

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Rest: Finally, let your mind and emotions settle to rest in silence and simply seek to love and be loved by God. Anytime distracting thoughts arise, just return to the word that stood out in the reading, and repeat it, and allow other thoughts to fade. Allow this "sacred word" to symbolize all your love for God, and your willingness to give God all your attention. Sit in the presence of God and use the word as a window through which to gaze upon God and to allow the light and love of God to stream into your heart and spirit.

Discussion questions for week 7: Failure and Fresh Starts

1. What resonated with you from the message this past Sunday? Was there anything that seemed timely or relevant to you?
2. When you think of the disciple Peter, what first comes to mind? Do you think you would have enjoyed his company? Why or why not? If you could ask Peter any question, what would you ask?
3. Read Mark 1:16-19 and Mark 1:29-39. What do these verses tell us about the character of Peter (or Simon, as he was then called)? Put yourself in the sandals of the first disciples. What might it have been like to be around Jesus in this early stage of his ministry?
4. Read Mark 6:7-13 and Mark 8:14-21. The disciples seem to be effective and full of faith some days, and totally uncomprehending and overwhelmed with fear at other times. Can you think of such contrasting examples in your own life? What do you think explains this variance?
5. Read Mark 14:27-31 and Mark 14:66-72. What emotions do you think Peter would have experienced when he heard Jesus' words? What thoughts do you think went through his head when the rooster crowed a second time?
6. Read Mark 16:1-8. (Note: some manuscripts have additional text beyond verse 8, but many scholars believe they were additions made by a later editor.)
 - Why do you think the gospel ends in this way?
 - Why do you think Peter is mentioned by name?
 - How does this impact how you think about your own faith journey?
7. Break into groups of 2-3 and share how you feel about following Jesus right now. Then take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to prayerfully consider this question. Open your heart to God, and let the love and grace demonstrated in Jesus flood your heart.

Practice for the week: Being with Jesus

He appointed twelve that they might be with him... (Mark 3:14a)

As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so continue to live in him. Keep your roots deep in him and have your lives built on him. Be strong in the faith, just as you were taught, and always be thankful. (Colossians 2:6-7)

Take time this week to be with Jesus. Take a walk or find a quiet place where you can open your heart to his presence. Talk to Jesus as if you could see him walking or sitting beside you. Tell him everything that is on your heart. Thank him for his unalterable love through all the ups and downs of life.