

CHAPTER 3

Jesus' First Days of Ministry Stir Controversy

Mark 1.14-3.35

READ MARK 1.14-3.35.

In Mark's gospel Jesus begins his ministry when he hears the Baptist has been arrested. His first words announce the profound significance of his ministry and person. **"God's reign is near."** In Jesus' coming among the people of Galilee, God's promises have ripened into fulfillment. Jesus' message is a call: **"Repent and believe the good news"** (1.15).

The word *repent* in Greek is *metanoia*, which means *conversion*—*turning around or toward or back*. Jesus' call goes beyond John the Baptist's call to a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sin. Jesus invites faith in him and his good news. He is the one to follow.

After establishing the theme of Jesus' preaching, the gospel narrative sets Jesus in furious motion. Mark's stories are short; the gospel writer uses the word *immediately* to shift quickly to new scenes. With Jesus' every step, God's dynamic, healing, liberating power breaks into the human community.

In these opening three chapters Jesus preaches, calls disciples, heals people, casts out demons, forgives sins, appoints the Twelve, and claims those who do the will of God as his real family. Frequently the gospel writer follows a scene in which Jesus heals one person with a scene in which he heals many. He calls one tax collector; many come to dinner. Jesus' fame spreads; crowds swell with travelers from increasing distances; scribes and Pharisees accuse him of breaking the law and blaspheming.

DAY ONE: FRIDAY ALONG THE SHORE

Immediately after his baptism and Spirit time in the desert, Jesus appears in Galilee. It's a Friday as Jesus strides along the lakeshore, sees Peter and Andrew fishing, and calls them to follow him. **"Come after me. I will make you fishers of people"** (1.17). Immediately the two follow. Jesus walks on and sees James and John readying their nets and calls out to them. Immediately and without good reason James and John leave their father and go off with Jesus. The four unhesitatingly take first steps into new lives. Jesus' call is direct; their responses quick and decisive. However, their maturing as committed disciples happens more slowly. Only gradually as they accompany Jesus do they appreciate who he is. Their fear, incomprehension, and flight make them ideal role models for us readers who

like them fail and flee Jesus' call. Their story is part of Jesus' story from the beginning.

DAY TWO: SABBATH IN CAPERNAUM

Jesus headquarters his ministry in Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. On Sabbath Jesus preaches at the local synagogue; his new disciples go with him. The dark basalt foundation of this synagogue still rests beneath the ruins of a second-century synagogue that stands at the highest point in the village. What amazes those who hear Jesus preach is the authority he claims. He does not cite the legal precedents of the oral and written law as was apparently the practice of the scribes and Pharisees. He challenges the law in a sense that amazes and attracts his hearers.

A man shouts out to Jesus in the synagogue; an ungodly spirit possesses the man the way success, security, drugs, alcohol can drive any of us. Ironically this unclean spirit, recognizing a threat in Jesus, is the first to proclaim, **"I know who you are—the Holy One of God"** (1.24). Jesus will not allow this voice to herald who he is. Jesus silences the spirit and frees the man from its influence. Jesus' action elevates his hearers' response from interest to amazement and creates the first of many thresholds in the gospel where faith can begin. **"What is this?"** the people ask and answer, **"A new teaching—with authority!"** People talk; Jesus becomes famous.

From the synagogue, Jesus and his four disciples go to Peter's house, where his mother-in-law lies sick with a fever. **"Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her and she began to serve them"** (1.31). The word *lift* in English, *egeiro* in

Greek, means *to raise up*. This is the same verb Jesus uses when he predicts his passion, “**After I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee**” (14.28). The young man uses the same verb when he tells the three woman who find the tomb empty, “**He has been raised; he is not here**” (16.6). Mark’s gospel uses the same word to describe Jesus’ healing actions and God’s action in Jesus’ resurrection.

Peter’s mother-in-law becomes Jesus’ first woman disciple. Her story takes just one verse among the 660 verses in Mark’s gospel. She responds to Jesus lifting her up by serving him. The Greek word *diakonie* means *serve*. It can mean providing for physical needs and serving the table. In fact, the New American Bible translates her response, “she began to wait on them.” The English word *deacon* comes from this same Greek word. The work of serving the tables later becomes an office in the Christian community (Acts 6.1-6).

In Mark’s gospel Jesus says of himself, “**the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many**” (10.45). If we apply this definition to Peter’s mother-in-law, she responds to her healing by giving her life to the new community. In fact in the story the male disciples and Jesus come to be served; she is the model disciple who serves.

DAY THREE: THE MISSION WIDENS

After sunset, a new day begins. Sick and possessed people crowd Jesus door. He heals and frees them, repeating for many what he has done for two individuals, the man in the synagogue and Peter’s mother-in-law. This is Mark’s storytelling technique. The first evangelist dramatizes the dy-

namic inbreaking of God's healing, liberating power in Jesus' ministry by following two stories in which Jesus helps individuals with a summary scene in which he helps many. After a little time in the evening to sit apart from the crowds and pray, his disciples find Jesus and they set off to bring the good news to surrounding villages.

With Jesus' widening mission, the narrative stops marking days. Interestingly Mark's gospel begins and ends with the same three days—Friday, Sabbath, Sunday. In the first three Jesus gathers disciples, heals the sick, frees the possessed, bringing God's kin*dom near.

Chapter one ends with the story of a leper who can't keep secret who Jesus is and spreads his fame. The leper so moves Jesus to pity that he stretches out his hand, touches, and heals the man but tells him **“to say nothing to anyone”** (1.44). Jesus demonstrates the wholeness God intends for human beings and returns the man to the life of the human community. This person isolated by his disease from family and neighbors cannot contain his good news. He **“went out and proclaimed the matter freely.”** He becomes the first of four suppliant who won't keep the secret of who Jesus is. The leper testifies to all Jesus has done for him.

CONTROVERSIES BEGIN

After reading the first chapter of Mark, we expect Jesus to preach the good news, heal the sick, and free the possessed. He travels to other villages to do what he does in Capernaum. When he returns, increasing numbers crowd his house and door (2.1). In fact, four men have to dig through the roof to lower a paralyzed friend into Jesus' presence.

To readers' surprise, Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins rather than healing his body. Jesus does what only God can do. Scribes take notice. Jesus takes them on, **"Which is easier, to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up, take your mat, and walk?'"** Then Jesus demonstrates his authority to forgive sins by saying to the man, **"Arise, take up your mat, and go home"** (2.11). Immediately he does.

This story is longer than any other in the first three chapters. It is a literary and theological sandwich that introduces controversy into the narrative. Jesus' forgiving action forms the top and his healing action the bottom of the sandwich; the theological controversy about which is easier, forgiving or healing, is the meat in the middle.

Mark's gospel narrates three more controversies between Jesus and the religious authorities in chapter two. In each tension heightens. In Mark 2.16 the scribes question Jesus' disciples about why he eats with sinners. In Mark 2.24 they question Jesus directly about why he and his disciples pick grain on Sabbath. These controversies about the law culminate in a plot to accuse and destroy Jesus in Mark 3.2, 6.

Jesus does not duck controversy and extends his ministry to people outside the law. Levi is sitting in his tax collection booth when Jesus calls him to become a disciple. By calling Levi, Jesus includes in his inner circle a person the Pharisees regard as a threat to Jewish identity, a person outside the law because he collaborates with the Romans and collects their taxes. Levi is not the only tax collector who follows Jesus. When Jesus and his disciples eat at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners join them, **"for there were many who followed him"** (2.15).

Jesus continues gathering disciples and appoints twelve to become apostles, whom he sends out with authority to proclaim the message and cast out demons. As chapter three ends, his family and mother go to see Jesus in Capernaum (3.31). People are telling them he is out of his mind. When his family asks to see him, Jesus does not go out to them but says, **“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”** (3.35). Jesus claims his followers rather than his relatives as his family. Jesus does in these first days what he does in all his days—preach, heal, cast out demons, gather followers, forgive sins, and generate controversy.

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- 1 What sense of who Jesus is do you get from the fast and furious pace in his first days of ministry? What sense of Jesus' identity emerges? Who do you imagine Jesus thinks he is?
 - 2 How do you interpret the gospel's use of *egeiro* for Jesus' actions in his miracles and in God's raising him to new life?
 - 3 In what sense do Jesus' first days tell the whole story of his ministry?
 - 4 Imagine what Peter's mother-in-law's life is like after Jesus raises her up, and she becomes his disciple, serving him and the community he is gathering.
 - 5 What is the kin*dom Jesus brings near? How do you experience it today?
 - 6 Who belongs to the family Jesus claims as his own (Mark 3.31-35)? Who are those that do the will of God and are brothers, sisters, and mother to Jesus? Who belongs in an illustration of this scene?