

A SUBVERSIVE COMMENTARY



THE CHALLENGER

FAITH, LOVE, AND RESISTANCE IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

BRENT DAVID MILLER

The Challenger

Faith, Love, and Resistance
in the Gospel of Mark

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This book is dedicated to my Mom and Dad, William and Mary Louise Miller. I lost you both during the course of writing it, but because of Jesus, I know I will see you again.

Contents

Introduction	1
The Personal History of John Mark.....	4
Mark 1:1 - Jesus is Lord.....	7
Mark 1:2-8 - The Messenger.....	9
Mark 1:9-15 – The Challenger Appears	12
Mark 1:16-20 – The First Disciples.....	15
Mark 1:21-28 – Reckoning with Dragons.....	18
Mark 1:29-34 – Pushing Back Darkness.....	21
Mark 1:35-39 – Times of Refreshing.....	23
Mark 1:40-46 – Touching the Untouchable.....	26
Mark 2:1-12 – The God who Breaks the Rules	29
Mark 2:13-17 – Friend of Sinners	32
Mark 2:18-22 – New Wineskins.....	35
Mark 2:23-3:12 – Lord of the Sabbath.....	38
Mark 3:13-19 – Jars of Clay.....	42
Mark 3:20-35 – The Misunderstood Messiah.....	45
Mark 4:1-20 – Seed and Sower.....	49
Mark 4:21-25 – Practice Makes Perfect.....	51
Mark 4:26-34 – Small Beginnings, Big Miracles.....	54
Mark 4:35-41 – In the Father’s Hands	57
Mark 5:1-20 – The Fall of Legion	60
Mark 5:21-43 – Raising Daughters.....	65

Mark 6:1-13 – With or Without	69
Mark 6:14-29 – The Way of the World	73
Mark 6:30-44 – The Army of Jesus	77
Mark 6:45-56 – Safely to Shore	80
Mark 7:1-23 – The Wellspring	84
Mark 7:24-30 – A Faith for the World.....	87
Mark 7:31-37 – To the Glory of Jesus	91
Mark 8:1-21 – Missing the Kingdom.....	94
Mark 8:22-26 – Learning to See.....	98
Mark 8:27-30 – Cards on the Table	101
Mark 8:31-9:1 – The Way	105
Mark 9:2-13 – Listen to Him!	109
Mark 9:14-29 – Weapon of Choice.....	113
Mark 9:30-37 - Greatness	116
Mark 9:38-49 – Competitive Ministry.....	119
Mark 10:1-12 – One Flesh.....	123
Mark 10:13-16 – Faith Like Caleb	127
Mark 10:17-31 – The Life of the Ages.....	130
Mark 10:32-34 – The Third Prediction.....	134
Mark 10:35-45 – Not So With You	137
Mark 10:46-52 – The Light of the World	140
Mark 11:1-11 – A Peculiar Procession	144
Mark 11:12-21 – Time for Something New	148

Mark 11:22-26 – Moving Mountains	151
Mark 11:27-12:12 – The Vineyard Master’s Son	154
Mark 12:13-17 – A Tale of Two Kingdoms.....	158
Mark 12:18-27 – One Bride for Seven Brothers	161
Mark 12:28-34 – Jesus for Dummies	165
Mark 12:35-37 – The God-Man	168
Mark 12:38-44 – From the Heart.....	171
Mark 13:1-23 – The Coming War.....	175
Mark 13:24-37 – Carry the Fire.....	179
Mark 14:1-11 – Extravagant Love	183
Mark 14:12-26 – Worthy is the Slaughtered Lamb!	187
Mark 14:27-31 – Undeserved Love.....	191
Mark 14:32-42 – Behold Him Rise	194
Mark 14:43-52 – The Nonviolent Revolutionary	198
Mark 14:53-65 – Religion and Power	201
Mark 14:66-72 – Peter’s Denial	206
Mark 15:1-15 – The Empire’s Turn	210
Mark 15:16-26 – The Coronation of the King	214
Mark 15:27-39 – Mission Accomplished.....	218
Mark 15:40-41 – Unlikely Heroes	221
Mark 15:42-47 – No Turning Back	224
Mark 16:1-7 – The Revolution Begins.....	228
Mark 16:8 – We Can Be Heroes.....	232

Acknowledgements	238
Works Cited	239
About the Author.....	240

Also by Brent David Miller

*Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on
Salvation, Hope, and the Love of God*

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*Deleting Jesus: Recovering
Discipleship in the Wake of 2016*

*Royal Mistakes: Life Lessons from
Some Seriously Messed Up Judean Kings*

*'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain –
to receive power, wealth, wisdom,
strength, honor, glory and blessing.'*

Revelation 5:12

The Challenger

Introduction

The archetype of the challenger is well known in both literature and film. Oppression abounds when suddenly an unlikely hero steps onto the stage. If the hero doesn't appear in disguise, as is often the case, he or she at least appears out of nowhere. Picture King Richard in *Ivanhoe* coming as the Black Knight to take back the throne from Prince John, or some other story involving an improbable hero who manages to subvert the repressive order of things. There is something about the revolutionary challenger that thrills the soul and inspires the imagination.

One beautiful spring day, I opened my Bible to Mark's Gospel to do some devotional reading. I began, appropriately enough, with Mark 1:1 and read through the end of the chapter. I have probably read Mark's Gospel a hundred times or more, but this time was different. Maybe it was my frame of mind, or perhaps divine inspiration, but this time I wasn't reading the story of the Jesus you typically hear about in church. I was reading the story of a revolutionary, of an unlikely, unexpected hero rising from the margins to do battle against the oppressors of humankind. In a world that had gone wrong, Jesus was the challenger come to set things right.

I stopped reading as a fresh wave of excitement crashed over me. In my hands was one of the most subversive documents ever written.

I picked up a leather-bound journal I keep in my office for such occasions and began to record my thoughts. Over the next weeks, I slowly made my way through the Gospel of Mark, one story at a time, taking special note of its subversive elements. They were everywhere. In every story Jesus was challenging the powers of the world, be they political,

The Challenger

religious, or spiritual. To borrow a phrase of Paul's, Jesus was calling them out, disarming them of their power, making a public spectacle of them.¹

I harbor no illusions that I am the first to see this in Mark's Gospel. Indeed, I am sure I owe many of my observations to the radical Christians who have influenced my life. Nonetheless, as I jotted down my thoughts, I was acutely aware that most Christians, at least the ones I know, do not notice subversion in the Gospels. We have been conditioned by a Christian culture that benefits from the status quo to miss it. Sure, Jesus can flip over a table or two if you get him mad enough, but beyond that he isn't all that challenging. Christianity in our day seems to be, for many, mostly fire insurance. Say a prayer, believe in Jesus, and receive your get out of hell free card. Or, if it's something more, it's about that special someone who helps in time of need, the Good Shepherd of John's Gospel who tends his sheep in their distress. We have, sad to say, transformed the subversive, challenging Jesus into a tame Messiah who exists to meet our needs.

Yes, that's a big generalization. Christianity is more than that to many believers. But how many Christians see the Gospel as a revolutionary call to arms – a summons to go into the world and join Jesus in his ongoing work of challenging the powers and turning the world upside down? I suppose some do, but many of these have tragically made the equal and opposite error of domesticated religion by transforming Jesus into an aggressive champion of warrior evangelicalism and Christian nationalism, using him to justify bellicose rhetoric and violence. Few Christians today realize the precise nature of Jesus' challenge to the world.

Anyway, such were my thoughts as I wrote in that journal. So it is not surprising that somewhere along the way I made the decision to share

¹ Colossians 2:15.

The Challenger

them, in the hope that perhaps they might resonate with others as well. In the pages that follow, I have tried to capture some of what captivated me during those spring days spent in the Gospel of Mark.

I've fashioned this book to be an accessible commentary on Mark's Gospel. As such, each entry is limited in scope. I have made no attempt to plumb the depths of every word, phrase, or historical reference. John suggested at the end of his Gospel that if everything Jesus did or said were thoroughly explored and written down, the world would not be able to contain the books that would be written.² My entries will be much shorter, a bit longer than what you might find in a daily devotional. I'd like to think that people will read it as a commentary for subversives, or at least would be subversives, who want to understand the radical challenge presented by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I should mention a word about translation. The Biblical text at the beginning of each entry is a blend of my paraphrase of a public domain version of the scriptures and my own translation of the Greek New Testament. Verses quoted in the body of each entry are the same, unless otherwise indicated.

I hope that in these pages you will find the Jesus that so much of the church misses: the one who came to turn, not just a few tables over, but the entire world upside down.

² John 21:25.

The Challenger

The Personal History of John Mark

John Mark was the son of a woman named Mary, a Christian from Jerusalem who hosted prayer meetings in her home, notably the one in which the believer's prayed for Peter's release from prison.³ He was also a cousin to Barnabas, Paul's early partner on the mission field.⁴ When Paul and Barnabas left Antioch of Syria on their first missionary journey, Mark accompanied them as their assistant.⁵ What exactly did he do? The sort of things all assistants do: run errands, fill water jugs, carry bags, make coffee. Most importantly, he had a front row seat to the preaching of Paul and his Uncle Barney. Basically, he had the greatest missionary internship of all time.

Nonetheless, shortly after the trio's encounter with Elymas the sorcerer on the island of Cyprus, Mark deserted the mission field and returned home to Jerusalem.⁶ The scriptures do not explain why. Perhaps he was frightened by the encounter with evil. Perhaps the travel just didn't agree with him. Or perhaps he was simply homesick for Mom's cooking. Whatever the case, Mark just up and quit.

We can't be sure what Mark did back in Jerusalem, but with a little imagination we can paint a picture. Slowly, Mark realized he had made the biggest mistake of his life. Called to share the grand adventure of changing the world with the Good News of Jesus, he had chosen the tedium of the ordinary. Reports came in from time to time about what Paul and Barnabas were doing on the mission field. Mark felt like a heel. Like the men whom Shakespeare depicts as 'holding their manhoods

³ Acts 12:12.

⁴ Colossians 4:10.

⁵ Acts 13:5.

⁶ Acts 13:13.

The Challenger

cheap,' at the memory of the 'happy few' who fought for Henry V, he felt the sting of having remained at home while others went forth to fight for King Jesus.

But one day Barnabas and Paul returned. The believers had gathered to discuss important business about the Gentiles and their place in the Church. On the heels of that meeting, Uncle Barney, a real softy whose heart contained room enough for the world, offered Mark a second chance and invited him to come along on his next missionary journey.⁷ Paul wasn't sold. He didn't have time to rehabilitate a deserter. The two partners had a sharp disagreement over the matter, and in the end, split up. Paul took on a new partner for the journey to Syria and Cilicia, and Barnabas took his nephew with him back to Cyprus.⁸

That's the last we hear about John Mark in the book of Acts. But if we flash ahead to the 60's AD, Mark makes another appearance in the records of the New Testament Church. Paul is now an old man, living under house arrest in Rome, awaiting execution. Most of his friends have deserted him. But a few remain loyal, and these Paul mentions in the letters he writes. In two of these letters, Paul mentions that among these loyal, noble co-workers in the Kingdom of God is – guess who? Yup. John Mark.⁹ Indeed, in one of Paul's last letters, written to his son in the faith Timothy, he wrote, 'please come quickly...and bring John Mark with you. He is a great help to me.'¹⁰ Apparently, the two had more than reconciled.

⁷ Acts 15:36-37.

⁸ Acts 15:38-41.

⁹ Colossians 4:10-11; Philemon 23.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 4:9-11.

The Challenger

Paul wasn't the only one who recognized the valuable contributions of Mark. In his first epistle, Peter referred to him as his son.¹¹ This close connection between Peter and Mark is a hallmark of Church tradition, which holds that Mark recorded the Gospel stories as told to him by Peter.

Which leads of course to Mark's crowning achievement. Mark, the erstwhile deserter, became the first to write a Gospel. He was the first to record the life of Jesus Christ, the first to dare to put on paper the startling news that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of God.

In other words, the deserter became a challenger. The boy who once abandoned the mission field became someone who risked his life to tell the subversive story of Jesus and His love.

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:13.

The Challenger

Mark 1:1

Jesus is Lord

This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God.

Mark's story begins with a statement about Jesus' identity. To modern Christians used to calling Jesus, 'Messiah' and 'Son of God,' Mark's opening line doesn't seem remarkable, let alone subversive. It just describes who Jesus is. Jesus is the Messiah foretold by the prophets. He is, in fact, God's Son. The second person of the Trinity. Mark is just stating the obvious.

Until you think about it. For centuries, Israel had longed for her Messiah. Desperately. The Messiah was the anointed one whom the prophets said would save Israel from defeat, exile, and separation from her God. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex history, the story of Israel is one of a mission gone terribly wrong. Yahweh had called Israel to be his 'peculiar treasures.'¹² He placed them at the crossroads of civilization in the Middle East and made a covenant with them: he would be their God and they would be His people. They would live in relationship with him, follow His ways, and demonstrate what it meant to walk with God so that all nations might know him as well. But Israel blew it. Plunging herself into idolatry and social injustice, she broke her covenant with God. The result was defeat at the hands of her enemies, exile to Babylon, and even after she returned home, separation from the God who had called her people his own. The mission was in

¹² Exodus 19:5, King James Version.

The Challenger

shambles. Israel, God's 'light to the nations' was no longer shining. It seemed as if things were hopelessly lost.

They were not. Through his prophets, God promised to make things right. He would send his Messiah, or 'anointed one,' who would restore God's people and enable them to stand at the crossroads and fulfill their mission once again. This would benefit, not just Israel, but the entire world, for the Messiah was to scatter the wicked powers of the world and establish a kingdom that would outlast them all.¹³ Jesus, Mark tells us, is this Messiah.

Mark goes on to say that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but also the Son of God. Writing such words, Mark is taking his life into his hands. The title, Son of God, belongs to the Roman Emperor. Mark (and Jesus) lived in a Roman world. Augustus, the adopted son of Julius and emperor at the time of Jesus' birth, had been the first to take this title to himself, and by the time Jesus ministry began, it had passed to the Emperor Tiberius. Subsequent emperors followed suit, and one of the great challenges faced by the early church was the requirement that believers, along with everyone else, worship Caesar. Mark is therefore making a deeply subversive statement when he calls Jesus God's Son. He is making the proclamation, for both his time and all time, that 'Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.'

Mark classifies the arrival of this new Son of God as *Good News*. It is good because it means that Israel's restoration (and through hers, the world's) is at hand. It is good because it means that God's plan to save the world is back in motion. More specifically, to people living under the weight of oppression, be it at the hands of Rome or some other power, it means that relief is on the way; the Kingdom of God has come. There is

¹³ See, Isaiah 9:2-7; Daniel 7.

The Challenger

now someone more powerful than the Caesars; someone who is, and not just in title, the Son of God. Someone who breaks the bonds of slaves and sets the captives free. Someone who will challenge the powers of the world, send them packing, and replace them with the kingly reign of God.

This is the beginning of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The powers of the world are on notice. There's a new sheriff in town.

Thought to ponder: what might 'Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not' mean today?

Mark 1:2-8

The Messenger

It began just as the prophets said it would: 'Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare the way for the Messiah's coming. His voice cries out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the path for the coming of the Lord! Straighten the path that he may come.' John was the messenger. He appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole country of Judea, including the citizens of Jerusalem, went out to see him and listen to his messages. He baptized them in the Jordan river as they confessed their sins. John wore camel's hair clothing, cinched by a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. He told those who came to see him, 'Someone is coming after me who is stronger than I. I am unworthy to untie his sandals. I baptize you in the water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

It was a familiar sight in Israel. Roman soldiers riding on horseback, one bearing a placard on a pole or perhaps a scroll to be read aloud to the residents of a city, town, or village. This was the herald come to announce

The Challenger

the empire's latest news: an imperial edict, the levy of a new tax, a crackdown on subversive activity, the arrival of a new local authority, or, less frequently, the inauguration of a new emperor. That last bit of news would be proclaimed, not just locally, but throughout the Roman world. Such news would originate in Rome, the center of power, and be carried to every corner of the empire. The imperial heralds would let everyone know the identity of the new king.

The story of Jesus begins with a herald. His name is John, and he differs greatly from his Roman counterparts. For starters, he doesn't have a horse. He is a wild looking dude, sort of a mountain man-hippie hybrid. A real granola. His role is the one proclaimed by the prophets.¹⁴ He is the messenger sent to pave the way for God's Messiah. His task is to plow through the stony ground of Israel's hard heart and prepare her for the coming of the world's True King. To this end, he calls upon the people to seek God's forgiveness, turn from their ways, and demonstrate their willingness to change through baptism in the Jordan River.

Everyone, Mark reports, comes to see him. No doubt this is hyperbole (there must be at least one curmudgeon who refuses). But the idea is that John is famous. People are intrigued by him. They hang on his every word. They allow him to dunk them in the river. We can picture all sorts of people, from the religious Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes to the revolutionary zealots who seek to free Israel through violence, to the representatives of the empire the zealots want to replace, to the acquiescent 'meh' crowd who do not care who rules them, all listening intently to the words of the Baptizer. John is a big deal across the board.

¹⁴ See, Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1.

The Challenger

He doesn't think so though. He understands that his is a limited role. His job is simply to get the people ready for Jesus. He tells his admirers, 'You think I'm something? Wait 'til you get a load of the guy coming in my wake. I'm not worthy to rinse off his crocs. I'm baptizing you with water from the river, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Now to say the Messiah is on the way is revolutionary. But to say he will baptize with the Holy Spirit seriously ups the ante. In Israel's history, the Spirit had come upon people from time to time, and whenever she did crazy things would happen.¹⁵ Cowards turned into heroes. Men and women prophesied. The enemies of Israel ran for the hills. To say that the Messiah would baptize people with the Holy Spirit is to say that, well, there is no telling what will happen, other than the fact that it will be out of the ordinary. The unpredictable is about to take place.

All of this is interesting, but what is perhaps most striking is that John's proclamation of a new king is neither made in nor originates from a center of imperial, or even religious, power. Neither Rome nor Jerusalem initiate the proclamation. It is made in the wilderness. John is an unusual herald in this regard as well, which only makes sense, because the king he proclaims is an unusual kind of king. You won't find this king in the halls of power or the center of empire. You will find him at the margins, in the wilderness, in the places where empires and power players typically do not go or even care about. Just as John stands in the wilderness and waits for people to come to him, the Messiah will be found in unexpected places, waiting for those who want a different kind of king. The story of Jesus will unfold not from the center, but from the fringes.

¹⁵ You read that correctly. Spirit, in both Hebrew and Aramaic, is a feminine word. This is, remember, a subversive commentary.

The Challenger

From those fringes, standing in the wilderness on the bank of the Jordan, John prepares the way. The manner of his announcement tells us that something new and different is about to happen. Something that will challenge conventional thinking and practice.

The Challenger is on his way.

Thought to Ponder: why would the story of Jesus begin in the wilderness? Where might the story of Jesus continue today?

Mark 1:9-15

The Challenger Appears

The day arrived when Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan. As he rose from the water, the heavens opened wide. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove. A voice from above called out, 'This is my Son. This is the one I love. The one who fills my heart with joy.' As soon as this happened, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, where Satan tempted him for forty days. He was with wild beasts, but angels served him. After Jesus' ordeal was over, and John had been placed under arrest, Jesus returned to Galilee and began to preach the Good News of the Kingdom. He said, 'The time has come! Just as God has promised us. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News!'

The theme of wilderness continues as Jesus, the Challenger whom John announced, steps onto the stage. He comes into the wilderness from Nazareth in Galilee (a marginal place in its own right) to be baptized by John, as if he were nothing more than another dude in need of cleansing. In this, he does what no imperial king would ever do: he identifies with the common people. He declares himself to be one of them.

The Challenger

John dunks him in the water. It is a kind of anointing. The kings of Israel's past had been anointed with oil.¹⁶ Jesus gets ordinary river water. But as soon as he rises, something extraordinary happens. The Spirit of God alights upon him with the tenderness of a dove, and a voice, the voice of God the Father, speaks. His words simultaneously lavish love upon Jesus while rebuking Rome's emperors. '*This is my Son. This is the one I love. This is the one who fills my heart with joy.*'

The inauguration of a king (or President or Prime Minister) is typically a lavish affair, down to this very day. There are speeches and celebrations galore, and when all is said and done, the newly anointed leader typically goes home to a palace. Jesus is driven deeper into the wilderness. There, far from the comforts of the world, he is tempted by the great enemy of humankind, Satan. Interestingly, Mark does not record the precise nature of the temptations, as the other synoptic Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, do. One wonders why? Perhaps he wants his readers to imagine the temptations broadly, with Jesus enduring and battling temptations just as they did. This could be Mark's way of highlighting that Jesus, though he is God's Son, is also one of us, tempted and tried in every way, just as we are; that he knows and understands what it is like to face temptation in all its forms.¹⁷

But given what Mark has told us so far, we need not refer to other Gospels to deduce that Satan attempts to derail Jesus from his mission. Jesus is the rescuer come to save humankind from the power of sin, and the path before him requires that he take on the evil powers of the world. We don't know if Jesus is aware at this point if his mission

¹⁶ See, e.g., 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39.

¹⁷ See, Hebrews 4:15: 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (NRSV).

The Challenger

involves a cross, but he surely knows it will be difficult. He knows he will confront Satan, the power of sin, and all other nefarious powers of the spiritual and temporal realms. Moreover, he has heard the prophecy of the suffering servant read aloud in the synagogue.¹⁸ He knows that the price of the world's healing will be his suffering and death.

As Satan whispers in his ear, it is only natural for Jesus to wonder: 'Is there another way?' Maybe he can use the world's power to free Israel, create a Utopian kingdom, and live as a hero to his people. Or maybe he can just walk away, get married, raise a family, and live out a nice, quiet life. He can forget the road of suffering, reject the path reserved for the One who is to challenge the powers of the world.

Interestingly, as Jesus faces such temptations, he is in the company of wild beasts. Throughout the Bible, the powers of the world are often depicted as beasts.¹⁹ If Jesus takes the road before him, he will often be in the company of beasts. He will face them every day of his life. The beasts of empire and false religion. The beasts of hatred and violence. The beasts that lay behind the powers that will nail him to a cross.

Mark's brief account of the wilderness temptation ends with a choice. Jesus passes through the fire in the desert and returns to Galilee. He learns that his cousin John has been arrested. Like a parting shot from Satan, Jesus is reminded that those who challenge and call the world to repentance are persecuted. 'Turn back now Jesus,' the enemy seems to say. 'This is what happens to people who challenge the way things are. Believe me, you'll get worse.'

¹⁸ See, Isaiah 53.

¹⁹ See, Daniel 7; Revelation 13.

The Challenger

But the Challenger is undaunted. As he walks along the Galilean seashore, fire flickers in his eyes. He plants his feet firmly on the sand. He looks around at the fisherman, the tax collector in his booth, the locals going about their business all hurry scurry, and calls out in a loud voice, 'The time has come! Just as God promised! The Kingdom is at hand! Repent and believe the Good News!'

Satan's response is left unrecorded.

Thought to ponder: how did Jesus feel when he announced the coming of the Kingdom?

Mark 1:16-20

The First Disciples

One day Jesus was walking along the beach, beside the Sea of Galilee. He saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the water. Jesus said, 'Follow me, and I will teach you to fish for people!' They immediately dropped their nets and followed him. He continued walking along the shore until he came upon James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were hard at work mending their nets. As soon as Jesus saw them, he called them as well. They too followed Jesus, leaving their father in the boat with his hired servants.

The Gospels report that Jesus walked and prayed in lonely places, far from the pressing crowds.²⁰ We can imagine him taking such walks in the early morning hours along the sea, contemplating his next steps toward the fulfillment of his mission. There in the dawn's early light he would see

²⁰ See, Luke 5:15-16.

The Challenger

nary a soul but the fishermen who worked the sea, bringing in their catches and tending to their gear.

Mark tells us of one such walk. Jesus strolls with purpose. He has begun his ministry, or at least announced it, and knows that to successfully complete it he will need a team. A Rabbi has students after all, disciples who learn from their master, strive to be like him in every way, and continue his work when he is gone. Jesus needs men like that. Ordinarily, Rabbis in search of students sought the best of the best, or at least the best available, often basing their decisions upon a student's academic performance. Given the nature of Jesus' mission, one might imagine him doing the same. He needs men who are special. Men who know the scriptures. Yes, a knowledge of theology seems to be precisely what is needed.

But Jesus has other criteria in mind. He knows the task before him is difficult. It requires more than mere book smarts. It requires physical and mental toughness. Jesus needs street fighters, men who can take a punch (and refrain from throwing one back). Men who can stand amid the fray and keep their cool. Men who remain steadfast in the storm. Men who display tenacity in the face of fierce opposition. Sure, they have to be smart, but a special kind of smart. He doesn't need academicians; he needs people with street smarts. Men who are wise in folksy ways. Men who can pass the things he teaches along to ordinary folks.²¹

Most of all, his disciples have to be teachable. Jesus' way is going to be different than that of the religious leaders of his day. The Pharisees

²¹ If you are bothered that I keep saying men, please understand, that is only because we are presently talking about the first disciples, who were male. As we shall see, Jesus will have both male and female disciples, and will prove himself to be remarkably egalitarian.

The Challenger

lord their authority over people. Theirs is a 'power over' approach that holds no appeal for Jesus. The Sadducees are compromisers who ally themselves with political power to advance their agenda and interests. Jesus has no use for such alliances. Jesus needs followers whose heads haven't been filled with such stuff and nonsense. He doesn't have time to retrain people theologically. He needs blank slates.

Tough. Steadfast. Tenacious. Teachable. These are the traits Jesus looks for in the men (and women) who will be his disciples.

His seaside walks have shown him something. Fishermen are tough. They know how to sail in storms and keep their cool. They know how to steadfastly battle the elements. They tenaciously work the seas knowing that their lives and the lives of their loved ones depend upon their success. And teachable? Well, they may be rough around the edges, perhaps even a little set in their provincial ways, but at least their heads aren't filled with theological garble-dee-gook.

Yes, fisherman will do nicely.

Four particular fishermen catch Jesus' eye: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Mark doesn't say how Jesus knows them, but he knows them well enough. They have what it takes. With a little polishing, these guys can help change the world. The way Mark tells it, Jesus just saunters up to them on the beach and says, 'Follow me.' Other Gospels offer a more nuanced version of events, but Mark apparently feels we don't need the details. All we need know is that Jesus wants these men on his team, and that they, once called, leave everything behind to follow Jesus.

These are the first to be chosen by Jesus. They are neither warriors nor scholars, but fisherman. Ordinary folks. The salt of the earth. It will be with the help of such men and women that Jesus will change the world.

The Challenger

As the men walk away with their new Master, their empty boats and tossed aside nets (not to mention poor Mr. Zebedee who is left to manage the family business without his sons) bear testimony to the wisdom of Jesus' choice. Jesus has chosen men who want more out of life and are willing to seek it. Men who, once their minds are made up, never look back. Men willing to breach new horizons, even if doing so costs them everything.

Such is the nature of Jesus' call. It costs you everything. If you want to challenge the world with Jesus, you must leave things behind. You can't turn the world upside down if you aren't willing to turn your life upside down first. That's what those first disciples did that day: turned their lives upside down. They showed us the kind of people Jesus looks for in his ongoing mission to change the world.

Jesus wants people who are tough, steadfast, tenacious, teachable, and willing to give everything for the sake of the mission.

Jesus wants disciples who are all in. Because that's what it takes to challenge the world.

Thought to Ponder: are you 'all in' for Jesus?

Mark 1:21-28

Reckoning with Dragons

Jesus and his recruits went into the town of Capernaum. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and was given the opportunity to teach. All were amazed at what he had to say, for unlike the scribes, he taught with authority. Immediately, a man with an unclean spirit cried out, 'Why are you here? What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are! You are the Holy One of God!' Jesus

The Challenger

fired back, 'be quiet! Come out of him!' The man fell into convulsions, and the unclean spirit left with a piercing shriek. Everyone was amazed, and they began to talk amongst themselves, saying, 'What is this about? Is this some new teaching? He commands unclean spirits and they obey him. What authority!' The news about Jesus immediately spread throughout the region of Galilee.

Skeptics scoff at the existence of malevolent spiritual forces. The notion of Satan, let alone demons, is laughable. This suits those forces just fine. It's easy to wreak havoc when people don't acknowledge your existence. If no one believes you are a force in their lives, you can pretty much sabotage away with impunity.

But while skeptics laugh, evidence of the demonic abounds. Biblically, we are told of the serpent who deceived the first people in Eden.²² Revelation speaks of the great dragon who deceives the world.²³ In between these bookends, the enemy makes many appearances. Beyond the pages of Biblical history, this enemy has continued to leave carnage in its wake. Brokenness. Violence. War. Genocide. One of my seminary professors, Manfred Brauch, once told me about his experience growing up in post-World War II Germany and coming to grips with the reality of the Holocaust. I'll never forget his words: 'there are some manifestations of evil that are simply beyond the collective capacity of humankind to perpetrate. That this is so points to the reality and basis for a tangible source of evil.'

And then there is the evidence of our own experience. Who has not, from time to time, felt the dragon's talons?

²² See, Genesis 3.

²³ Revelation 12:9.

The Challenger

Yes, there is an enemy, a great dragon, and it is not alone. There are indeed spiritual forces that must be reckoned with.

As the present episode in Mark's Gospel begins, Jesus knows this. Indeed, he has already battled the dragon in the wilderness. He has felt the talons, and although he escaped unscathed, he knows it's only a matter of time before it strikes again. He knows that his destiny involves challenging and driving back the 'prince of this world,' to defeat the enemy once and for all.²⁴

The enemy knows this too. Which is why it is not surprising that in the story Mark tells malevolent forces harass Jesus at every turn. Jesus scarcely begins his ministry when the badgering begins. He is given the opportunity to speak in Capernaum's synagogue, and things are going well. People are impressed. They are listening. This the enemy cannot abide. And so, an unclean spirit, having wormed its way into the life of one of the congregants, compels its host to make a rather unseemly interruption in the otherwise orderly service. *'Why are you here? What have we to do with you, Nazarene? Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are! You are the Holy One of God!'* With such words, we sense not only the attack of demonic powers, but the danger Jesus presents to them. Their powerlessness against Jesus is proven in an instant, as he first commands the spirit to be silent, and then compels it to surrender its prey. Immediately, the man is set free.

The astonished congregants are filled with wonder. Who is this man who has power to command the forces of darkness?

He is the Challenger, and his work has begun. The battle in the wilderness was just the beginning. Jesus will not only stand against the

²⁴ The term, 'prince of this world,' is from John 12:31

The Challenger

enemy itself; he will fight on behalf of a beleaguered world. The devil has been served. The enemy's time is short.

The powers of darkness will throw everything they have at Jesus before this is over. But the writing is already on the wall.

The Challenger will prevail.

Thought to Ponder: what dragons need reckoning with today? How does Jesus continue to defeat them?

Mark 1:29-34

Pushing Back Darkness

Jesus left the synagogue and went directly to the home of Simon and Andrew, along with James and John. Simon's mother-in-law was sick with fever, and they immediately told Jesus. He went to her bedside, took her by the hand, and raised her to a sitting position. The fever immediately left her, and she was able to serve them. Later that evening, after sunset, Jesus' new followers led many sick and demon possessed people to Jesus. The people of Capernaum gathered around the door to see what would happen. Jesus healed many who were sick with various illnesses, and he cast out many demons. He commanded the demons not to speak, because they knew who he was.

Fresh from his victory at the synagogue, Jesus goes to the home of Simon and his brother Andrew for lunch. Perhaps, unlike modern Christians who go to restaurants after church, Jesus preferred home cooked meals. There is, however, a problem. Simon's mother-in-law, who ordinarily prepares the meals, is sick in bed with a fever. I suppose Jesus and the boys could have whipped something up themselves, but then again, had the story ended there, it wouldn't really be worth telling.

The Challenger

What happens instead is a miracle, one that teaches something about Jesus' mission as it relates to the problem of sickness. One of the biggest obstacles for people who want to believe but find their intellect in the way is the reality of suffering. That it exists at all presents a theological difficulty. If God is good, why does he allow cancer, or muscular dystrophy, or any other number of life threatening, debilitating illnesses, to exist? That they do exist has led many to, if not disbelieve in God altogether, at least agree with the old Jewish proverb: 'if God lived on earth, people would break his windows.'

Meditating on this passage, we begin to glimpse an answer to the problem of sickness and disease that is, if not completely satisfying, indicative of the fact that God is as bothered by suffering as we are. So much so that he sent Jesus to do something about it.

We should remember that disease was not an original part of the world God designed. God made a perfect world, free of such troubles, but when people broke faith with Him, the enemy stepped into the cracks and corrupted the very fabric of existence. Disease is just another manifestation of evil, a consequence of the enemy's virulent invasion of the created order. Humankind fell, and darkness, including the darkness of disease, spread across the expanse of what had previously been a perfect world.

This manifestation of evil is part of what Jesus comes to challenge. His mission is to push back the darkness, and so, as his belly rumbles on a fine Sabbath afternoon, he seizes the opportunity to begin this aspect of his work. He goes to the sick woman's room, kneels at her bedside, takes her by the hand, and raises her up. Immediately, she is well. With great thankfulness, she sets about the business of preparing lunch.

The Challenger

Peter and his friends are so excited by what Jesus has done that they run into the streets to find others who can use the healing touch of the Challenger (apparently without Jesus having to tell them; you can see why he picked these guys!). Jesus touches and heals the sick all afternoon. He drives out demons. He sets people free from both physical and spiritual bondage.

This day would be the first of many on which Jesus would push back the darkness that came over the world after Eden. As we picture him healing and freeing people, we sense the darkness being driven back. Like Beowulf charging against the monster Grendel, Jesus rides to strike down the darkness of disease and death with his glorious light. Demons flee. Sickness vanishes. The lame dance. The world begins to heal.

The Challenger is again at work, rolling back evil. Bringing creation back in line with the way it was originally intended to be. Whole and healthy. Beautiful and well.

As he does, we hear the advance echo of what the world will one day be when the Challenger completes his work: a world without death, mourning or pain; a world where God himself will wipe the tears from our eyes.

Thought to ponder: how have you experienced the healing touch of Jesus?

Mark 1:35-39

Times of Refreshing

Early the next morning, while it was still dark outside, Jesus got up and found a deserted place to pray. Simon and his companions went looking for him. When they found him, they said, 'everyone has been wondering where you went!' Jesus answered them, 'We need to go away to the other

The Challenger

towns. We cannot just stay here. I need to preach to other people too. That is my mission.’ So Jesus began to travel and preach in synagogues throughout Galilee, preaching the Good News and casting out demons.

Jesus is at war.

It is not a conventional war. He is engaged in a cosmic battle between light and darkness. It is a fight against principalities and powers: both the evil rulers of the present age and the wicked spiritual forces that stand behind them.²⁵ He has thus far challenged demons and disease. In the months ahead he will challenge religious and political power. His is the epic struggle to end all epic struggles.

Having spent the previous day in battle, Jesus knows two things. First, spiritual battles are both difficult and draining. Second, he has only begun to fight. Greater battles are just around the corner. Jesus is therefore in need of two things: refreshment from the battles he has fought; and strength for the battles yet to come.

How will he find these things? Easy. In prayer.

After a good night’s sleep, Jesus rises before dawn and leaves for a deserted place. We might imagine him on the beach, far down the shore from Capernaum, sitting and waiting for the sunrise. There in the quiet, with the morning breeze upon his face and the sound of gulls soaring overhead, Jesus prays.

He shows no concern that so many still need him, or that they are, in fact, looking for him. He knows that spending time with his Abba is the most important thing on his to do list. It simply must be done if he is to be successful in his mission.

²⁵ See, Ephesians 6:12.

The Challenger

In stillness, Jesus meets with God. In the meeting of their love, as deep touches deep, he finds refreshment. He is restored and renewed. He is filled with strength to carry on. And which is more, he discovers precisely what his Father desires he do next.

It would be easy to gloss over this episode. But it provides one of Jesus' most important lessons. If we are to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, if we are to follow him as he challenges the world - as he does so through us - we too need times of refreshing. We too need strength for the journey. We too need direction. So often, we fail to seek these things. We wear ourselves down. We strive to complete tasks in our own strength. We form plans and put them into place without asking God what He thinks. Jesus shows us the foolishness of such an approach. If you want to challenge the world with the Good News, the place to begin is on your knees.

Jesus rises to meet his friends, refreshed, ready, and with a renewed sense of mission. There is a world out there beyond Capernaum that needs saving. There is darkness that needs to be pushed back. There are people who need to know the way of the Challenger.

Turning to his friends, an invigorated Jesus says, 'time for a road trip boys. We have work to do.'

The kind of work the Challenger always began on his knees.

Thought to Ponder: how might your life be different if you found time each day to be alone with God?

The Challenger

Mark 1:40-46

Touching the Untouchable

A leper approached Jesus and knelt before him, begging to be healed. He said, 'I know that if you are willing, you can make me clean again.' Overflowing with a divine compassion that arose from his innermost being, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper, saying, 'I am willing. Be clean again.' Immediately, the leprosy was gone, and the man was healed. Jesus sent the man on his way with a warning, saying, 'Make sure you don't say anything to anyone. Go show yourself to the priest and make the offering for cleansing required by the Law of Moses. Then everyone will acknowledge along with you that you have been made whole.'

The leper had been forced to leave his home, family, and community to live on the outskirts of town with others who shared his fate. Unable to work, he now relies on the charity of others to survive. His torn clothing and disheveled hair serve as a warning to stay away; if anyone comes too close, he is to shout, 'Unclean, unclean!' as a final admonition.²⁶ Beneath his torn clothing are the ravages of his disease. Dissolving skin and tissue. Fingers worn to stumps. Eyelids missing. Ulcerated sores. Some religious authorities proclaim his disease a punishment for moral failure. Perhaps he even believes that. He is an outcast in every sense of the word.

Enter Jesus. One day, as he approaches a set of village gates, the leper, who lives outside those gates, takes heart. He has obviously heard about Jesus, who has been touring the towns and villages of Galilee. If ever he has a chance to be healed, this is it. Falling at Jesus' feet, the leper cries, 'I know that if you are willing, you can make me clean again.' The words sputter forth from ruined lips. Tears fall from ravaged eyes as he

²⁶ See, Leviticus 13:45-46.

The Challenger

awaits Jesus' response. Can Jesus, will Jesus, heal one such as he? Or will Jesus, as so many others had always done, keep walking by?

Mark tells us that Jesus is filled with compassion from the depths of his being. In the Greek text, this is expressed by a form of the word *splanxizomai*. People in Mark's time considered the bowels, or *splanxnon*, to be the source of emotion. Used throughout the New Testament to refer to divine mercy, such words evoke images of deep compassion arising from one's innermost being. Overflowing with such compassion, Jesus looks at the wreck of a man before him, so far gone from the glory of Eden, and stretches out his hand to touch him.

I have always been moved by the image. I get the sense of Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: God stretching out his hand to touch the finger of Adam and bestow life. I sense in Jesus' action a parable of the Incarnation itself, of the traversing of a vast and timeless distance, from heaven to earth, to touch a human heart.

With that simple gesture, Jesus establishes his love for outcasts. The people others avoid are welcome in the all-inclusive Kingdom of Jesus. The untouchable becomes touchable. Indeed, for those who come to truly follow Jesus, the notion of passing them by will from this point on be unthinkable.

The result of Jesus' touch is miraculous. Immediately, the man's leprosy disappears. Ulcerated spots gone. Fingers where there once were stumps. Eyelids blinking. Skin fresh and intact. He is whole again in every way. Curiously, Jesus tells him not to tell anyone. Rather, he is to follow the dictates of the Mosaic Law and show himself to the priest so that he

The Challenger

can be pronounced clean and thus restored to the community.²⁷ Jesus, in character, does not draw attention to himself. He focuses exclusively upon the man's restoration. The man will be able to go home again. He will be able to work again. To hug his family again. The man who had been an outcast in every sense of the word will now be whole in every way.

In this episode, we see not just Jesus' love for outcasts, but another aspect of how Jesus challenges the world. Jesus challenges the darkness, not merely with raw power, but with intimacy and compassion. His way is directed by the deepest and noblest emotions of the heart. With such compassion, Jesus will drive back the darkness of the world.

By the conclusion of Mark's first chapter, we know Jesus has come to challenge the powers and to drive back the darkness, and that he intends to do so in a most unusual fashion. He begins in the wilderness, far from the center of power and empire. He works from the margins, in abandoned and lonely places. He involves the most unlikely people. And his tools are not the tools of empire. They are prayer, compassion, and love.

It seems a strange way to challenge the powers of the world. But it is the way Jesus' Kingdom will grow, the one Kingdom that will overcome all others.

Thought to Ponder: who are the untouchable people around you? How might their lives (and yours) change if you allowed divine compassion to direct your actions?

²⁷ See, Leviticus 14.

The Challenger

Mark 2:1-12

The God Who Breaks the Rules

Several days later, Jesus returned to Capernaum. The people heard that he was at home and immediately gathered there. There were so many that there wasn't even room in the doorway as Jesus preached to them. Four men arrived, carrying a paralytic on a mat. Discovering they could not get close to Jesus because of the crowd, they went onto the roof and tore a hole through it. Once they broke through, they lowered the man down on the mat. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.' The religious teachers and leaders present said in their hearts, 'Why does Jesus blaspheme in this way? Only God has the power to forgive sins!' Jesus, knowing their hearts, said to them, 'Why do you question such things in your hearts? Which do you think is easier, to say, 'your sins are forgiven,' or 'Arise, pick up your mat and walk?' I will show you that the Son of Man possesses the authority on earth to forgive sins.' Jesus then turned to the paralytic and said, 'Arise, pick up your mat, and walk home!' The man immediately stood up, picked up his mat, and walked out of the house. Everyone was amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

When Jesus calls the paralyzed man a 'child' (*teknon*), I suppose he may mean it as a term of endearment, but it may also be, at least in part, a reference to his youth. If so, his is a tragic case. A young man, a teenager, who should be learning a trade and roaming the hills with friends in his spare time, is confined to a bed, cut down in the spring of life. As for the four who carry him, they may be his fellow teenage friends (their actions certainly reflect the impetuosity of youth), or family members, perhaps led by a loving father willing to do anything for his son. We don't know for sure, but we can say a couple of things about them:

The Challenger

first, they love this young man; and second, they don't give a hoot about the rules. They are willing to break convention, even destroy property, to save someone they love.

Whoever they are, Mark paints the picture as they bring the young man to Jesus, whom they obviously know can heal the sick and lame, only to find the path blocked. That isn't going to stop them though. They find some ropes (did they 'borrow' them?), make their way onto the roof, and begin tearing it to pieces. Just imagine the scene: Jesus hears something overhead. He looks up and sees debris falling through the ceiling, which, by the way, may have been *his* own. The Son of Man may not have had a place to lay his head when he was traveling, but surely, he slept somewhere while living in Capernaum. Most people would be horrified, even angry. Not Jesus. He looks up and sees four hopeful faces peering down, each displaying what he and his Father love best: child-like faith.

There is only one thing to do in the face of such rule-breaking, 'love at all costs' faith: reward it. So, Jesus waits as the young man is lowered, so that he may give him back his future. In doing so, Jesus will demonstrate another facet of his method of challenging the world. He will be unconcerned with rules or convention. He and his followers will demonstrate, and not for the last time, that rules and convention do not matter. Only faith and love.²⁸

But that's only half the story.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, 'be healed,' or something along those lines, as he did with the leper. No, his first words are, '*Child, your sins are forgiven.*' Why would Jesus say that? There may well be a hidden

²⁸ See, Galatians 5:6(b): 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (NRSV).

The Challenger

meaning here, but the most obvious explanation is that Jesus wants to use what is happening as a teachable moment for the sake of the religious leaders who are present. Their reaction to the entire course of events is predictable. To think that someone would tear a hole in a roof! Their initial horror is quickly eclipsed as Jesus forgives the young man's sins. To be fair, this is a shocking thing to do. The thought balloons hanging over the religious folks' heads contain words of pure truth: *only God has the power to forgive sins*. Which means Jesus is claiming the prerogatives of God. How presumptuous!

Sensing their thoughts (and you didn't need to be Jesus to do so; their expressions were easy enough to read) Jesus ups the ante. To prove he has authority to forgive sins, that is to say, *God's authority*, he does something that in the minds of his critics is just as hard, if not harder, to pull off. He heals the paralytic on the spot. You can almost imagine him dropping the mic. 'Bam! I do have God's authority. Now who do you suppose that makes me?'

Mark doesn't tell a Nativity story, as the other synoptic Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke do. He doesn't explain how the promise of the Messiah who would be both human and divine is fulfilled in the stories of shepherds, angels, and wise men. But in this passage, he comes pretty darn close.

Mark's syllogistic reasoning is clear. Premise One: *only God* has authority to forgive sins. Premise two: *Jesus* has authority to forgive sins. Conclusion: Jesus is God.

The Challenger has every reason to be unconcerned with the rules and conventions of men and women. He is above them. He is free to break as many human-made rules as his heart desires.

The Challenger

Indeed, before this is all over, the Challenger is going to cast a lot of rules and conventions aside in favor of love, and call his followers to do the same.

Thought to Ponder: if Jesus is God, how seriously should we take his commands?

Mark 2:13-17

Friend of Sinners

Jesus went back down to the seaside and taught the many people who came to him there. As he was walking, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax booth. He said, 'Follow me.' Levi got up from his booth and followed him. Later they went to have dinner at Levi's home, where many tax collectors and other notorious sinners were guests as well (for many such people followed Jesus). When the Pharisees and scribes saw that Jesus was eating with such people, they asked his disciples, "why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus heard them and replied, 'People who are healthy don't need a doctor. Sick people do. I didn't come for people who think they are righteous. I came to call sinners to repentance.'

Levi, aka Matthew, is a hot mess. His name signifies that he hails from a priestly family, but he has fallen short of his heredity. He is a tax collector, a hated agent of the Roman Empire, a traitorous collaborator. As such, he is deeply disliked, even hated, by his fellow Jews. Sitting in a booth by the seashore, taxing fisherman based on the volume of their catch, he is the face of all that is wrong in Israel.

His friends are hot messes too. Of course they are. No decent person would be caught dead in the company of a tax collector, so Levi takes as his companions the only sort of people who will: fellow tax collectors,

The Challenger

prostitutes, and other notorious sinners. Together, they revel in the luxuries of Roman ways. Their homes are well known for debauchery and licentiousness. Such is Levi's life. A nice Jewish boy gone wrong. A prodigal son who betrayed both his people and ancestral faith for a walk on the wild side.

There are two ways to go when you're that kind of person and have to look at yourself in the mirror every morning. You either harden your heart and convince yourself that you don't care what people think and live your life with gusto, or you carry around an enormous burden of guilt and shame. For Levi, it may be both. He has an impressive home (large enough to host a dinner party) and lots of sinful friends, so we can assume he revels in his lifestyle. But still. There must be moments when he thinks about the dreams his parents had for him, dreams he perhaps once had himself. Moments when he fights hard to push back the tears that serve as visible reminders of his fallen life. But push them back he does, for after all, he made his bed, and would have to lay in it. Too late to do anything now.

Jesus and Levi likely knew each other before the day Mark records. Jesus hung out at the seashore a lot, and heck, he had to pay taxes too, so they must have had at least a passing acquaintance. Each time Jesus saw Levi, he saw through him. He saw the guilt and shame, the pain and dashed dreams. He saw a broken soul in need of mending. He saw a man who needed a fresh start. And which is more, he saw Levi, not just for who he was, *but for who he could become.*

So one day, when the time is ripe, Jesus walks up to Levi's booth, looks him straight in the eye, and says, 'Follow me.' Just two words, but they speak volumes. Jesus might as well have said, 'Levi, I know you. I know what people think about you. But I also know you have what it

The Challenger

takes. How would you like a fresh start?’ Jesus doesn’t need to ask twice. Levi steps away from his booth, leaves his ledgers behind, and follows Jesus.

This is already a remarkable story, but it gets even better. Levi decides that before taking to the road with Jesus, he will throw a party. The two of them invite everyone they know, which in both of their cases means a whole lot of less than ‘A list’ guests. And so there is Jesus, eating and drinking and otherwise having a good time, when the religious people show up. Whether they were invited or just party crashers the text doesn’t say. Shocked that Jesus would dare hang with such people, they say something (ever notice how religious people can’t keep themselves from saying something?). Jesus wastes no time in setting them straight. He has not come to save people who think they are all that and a bag of chips. He has come to save people who have lost their way, who know, at least deep down, that they are meant for more than the life they are living.

Jesus’ Kingdom is made of such as these. Just as his movement began in the wilderness, far from the respected centers of privilege, prestige, and power, it begins with the least and the lost, those who lack power, prestige, privilege, or even respect. Jesus seeks out and chooses such as these.

Aren’t you glad he does?

Thought to Ponder: who are the people around you whom the religious folks might consider beyond the reach of grace? How might Jesus engage such people?

The Challenger

Mark 2:18-22

New Wineskins

The disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came to Jesus to ask, 'Why do the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?' Jesus answered, 'Do the groomsmen fast in the company of the bridegroom? Not if he is with them! But one day the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a new piece of cloth on an old piece of clothing; if they do the new patch shrinks and tears the old, leaving an even bigger hole. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; if they do the new wine will burst the skins. The wine will pour out and the skins will be destroyed. New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.

Mark doesn't name the occasion, but whatever it is, it calls for fasting. The Pharisees and their disciples are doing so, as are the disciples of John the Baptizer. These two groups aren't exactly on the same page, so the fact that both are fasting suggests that it is the expected thing to do. Jesus and his disciples, however, are hanging out at a back-yard barbecue flipping burgers.

This naturally prompts a question from the people. Which people? Matthew identifies them as John's disciples.²⁹ Mark just says, 'some people.' But in any event the question reflects confusion on the part of those who are watching Jesus: 'why aren't Jesus and his followers abiding by the traditions and practices of existing religious groups?' It is a good question. Jesus is a Rabbi who teaches in the synagogue. He gathers disciples. He speaks of the Kingdom of God. He observes the Sabbath and

²⁹ Matthew 9:14.

The Challenger

attends Jewish festivals. Why then, is he acting so irreligious? Why is he bucking the religious fast that everyone else observes?

Jesus' initial answer is both familiar and understandable. Drawing from the experience of a wedding celebration, he points out that no self-respecting groomsman refrains from eating and drinking in the presence of the bridegroom; they eat, drink, and dance on the ceiling! I'm sure people nod. If Jesus is the Messiah, as many already suspect he might be (certainly John's disciples did) why would his followers do anything other than celebrate in his presence? Someday, when Jesus is gone, they will fast, but certainly not before then. Jesus, in other words, tells the people that life in his presence is a party, and that those who follow him are expected to behave as if they are at one.

I suppose Jesus could have stopped there. But given that in coming weeks and months his ministry will buck other religious traditions and practices, he decides to use the question as an opportunity for deeper teaching about the nature of what he is up to.

You see, people likely expect Jesus to simply join up with one of the existing religious communities. Oh sure, they have their problems, but under Jesus' leadership those can surely be straightened out. Jesus might for example, become a Pharisee. The Pharisees are a bit hard-nosed about religion, but Jesus could soften them up. Or maybe a Sadducee. The Sadducees had obtained power and influence by collaborating with the Romans. That wasn't right, but just think what Jesus could achieve through the power they wield on the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish religious Council in Jerusalem. Or maybe he can corral all those Zealots. After all, maybe they are on the right track in employing violence against Rome. Weren't Old Testament heroes hailed for their violent zealotness for the Lord? Maybe they just need the right leader?

The Challenger

But Jesus isn't interested in using an existing structure for his movement. Oh sure, he might recruit a person or two from those structures, but he has his sights on something new. 'Behold, I am about to do a new thing,' God said to his prophet Isaiah.³⁰ Jesus is the new thing. True, Jesus could join one of those other movements and try to round off their rough edges, but quite frankly, he doesn't have time for that. Anyone who has ever tried to change the culture of an existing organization or movement knows why. Church planters have an on point saying to explain why they prefer to start something new rather than change an existing church: 'it's easier to give birth than raise the dead.' And so Jesus explains that he isn't following the old practices and traditions (at least not entirely) because he is doing something new. And when you do something new, you don't integrate yourself too closely with the old. No one, for example, patches old clothing with new cloth, or puts old wine in new wineskins, for the reasons he explains. Trying to modify old structures with innovative ideas usually doesn't work out very well. It's like mixing broccoli with ice cream. New wine, new ideas, and new movements, call for new wineskins.

With such homey illustrations, Jesus makes his point: he is bringing something new into the world, and the old approaches, systems, and structures simply won't do any longer.

What are the new wine and wineskins that Jesus brings? Well, the wine is the Gospel; the Good News that the Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus the Messiah. And the wineskin, the vessel that will carry the new wine into the world? That is his *Ekklesia*. His Church. His New Community. A gathering of people who won't be like the hard-nosed Pharisees or the compromised Sadducees or the violent Zealots, or

³⁰ See, Isaiah 43:19.

The Challenger

anyone else. They will be a people of prayer, peace, love, compassion, justice, and hope who will, by following Jesus and living differently, challenge the world to embrace Jesus' way.

In this we see again that Jesus is the Challenger. He challenges the existing order, even the religious one, to embrace something new.

He still does.

Thought to Ponder: What innovations might the church today need to embrace in order to effectively hold and share the wine of Jesus' message?

Mark 2:23-3:12

Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus was walking through some grain fields with his disciples. It was the Sabbath, and as they went along, his disciples were plucking heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees said to Jesus, 'Hey now! Why are your disciples breaking the law by harvesting on the Sabbath?' Jesus answered, 'Haven't you read about the time David and his men were hungry? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the sacred bread that only the priests could eat, and gave some to his friends as well? Don't you see, the Sabbath is made for the benefit of people, not people for the benefit of the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath.' Jesus went into the synagogue, where he found a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees continued to watch him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, hoping to accuse him. Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, 'Stand up.' He then asked the Pharisees, 'Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to harm? To save life or to take it?' They remained silent. He looked at them with anger and sadness because of their hard hearts. Then he said to the man with the withered hand, 'Stretch out your hand.' The man stretched it out, and his hand was

The Challenger

restored. The Pharisees stormed out, and immediately conspired with the supporters of Herod to kill Jesus. Jesus withdrew to the sea with his disciples, and a large crowd followed him. People came from Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, from east of the Jordan, and as far north as Tyre and Sidon. People from everywhere had heard about the great things he did, and many came to see him. He told his disciples to have a boat nearby in the event he needed to escape being crushed, for he had healed so many, and many more were pushing through the crowd to touch him. Whenever people possessed by unclean spirits saw him, the spirits threw them to the ground and cried, 'You are the Son of God!' But Jesus sternly ordered them that they should not tell anyone who he was.

'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.'³¹ So says the fifth of the Ten Commandments. Since God himself rested after six days of creating the universe, men and women were commanded to refrain from work on the seventh day as well.³² God set an example for people to follow. It is important to take a break occasionally, to pause after a long week's work, and to refresh oneself for the labor that lies ahead.

But as is often the case with God's commands, religion has a way of perverting God's good intentions, and in Jesus' day, much that God intended for good in the Law of Moses had been transformed into a bevy of legalistic nonsense.

Enter the Challenger.

One day, as the disciples make their way to the synagogue with their Master, they pluck heads of grain for a mid-morning snack. The Pharisees, heading for the same synagogue, go apoplectic. How dare anyone 'work'

³¹ Exodus 20:8 (NRSV).

³² See, Exodus 20:8-11.

The Challenger

on the Sabbath! Good grief. As if this was what God had in mind to prevent when he gave the fifth commandment. Plucking heads of grain involved no more work than getting crackers out of your kitchen pantry, probably less.

Jesus defends his disciples by citing a familiar Old Testament story about David and his men.³³ The point of the story is, as Jesus says, that one should never elevate religious rules above their original purposes. God had given the Sabbath as a divine gift to enable men and women to rest. The spirit of the law was to allow men and women to find comfort. To deny people the right to fill their empty bellies on the Sabbath was hardly in keeping with that original purpose.

But more to the point, Jesus is, as he says, 'Lord of the Sabbath.' Someone greater than the Sabbath, the author of the Ten Commandments themselves, is present. And doggone it, if he says something is okay, it is okay. The one who has authority to forgive sins certainly has authority to decide what is and isn't permissible on the Sabbath.

The scandalized Pharisees make their way to the synagogue, where once again, Jesus has a role in the morning service. Standing before the congregation, Jesus notices them staring at a man with a withered hand. Their brows arch and their eyes go wide. They just know that Jesus will do something about this. He will heal on the Sabbath! They begin to smile as they sense the opportunity to add another count to their growing indictment of Jesus.

In those days, physical deformities were often considered punishment for sin. One wonders whether the man with the withered

³³ See, 1 Samuel 21:1-7.

The Challenger

hand felt the sting and shame of the Pharisees' condemnation as he caught them staring. We can imagine him slipping his hand beneath his cloak lest he draw further attention to himself.

Jesus asks the man to stand up. It's hard to know whether the poor guy is excited about the possibility of being healed or plain embarrassed. But in any event Jesus uses the circumstance to put another marginalized person front and center (how very Jesus of him). He then asks the Pharisees, 'What do you think the Sabbath is for, doing good or doing evil? Healing life or destroying it?' The flummoxed religionists remain silent. Angry and disappointed by their hard hearts, Jesus shows everyone the answer. Of course you can heal on the Sabbath! He asks the man to stretch out his hand, and when the man does, the congregation gasps as they behold a miracle of restoration.

In the wake of the miracle, Jesus' popularity grows. People come from north, south, east, and west, to see him. He teaches them by the waters of the Galilee (another religious anomaly; Jesus does not confine his teaching to synagogue buildings). He heals the sick and sets captives free. He exercises divine power in undeniable ways. His Lordship extends beyond the Sabbath, and even as he tries to maintain a low profile, the demons he drives out proclaim his identity: Jesus is Lord of all. He is the Son of God!

But as the crowds celebrate with Jesus, the jealous Pharisees make other plans. They go to the Herodians, those who work in collaboration with Rome and the family of Rome's puppet king, to find a way to kill Jesus.

Such is the reaction of religious power to Jesus, and it is just the beginning. But Jesus will neither bend nor break. He will not succumb to their threats and conspiracies. He will continue along his own path, the one prepared for him from before the foundation of the world.

The Challenger

What else would you expect from the Lord of the Sabbath?

Thought to ponder: what aspects of religious life today would Jesus' challenge? What do you think the reaction of religious people would be?

Mark 3:13-19

Jars of Clay

Jesus went up a mountain and called to his side those whom he wanted. They came to him, and he appointed twelve of them, whom he named apostles, to be with him. He would send them out to preach and gave them authority to heal diseases and cast out demons. These are the twelve he chose: Simon (whom he called Peter); James and John (the sons of Zebedee, whom he called the Sons of Thunder); Andrew; Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealous; and Judas Iscariot, who would betray him.

Jesus has a decision to make. He has been travelling throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in synagogues, on hillsides, and by the sea, gathering a considerable following along the way. Things are going well, but he cannot stay in Galilee forever. He needs to reach the whole of Israel, and eventually the world. To do that, he must organize his movement, and that means choosing key people to help lead it. It is time to choose the leaders.

As he makes his choice, Jesus returns to the wilderness. He climbs a mountain and calls followers to his side. He then chooses a symbolically significant twelve to be his apostles (think of the twelve tribes of Israel).³⁴ An apostle (in Greek, *apostolos*) is a messenger sent on a mission, a person sent with orders to fulfill. The twelve Jesus chooses will be tasked to carry

³⁴ See, Genesis 49:1-28.

The Challenger

the Good News of his Kingdom to the ends of the earth. An apostle is also someone with authority, authorized to act on behalf of the person who sent them. Jesus gives the twelve he chooses such authority, commissioning them to heal the sick and drive out demons in his name. These twelve authorized messengers will become the leaders of the New Israel, otherwise known as Jesus' Church.

When Jesus chose his first disciples, he made the untraditional choice of fishermen. In the choices he now makes, he continues his unconventional ways. The four fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James, and John make the cut, as do the fishermen's friends, Philip and Bartholomew (aka Nathaniel).³⁵ Matthew, the recently salvaged tax collector, is also chosen. As are Simon the Zealous and Judas Iscariot (both of whom were likely associated with the Zealot movement). Thomas, who will one day be unfairly remembered as a doubter, is also among the twelve, along with two lesser known, though no less significant, apostles: Thaddeus and James son of Alphaeus (it's not a person's fame that makes them significant; it's their faithfulness to the call of Jesus).

What a crew! These guys aren't the most credentialed or celebrated people in Israel by a long shot. Just a bunch of ordinary Joes. That of course, is the point. Jesus calls ordinary people to do extraordinary things. The Challenger doesn't pick from the center, he picks from the margins. His choices are unconventional, counterintuitive, and world changing. They are a sign that in Jesus' Kingdom, anybody can be somebody. They are what Paul dubbed 'treasures in clay jars' who show the world that the power working through them is from God and not themselves.³⁶

³⁵ See, John 1:43ff.

³⁶ See, 2 Corinthians 4:7.

The Challenger

Looking at Jesus' unlikely choices, we can glean a few things about what it takes to be part of Jesus' band. First, you must be deeply committed to Jesus. The call Jesus gave these men was that they 'be with him.' Theirs was to be a sold out, Jesus-centered life. They would sit at his feet and learn from him. They would listen to Jesus as he taught them along the road, on hillsides, shorelines, and mountaintops. They would watch every move he made and strive to be like him in every way. This would be their primary vocation: to be with Jesus, and to become like him.

Next, you must be committed to community. Jesus called these men to a shared life. He called them to be a band of brothers. They would need each other in the tough times ahead. As iron sharpens iron, they would support, encourage, and refine one another.³⁷ The Christian life is not a lone ranger affair. To be saved by Jesus requires commitment to one's brothers and sisters. It requires deep participation in community.

Finally, you need to embrace diversity. The twelve were a diverse group. The juxtaposition of zealots, over-taxed fishermen, and a tax collector was quite a diverse mix, even without considering the others. This will be the pattern in the Body of Christ. It is One Body with many parts.³⁸ It takes all types to constitute the Church, people with different gifts and perspectives. The Kingdom will be made of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Black and white. Asian and Latino. Extroverts and introverts. Young and old. People who like coffee and people who don't.³⁹ To be a part of Jesus' team requires you to embrace differences. That's how Jesus' Church works.

³⁷ See, Proverbs 27:17.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

³⁹ I wonder about those who don't like coffee, but I'm willing to make allowances.

The Challenger

Ordinary people with an extraordinary calling who are committed to Jesus, each other, and difference. That's who you will find in the Challenger's innermost circles. Such are the people he calls to lead his revolution.

Thought to Ponder: are you committed to Jesus, community, and diversity?

Mark 3:20-35

The Misunderstood Messiah

Jesus entered a house. A crowd gathered once again. The crowd was so large and pressing that neither Jesus nor his disciples could eat. When his family heard what was happening, they went to get him and take him away, saying, 'He is mad.' The religious leaders from Jerusalem said, 'he's possessed by Beelzebul – the Prince of Demons! It is by the power of demons that he casts out demons.' Jesus called them over and answered their accusations with a parable. 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' he said. 'A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. A house divided against itself cannot endure either. If Satan is fighting against his own forces, how can Satan survive? No one can enter the house of a strong man to plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man. Then he can plunder the house. I tell you, every sin that people may commit will be forgiven, but those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. They will face eternal consequences.' His mother and brothers came to him again. Standing outside, they asked him to come out to them. The people sitting around Jesus said, 'Look, your mother and brothers are outside asking for you.' Jesus answered, 'Who are my mother and brothers?' Looking at those who had gathered around him, he said, 'These are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.'

The Challenger

Jesus' mother and brothers are at a total loss. His reckless behavior simply makes no sense. For one thing, as the eldest son, he should have settled down by now, started a family, maybe even taken over the family business. For another, he is supposed to be the Messiah. Mark doesn't tell the Nativity story, but it did happen, and so Jesus' Messiahship was no secret to Mary.⁴⁰ As for his siblings, well, families can be good at keeping secrets, but it's hard to imagine they hadn't at least picked up on certain conversations between Mom and Dad. Whether they believe it or not is another matter, but they surely know something. The miracles alone suggest something is up. But for both Mary and Jesus' brothers, the notion of Jesus' Messiahship is becoming increasingly difficult to believe. He makes so many odd choices. Messiah is supposed to zealously uphold Jewish traditions. Jesus breaks all the rules. Messiah is supposed to raise an army. Jesus doesn't even own a sword. Messiah is supposed to win over powerful, influential people. Jesus prefers the company of rejects. If Jesus is the Messiah, his family thinks, he sure has a funny way of showing it.

Their conclusion: Jesus is out of his mind.

They watch as a crowd follows Jesus into someone's home. The crowd consists of the usual suspects: the poor, the sick, and of course, the religious leaders who are out to get Jesus. His mother and brothers decide it's time to intervene. They attempt to take him away before he does something that will only get him into more trouble. Standing at the door, they try to get in. 'You have to let us in,' they say, 'he isn't right. He's gone mad. We must get him out of here.'

The religious leaders hear the family's remark and up the ante. Jesus isn't just out of his mind; he is in league with Satan. How else to explain

⁴⁰ See, Luke 1:30-33.

The Challenger

his supernatural power? 'We'll tell you what his problem is,' they say. 'He is possessed by Beelzebul, the prince of demons! That's how he is able to heal the sick and free the demon-possessed!'

It hardly gets more insulting than that.

Jesus, incredulous, addresses his religious accusers. 'Are you nuts? Why would Satan fight against Satan? We're talking about the great enemy here. The evil one who possesses minds, ravages bodies, and destroys souls. The master of disorientation who leads people down crooked paths. Why would such an enemy attack its own forces and undermine its progress? No, the plundering of Satan's house can only be accomplished by the One with both the motive and power to do so: God. Only God can overcome the enemy and free those held captive to Satan. It is with the power of God that I drive out demons.'

Jesus isn't guilty of blasphemy. His religious accusers are. He makes it clear: it is those who stand in the way of his work, who reject the one who has come to destroy the works of the devil, who are doing the work of demons. To stand in the way of Jesus is to stand in the way of liberation. It is to leave Satan's victims trapped in the grip of demonic talons. To fight against the only one with the power to save those victims is simply unforgivable.

Jesus' mother and brothers have their heads in their hands. Jesus has really made enemies now. They must get him out of here. Their message is relayed inside the house, through the people sitting around Jesus, the ones who hang on his every word. 'Your mother is outside Jesus. So are your brothers. They want to talk with you.' Whether Jesus is told their remark about his sanity Mark doesn't say. One would assume, however, that he knows how they feel.

The Challenger

Jesus looks at the people sitting around him and smiles. 'Who are my mother and brothers?' he asks. 'You are. That's right. You are the ones who are doing God's will. The ones who are not ashamed or scandalized by the things I say and do. The ones who are willing to follow me, even when I don't seem to make any sense. The ones who embrace my way, even when it goes against the grain of the world. Yes, you are the members of my family.'

That's a rather good description of family, isn't it? Family are the people who stick with you, even when it seems you are off your rocker.

This is not, as some have taken it, a slap in his family's face. It is an invitation. Jesus loves his family. He just refuses to allow them to define what family is. It is the way of the world to put one's immediate family above everyone else. Jesus insists that the concept of family is broader than biological ties. He invites everyone, his mother, his brothers, and the entire world into his family. But to be a part of his family, you must be willing to be misunderstood and maligned as you pursue the will of God. You must be willing to cast aside conventional, 'normal' ways of engaging the world, and do the kind of things most people consider nuts, or worse.

Such is the way of the Challenger. And such is the way of those who follow him. Those who march to a different beat are rarely, if ever, understood, even by those closest to them. That might sting a little, even a lot. But that's okay because it's worth the sting to be part of the family of Jesus.

Thought to ponder: have you ever been misunderstood or mocked for following Jesus? How did that feel?

The Challenger

Mark 4:1-20

Seed and Sower

Jesus once again began to teach by the sea. A great crowd soon gathered around him, so he entered a boat on the sea and taught from there. He taught them many things in parables. One of the parables he told went like this: 'Listen! A farmer went out to his field to sow seed. As he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it sprang up too quickly because the soil was shallow. When the sun rose, it became scorched, and because it lacked deep roots, withered away. Other seed fell among thorns that choked the plants as they grew. These bore no fruit. But other seed fell on good and fertile ground, where it yielded an abundant harvest – thirty, sixty, or even one-hundred times what had been planted. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.' When he was alone with the twelve and other close followers, they asked him about his parables. Jesus said, 'I give to you the ability to understand the mystery of God's Kingdom, but to those on the outside I speak in parables so that, 'seeing they might not perceive, and hearing they may not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.' Then he said, 'Don't you understand this parable? If you do not, how will you understand all the others? The farmer's seed is the message of God. The seed on the path represents people who hear God's message, only to have Satan come and take it away from them. The seed that fell on rocky ground represents those who receive the message with joy, but because they lack deep roots, do not endure. When trouble or persecution comes, they fall. The seed sown among the thorns represent those who hear the message, only to have it crowded out by the worries of life, the temptation of riches, and the longing for the things of the world. These things choke out the message and prevent fruit from being produced. But the seed that fell on good and fertile ground are those who hear the word, believe it, and

The Challenger

bear fruit, some thirty times, some sixty times, and some one-hundred times what had been planted.

Jesus has been putting the powers of the world on notice. He has preached the Good News and the challenge of the Kingdom. He has recruited the core members of his team and issued an invitation to everyone to join his revolution. Now, as he once again teaches by the shore of the Galilee a question hangs in the air: who will take him up on his offer?

Jesus knows not everyone will. There are many who will reject his invitation: the ones who wield religious authority, those who collaborate with the Roman Empire, those who would rather withdraw from the world to lead lives so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good, the purveyors of violence, the slaves of the empire, those who could care less. There are and always will be many who will find reason to reject the kingdom outright, just as there are and always will be others who will say they want in but won't really mean it.

As Jesus sits in his boat just off the shore, using the water as a sound magnifier that his words might more effectively reach the ears of his audience, he tells a parable: the story of the Sower and his seed. In imagery well known to his audience, he describes those who are so well-ensconced on their own paths that they will not even consider traveling another way. Others will be initially excited by the possibility of journeying with Jesus but will prove to be hard cases, people with rocky hearts, weak intentions, and shallow faith. Still others are compromised, too tied down to their way of life to change. For these, Jesus' call may be enticing, but not nearly enough so to overcome their obsessions. They may respond, but soon enough Jesus' call will be choked out by thorns of worry, money, and the pursuit of what the world has to offer. One way or

The Challenger

another, the message of Jesus will prove to be too challenging. It will require them to give up too much.

But there are and always will be others who heed Jesus' call. They receive it with immense joy and wind up producing a harvest for the Kingdom, as great a harvest as the Sower intends. Thirty, sixty, or even one-hundred times what had been planted.

As Jesus explains the meaning of his parable to his disciples, he emphasizes its importance. 'Don't you understand *this* parable?' Jesus asks. 'If you do not, how will you understand all the others? In other words, while all of Jesus' parables are important, this one is crucial. If you are going to understand Jesus, if you are to bear fruit for Jesus, you must heed the lesson. You must be open to new paths. You must be willing to be vulnerable, not hard-hearted. You must be willing to go deep, to develop more than just shallow roots. And you must be willing to surrender everything the world offers and uses to entice you away from his way. Once again, Jesus emphasizes that if you truly desire to follow him, you must go all in.

Many won't be able to do so. Their faith will either be for the birds, wither under demanding conditions, or have the life choked out of it before it even gets started.

But those who do, who go all in for Jesus, they will change the world.

Thought to ponder: what kind of soil are you?

Mark 4:21-25

Practice Makes Perfect

Jesus then said to the twelve, 'Do you light a lamp in order to place it under a basket or a bed? No! It is put on a stand, so people can see its light. For

The Challenger

nothing is hidden that will not be made known, nor is there any secret that will not be brought to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.’ Continuing, he said, ‘Pay attention to what you hear me say, for the measure you give will be the measure you receive, and those who listen and heed my words will receive more. To those who understand, more will be given, but to those who do not understand, even what they have will be taken away.’

As Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower to his disciples, he says something that confounds people to this day. He explains that he is giving them the ability to understand the mysteries of His Kingdom, but to those outside his inner circle, well, listen to his own words:

‘I speak in parables so that ‘seeing they might not perceive, and hearing they may not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’⁴¹

Seriously Jesus? You speak in ways people will not understand in order to prevent them from finding you? Isn’t that the opposite of what you want? Don’t you want people to understand and find the life you offer?

Well, yes. Jesus does want people to find him. But it is not quite as simple as that. In order to truly find Jesus and the life he offers, you need to pay attention, think deeply, seek him with all you’ve got, and put his lessons into practice.

Jesus says as much as he teaches the disciples the lesson of the lamp. No one, he says, lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. To the confused disciples, it seems as if that’s exactly what Jesus is doing. He has lit a light in his life and ministry, but now speaks in parables that are hard to understand. It seems as if he is covering his light with a basket. But as

⁴¹ Mark 4:11(b)-12.

The Challenger

Jesus explains, that is not what he is doing at all. No, he is lighting his lamp so that people will see it. It might seem as if he is hiding his lessons, but they will eventually be brought to light, at least for anyone who wants them to be.

The trick to understanding all of this is found in Jesus' line, 'the measure you give will be the measure you receive.' In other words, the effort you put into understanding and living out Jesus' lessons determines how much you get out of them. Think of learning advanced mathematics. The concepts may be hard at first, but if you apply yourself and practice them, they begin to make sense. Similarly, you cannot just listen to Jesus' words and expect them to magically transform you. You must pay attention, ponder, and turn them over and over again in your mind until you begin to see what he is saying. Then, once you do, you must heed the lesson, that is, put it into practice. It might take you a few times to get it right, but if you stick to it and keep practicing, things will begin to make perfect sense.

Much of what Jesus teaches is hard. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, he commands us to love and pray for our enemies.⁴² That seems idiotic, until you think about it. If you return hate for hate, things usually get worse. But maybe, just maybe if you return love for hate, things can be different. So you begin to love and pray for your enemies. At first, you may not see results, but as you keep at it you soon enough discover the changes such an approach makes - in you, in your enemies, and in the world.

So much of Jesus' teaching works this way. The more you live it out, the more understanding you gain and the more sense it makes. This is the reason Jesus does not simply spell things out for everyone with crystal

⁴² Matthew 5:44.

The Challenger

clarity. Not because he wants people to remain in the darkness, but because he wants them to find the light. Finding life in Jesus is not a matter of listening to magical words. We find life by pursuing it. We find it by practicing, repeatedly, until we get it right. You might say that when it comes to following Jesus, practice makes perfect.

This is what Jesus means in the lesson of the lamp. The more you pursue Jesus' way, the more sense it makes. But if you don't pursue it, even what little understanding you gleaned by listening to (or reading) Jesus' words will soon enough seep out of your leaky brain and be forgotten.

The Challenger's lessons are not for the lazy. They are for those willing to put their shoulder to the wheel and live them out. They are for those willing to be challenged.

Thought to ponder: think of a teaching of Jesus that has been hard for you. How might you put it into practice?

Mark 4:26-34

Small Beginnings, Big Miracles

Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of God works like this: a farmer scatters seed upon the earth. Day and night, whether he sleeps or wakes, the seed springs up and grows, though the farmer has no idea how it happens. The earth brings forth the crops on its own: first the blade, then the ear, and finally the ripened grain. Then, when the fruit is ripe, the farmer gets his sickle, because the time of harvest has come. Jesus also said, 'How then should we describe the Kingdom of God?' What sort of parable can I tell about it? It is like a mustard seed planted in the earth. It is the smallest of seeds, but when it grows, it becomes the largest of herbs. It puts out great branches so that the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow.'

The Challenger

With such parables Jesus taught the people. In public, he always taught in parables, explaining everything later in private to his disciples.

Jesus' Kingdom certainly is different. Even this early in Mark's story, the vision Jesus lays out challenges our preconceived notions at every turn. He has proposed an upside-down kingdom that is laughable in the eyes of the powers, and instead of laying things out clearly, has instructed the people with perplexing parables that has left them scratching their heads and wondering what he is talking about. Only the happy few will get it, and quite frankly, at least at this juncture, even they don't. Most people who listen to Jesus, including his disciples, are just plain confused.

It is only natural for his disciples to wonder how on earth such an approach will ever work. If Jesus is the Messiah, and this is the way of his Kingdom, how will it ever prevail? They may well fear that their hopes for the everlasting Kingdom of God might turn out to be little more than wishful thinking.

Jesus, reading the thought balloons over his befuddled disciples' heads, tells two parables.

In the first, Jesus returns to the metaphor of farming. A farmer (likely the same bloke who had indiscriminately tossed seed onto a cart path, rocky ground, thorns, and fertile soil in the Parable of the Sower) goes out once more to scatter seed on the ground. In time, it sprouts, and interestingly, the farmer seems surprised. We can imagine his childlike wonder as he humbly stands in his field amidst waves of abundant grain, looks to the heavens, and asks, 'where did all this come from? How on earth did it happen?' Now of course, he knows it had something to do with his sowing the seed, the work of the sun, and the falling of the rain, but the intricacies of how seeds work is lost on him. In the final analysis, the seed is to him, as indeed it remains to us today, a miracle. We who

The Challenger

profess to know more about seeds today really know nothing more. How such a thing exists, how it came to be, how it magically transforms from a seed into a fruit bearing plant, and which is more, the 'why' of it all, is nothing short of miraculous.

But the miracle happens. The inexplicable becomes reality. What the farmer can only scratch his head at defies all expectation. The blade pushes forth, then the ear, and finally, the ripened grain, ready for harvest. The farmer did not need to know how or why it happened. He only needed to do his part, sow the seed, and watch the miracle unfold.

As the disciples absorb the lesson of this first parable, Jesus launches into the second: the tale of the mustard seed. It is the smallest of seeds, Jesus tells his friends, but it becomes the largest of herbal plants, so large that the birds of the air can build nests in it. Small beginnings, Jesus informs us, can have shockingly out of proportion endings. It is significant that Jesus chose mustard, and not some other small seed, as his illustration. The flavor of mustard is robust, one might even say powerful.

Putting the lessons together, we can see how Jesus' Kingdom will prevail. His way may not make any sense. It may be something we can only scratch our heads at. It may seem small and insignificant in the eyes of a world that thinks bigger is always better. And it may seem to follow the way of weakness. But that's the way God works. His ways are higher than ours. We cannot understand them. They often arise from humble beginnings. But always in the end, they explode upon the world with miraculous power.

To Jesus' confused disciples, and to we who would follow the Challenger today, the lesson is clear: you don't need to understand how or why the way of Jesus works. It is enough to know that it will. Jesus' way, Jesus' Kingdom, is God's Kingdom. It is as strange as it is beyond our

The Challenger

comprehension. But it is backed by the miraculous power of an Almighty God.

Those who would follow the Challenger need know nothing more. We need only do our part, sow the seed, and watch the miracle happen.

Thought to ponder: think of a time you saw God bring amazing results from a small beginning.

Mark 4:35-41

In the Father's Hands

That same day, when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let's cross to the other side.' He was in a boat when he said this, and the disciples joined him, leaving the crowds behind as they crossed the sea, although some followed in their own boats. A ferocious storm arose, and the waves crashed over the boat, so much that the boat became filled with water. Jesus was sleeping in the stern with his head lying on a cushion. His disciples woke him up and cried, 'Teacher! Don't you care that we are dying?' Jesus woke and rebuked the wind and spoke to the water, 'Peace! Be still!' Immediately the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. Jesus said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith?' Overcome with awe, they said, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

It is evening, and Jesus has finished his class along the shore of the Galilee. He wades into the shallows and steps into a boat. Calling out to his disciples, he says, 'Let's cross to the other side.' The disciples are more than a little shocked. 'The other side' is the country of the Gerasenes, a league of ten cities known as the Decapolis on the eastern shore of the Galilee. It is chock full of Gentiles, and not just any Gentiles. The Decapolis is a base of sorts for the Roman military, with both active duty and retired

The Challenger

soldiers living there.⁴³ The country of the Gerasenes is Empire Land. A region associated with evil. Not the kind of place nice Jewish boys visit. The disciples think, ‘this following Jesus thing might be about to get hairy.’

Obediently, they join Jesus and push the boat into deeper water. But then, as they make their way across the sea, a ferocious storm breaks upon them. The Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden storms, and the disciples who had been fisherman undoubtedly experienced more than a few. But this is no ordinary storm.

This is a demonic storm. I know, that sounds ridiculous to our modern ears. But our forebears perceived things differently. To them, the line between the natural and spiritual worlds was not so distinct, and supernatural forces were sometimes at work alongside natural events. If you stop to think about it, this makes sense. The world as originally created by God may well have included storms. Storms are, after all, among nature’s wonders that declare the glory of God. But they were never intended to harm anyone. It was only after humankind fell, and evil infiltrated the created order, that the problem of natural evil arose, and people and animals fell prey to hurricanes, earthquakes, and the like. It was only when distance arose between God and those made in God’s image that the enemy slipped between the cracks and began to use natural phenomena to hurt, kill, and destroy.

Mark portrays Jesus’ ministry as a battle against the demonic powers that plague the world. In a sense, a storm has been building against him all along. Now, in this moment, those forces rise against him in the form of an actual storm, complete with fierce winds and destructive waves. It is as if the powers of darkness know the reason why the Challenger is

⁴³ Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2009), 114.

The Challenger

crossing over to the country of the Gerasenes (we will come to that in our next entry) and is doing everything possible to prevent his arrival.

The wind whips the sails, the waves crash over the gunnels, and the boat fills with water. The disciples fight to keep their vessel from capsizing, as do those in the other boats who dared follow Jesus across the sea. Yet all the while, Jesus lies in the stern of the ship, his head on a cushion, sleeping the sleep of the just. It is as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

The disciples stumble across the rocking boat to his side. They shake his shoulders. 'Teacher! Wake up! Don't you care that we are dying?' You must give them some credit here: they seem to understand that the solution to their problem is Jesus. Jesus stretches, rubs his eyes, feels the lurch of the ship, the wind in his hair, and the spray on his face, and immediately understands. Rising, he *rebukes* the wind and *speaks* to the water. Do you get that? Jesus is not merely orchestrating the movements of the elements. He is addressing and silencing the dark powers that lie behind the storm, just as he silenced an evil spirit in the Capernaum synagogue.⁴⁴ The enemy is immediately subdued. The roaring wind and crashing waves transform into a dead calm.

The disciples are overwhelmed. 'Who is this?' they ask. 'Even the wind and the sea obey him!' The answer to that question explains a great deal besides Jesus' ability to subdue wind and sea. It explains how Jesus can sleep in the stern of a boat headed into enemy occupied territory. It explains how he can savor the sleep of the just while knowing that the enemy might, at any moment, hurl a vicious tempest his way. Jesus knows who he is, and he knows to whom he belongs. Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and his life is in his Abba's hands. He knows that whatever happens,

⁴⁴ See, Mark 1:25.

The Challenger

he will never be taken from those hands. He knows that even amid the storm, there is no safer place to be.

Jesus asks his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid?' Do you still have no faith?' It is a question they need to ponder, as do we. Those called to follow Jesus will face many storms. As we challenge the darkness and spread the light, the enemy will rage and throw obstacles in our path. At times, this will be terrifying. We will naturally be afraid. But if we remember that we are in the hands of our Heavenly Father, we need never become 'so afraid.' For we can know that we forever remain in our Abba's care.

Such was the mindset of the Challenger. And such should be the mindset of all who would follow him as he continues to push back darkness in our world.

Thought to ponder: what 'storms' are you most afraid of, and how might knowing you are in God's hands help you through them?

Mark 5:1-20

The Fall of Legion

They came to the other side of the sea, in the country of the Gerasenes. Jesus stepped out of the boat, and immediately a man possessed by an evil spirit ran out of the tombs to meet him. He lived among the tombs, and no one had been able to restrain him, not even with chains. He had often been bound by fetters and chains, but the chains he tore apart, and the fetters he broke into pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. All day and night, in the tombs and on the mountains, he cried out and cut himself with stones. When Jesus was still some distance away, he saw him. He ran to Jesus and bowed down before him, crying with a loud voice: 'What have I to do with you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God!? I beg you

The Challenger

in God's name, don't torment me!' For Jesus had already said, 'Come out of that man, you evil spirit.' Jesus asked the man, 'What is your name?' The man replied, 'My name is Legion, for we are many.' He begged Jesus not to send them away from the area. Nearby on a mountainside was a large herd of pigs feeding. The evil spirits in the man begged Jesus, saying, 'Send us into the pigs, that we may enter them.' At once Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about two thousand rushed down the steep bank into the sea, where they drowned. Those who fed the pigs fled and spread the word throughout the region. Many people came to investigate. They saw Jesus sitting with the man who had been possessed, now clothed and in his right mind. This frightened them. Those who had witnessed what happened explained it to the crowd, and they begged Jesus to depart from their region. As Jesus entered the boat to leave, the man who had been possessed begged Jesus to let him come too. But Jesus told him, 'No. Go home to your friends and tell them of the great things the Lord has done for you and the mercy he has shown you.' So the man went home and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how Jesus had done great things for him. Everyone was amazed.

The freeing of the Gerasene Demoniac is my favorite miracle story in the Gospels. It is an amazing tale of Jesus entering the far country to push back the darkness and set a man free from the sorrow and shadow that bind him. In a sense, the demoniac represents all of us, and so whenever I read of his deliverance, when I imagine him sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and when I envision him leaving the tombs and returning home to tell of the wonderful things Jesus had done for him, my eyes get a little misty. For in his story I see so much of my own. Perhaps you can see some of yours.

The Challenger

But there is more to this story than meets the eye. It is not only the story of an individual's liberation; it is the story of the clash between the Challenger and Rome. To borrow a metaphor from the book of *Revelation*, it is the story of the battle between the way of the Lamb and the way of the beast.

The country of the Gerasenes, or the Decapolis, is, as we noted in the previous entry, Empire Land. It is an autonomous league of cities under Roman protection. Roman soldiers, both active and retired, live here. Rome is king in this land, and her emperor a god. Everything about the country of the Gerasenes shouts 'Empire!'

It is no wonder then that the evil spirits that inhabit this man go by the name, 'Legion.' A legion is a Roman army division about two thousand strong. When the man tells Jesus his name is 'Legion,' he is not merely announcing the number of demons inside him, he is identifying them with the Roman Empire. Somehow, the evil that inhabits Rome has come to inhabit this man.

Historians speak of the 'Grandeur of Rome,' and throughout history men and women have glorified empires, but this man's life stands as a sort of dissenting opinion. He lives among the tombs, a reminder that empires are built on the corpses of the conquered. He cannot be restrained; there is no level of violence that can subdue him. The way of violence, in other words, cannot be conquered by violence, and the attempt only makes things worse. And which is more, the man's life, like the way of empire, travels the path of misery. All day and all night, he cries on the mountains and cuts himself with stones. Those who walk in the way of empire do damage to themselves as well as others. To turn a phrase of Jesus, they

The Challenger

may seem to gain the whole world, but they lose their own souls in the process.⁴⁵

The righteous anger of Jesus against the evil of empire, an evil personified in this one victim, is evident from the moment he exits the boat. *'Come out of that man, you evil spirit,'* he says. The man, or perhaps we should say, the Legion within him, immediately recognizes Jesus as a threat and races to his side. The Legion knows that Jesus is more powerful than they. They beg not to be sent out of the country; they long to remain in the shadow of Rome's might. The implication is that they are deeply entwined with Rome, that empire and the demonic work together. One might say they need each other. The way of empire is driven, even empowered, by the demonic, and the demonic finds a medium through which to work misery through empire. To leave the cursed and profane ground of the Decapolis, with its military power and imperial cult, would be devastating to both.

Jesus, oddly enough, grants their request, at least temporarily. He gives them permission to enter a nearby herd of swine. The Legion does so, no doubt believing they have fooled Jesus into allowing them to fight another day. But the pigs, unclean though they may be in Jewish eyes, cannot bear the presence of the Legion. They rush headlong into the sea and drown. They would rather die than collaborate. Too bad for the pigs, but certainly a lesson that: first, Jesus cannot be fooled by the connivance of demons; and second, that wherever the power of demon empire goes, death reigns. Not even pigs are safe.

The citizens of the Decapolis, though certainly impressed, are not amused. Traditionally, the request for Jesus to leave the area is said to have come from the swine herders, who are somewhat understandably

⁴⁵ See, Mark 8:36.

The Challenger

upset over their loss. But Mark's text implies that it is the whole crowd, including people who have come from the cities and countryside, who ask Jesus to leave, a reading that is evident in the parallel accounts of Luke and Matthew.⁴⁶ So perhaps the fear of the people is about more than lost pigs. Perhaps, a people dependent upon Rome, many of whom serve or have served Rome in the military, are terrified at the sight of a man who had once been conquered by Legion, a man whom they had all heard howling on the mountaintops, a man who could not be restrained by any means tried, now sitting clothed and in his right mind. Perhaps they recognize that Jesus, this simple looking man from the other side of the Galilee, possesses a power greater than theirs. It is a thought that scares the bejesus out of them.

But if the crowd thinks getting rid of Jesus will free them from having to think about what happened, they are mistaken. Jesus goes but leaves the rescued man behind to serve as a witness. And so it happened that for the rest of that man's life, everyone in the Decapolis had access to a powerful truth: that though the power of Rome seems strong, there is a stronger power. A power that can rescue people from the tombs, succeed where violence fails, and, instead of bringing about harm and death, inaugurate liberation and life.

Such was the message the Challenger brought to both a broken man living in the tombs and a broken culture living in the Roman Decapolis. The way of the beast, the way of Rome, had met its match. The way of the Lamb had come.

Thought to ponder: how does the way of Jesus differ from the way of Empire?

⁴⁶ See, Matthew 8:34; Luke 8:37.

The Challenger

Mark 5:21-43

Raising Daughters

When Jesus crossed back to the other side of the sea, a great crowd gathered around him on the shore. Jairus, a leader in the local synagogue, came before Jesus and fell at his feet. Jairus pleaded, 'My little daughter is at the point of death! Please come and lay your hands on her, that she may be made whole and live!' Jesus went with him, and the crowd followed, pressing in on all sides. In the crowd there was a woman who had suffered an issue of blood for twelve years. She had undergone many medical treatments, spent all she had, and had nothing to show for it. Indeed, she had gotten worse. Having heard stories of Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. For she had thought to herself, 'If I can just touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately the flow of blood stopped, and she felt in her body that she had been made whole. Immediately Jesus perceived that power had gone out of him, and he turned around and asked the crowd, 'Who touched my clothes?' His disciples responded, 'You see all these people pressing against you. How can you ask, 'Who touched me?'' He looked around to see who had done it, and the woman, fearful of the crowd and trembling because of what had been done to her, came and fell before Jesus, and told him what she had done. Jesus said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. You are now whole.' While he was speaking to her, people came from the synagogue leader's house, saying, 'Your daughter is dead. Why bother the Rabbi any longer?' But Jesus turned to the synagogue leader, 'Don't be afraid. Just believe in me.' Jesus allowed only Peter, James, and John to go with him to Jairus' home. When he came to the home of the synagogue leader's house, there was quite a commotion, as people were weeping and wailing. He went inside and said, 'Why such a commotion? Why do you weep? The child is not dead. She is only sleeping.' The people

The Challenger

scoffed. Jesus sent them outside, and took the child's father and mother, along with Peter, James, and John, into the room where the child was lying. Taking her by the hand, he said, 'Talitha cumi!' which means, 'Little girl, get up!' Immediately the girl, who was twelve years old, got up and began to walk around. Everyone was amazed. Jesus strictly ordered them not to tell anyone and told them to give the girl something to eat.

Jairus is an important man. A leader in the synagogue at Capernaum, he had been entrusted with the tasks of organizing services and supervising ministries. Sort of like a Head Deacon or Ministry Chair in the modern Church. Mark repeatedly emphasizes this role as he tells the story. It seems to be a crucial point. Jairus is a big wig.

But he has a heart wrenching problem. His twelve-year-old daughter is sick and at the point of death. The doctors can do no more. But hope is not lost, for Jairus knows Jesus, who has spoken at the synagogue. Jairus has even seen Jesus heal a man during a service.⁴⁷ Still, it is no small thing for Jairus to seek Jesus' help, for the scribes and Pharisees are already plotting against Jesus. Jairus could easily lose his position and standing for seeking out Jesus. But his precious daughter's life is in the balance, and so, like any loving father, he casts all else to the wind and does what he can to save her. He comes before Jesus and throws himself at his feet, pleading, 'Please Jesus, let her live!' Jesus does not hesitate. He goes with Jairus immediately.

But along the way, an interruption. A woman with an issue of blood is among the crowd that follows Jesus. She has been sick for twelve years. In recording this fact, Mark forms an association between this woman and Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter; we are meant to connect their

⁴⁷ See, Mark 3:1-6; the restoration of the man with the withered hand took place in the synagogue at Capernaum, where Jairus did his work.

The Challenger

respective plights. Jairus is an important person, and as such, his daughter is too. But this woman? Well, she is, under the Law, unclean.⁴⁸ Worse, those who touch her, or touch what she has touched, are considered unclean as well, so it is a safe bet that just about everyone avoids her. And to top it all off, she is poor, having spent all her money on doctors to no avail. On the scales of social importance, this woman loses to Jairus and his daughter in every way.

But she has this going for her: she has great faith. Believing that even the touch of Jesus' clothes can heal her, she approaches him from behind. It is a bold move. If anyone sees, they will consider her act an outrage, one that risks rendering Jesus unclean and unfit to save Jairus' daughter. But if she can just touch his clothes, secretly, without anyone noticing, she supposes she can get away with it. No harm no foul. It works. She touches Jesus' garment, and immediately, the bleeding stops. Now, to just sneak away...

Jesus doesn't let her. He pauses. Looks around. Asks who touched him. Frightened, she steps forward and owns up to what she has done. What will everyone think? She can see the impatience on Jairus' face as he desires to get Jesus to his daughter as quickly as possible. She feels the judgment of the crowd. Why oh why didn't Jesus just let her quietly slip away?

The Challenger has a few points to make.

First, there is the matter of justice. Jesus must correct the notion that a poor woman matters less than the daughter of a synagogue official. Both have suffered. Both have reached the point at which no doctor can help. Both matter in the eyes of God. Perhaps this explains why Jesus

⁴⁸ See, Leviticus 15:25-27.

The Challenger

addresses her as '*Daughter.*' She is as much a daughter of God as anyone, and everyone, she, Jairus, and each person in the crowd, must learn that.

Second, Jesus wants everyone to know that this woman is no longer to be considered unclean. She is whole now. There is no longer an issue, and she no longer needs to be avoided. In fact, Jesus is saying more than that. He is rejecting the pathological thinking that had ever led people to consider women in her condition unclean in the first place. Remember, Jesus would have been considered unclean under the Law, at least as interpreted by the religious minds of his day, just because she had touched his clothes. He would have been considered unfit to heal anyone, Jairus' daughter included. That he goes on to do just that is a refutation of the notion that a woman having menstrual problems is somehow 'unclean.'

Finally, Jesus draws attention to the woman to demonstrate his healing power. This is especially important for Jairus, who is no doubt at his wits end over the waning life of his daughter. Can Jesus really save her? The answer comes in the wake of this interruptive miracle. Merely touching the clothes Jesus wears can heal a woman sick for twelve years. Surely Jesus, with the laying on of hands, can heal Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. What Jesus can do for one daughter he can do for another.

The story of course closes with the happiest of endings. At first, tragic news arrives as messengers from Jairus' house announce that his daughter has died. But Jesus doesn't allow this news to take Jairus down. 'Don't be afraid. Just believe in me,' he says. Jairus does. He takes Jesus into his home, and there, in the presence of his wife and three of Jesus' disciples, the miracle man takes his daughter by the hand. 'Talitha cumi!' he says, 'little girl, get up!' Immediately she leaps from her bed. Joy abounds. Mother and father hug their little girl. Tears roll down cheeks.

The Challenger

Jairus tries to thank Jesus, who simply smiles and tells him to give his daughter something to eat.

It's a wonderful story, this raising of two daughters. In it we see Jesus' power over sickness, even death. But don't let the triumphant ending cause you to miss the middle. Jesus came to restore life to everyone. He values every life, every son and daughter. In a world that only values the lives of important people, the Challenger takes time to announce that the life of a poor, outcast, 'unclean' woman matters. Mark's story therefore reminds us that when our society deems certain lives to be of less value than others, we must stand up and say as clearly as Jesus did that those particular lives matter.

Thought to Ponder: which lives today are valued less than others? What would Jesus say about that?

Mark 6:1-13

With or Without

Jesus left the area and returned to his hometown of Nazareth, and his disciples followed him. When the Sabbath came, he taught in the synagogue. Many who heard him were astonished. They asked, 'Where did he get such wisdom, and how is it that he is able to perform such mighty miracles? Isn't this the craftsmen, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon? Aren't his sisters living here in town with us?' So they were deeply offended by him. Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is honored everywhere except in his hometown, among his relatives, and in his own family.' He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was amazed at their unbelief. Then Jesus went through the surrounding villages teaching. He called the twelve together and sent them out two by

The Challenger

two with the authority to drive out evil spirits. He commanded them to take nothing with them for the journey other than a staff. They were to take no bread, no bag, no money for their purse. They were to wear sandals but were not to take an extra set of clothes. He said to them, 'When you enter a house, stay there until it is time to leave. If any village will not receive or listen to you, shake off the dust that is under your feet as a testimony against them when you leave. Surely I tell you: it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of Judgment than for that village!' The disciples went out and preached a message of repentance. They cast out many demons and healed the sick by anointing them with oil.

They say you can't go home again, and in this episode of the Challenger's life, we see that they, whoever they are, may very well be right.

Jesus returns to his hometown, Nazareth. It is only natural for him to speak in the synagogue he had long attended, and so when the Sabbath rolls around, Jesus takes the teacher's seat and begins to speak. The congregation is less than enamored. Indeed, they are 'deeply offended.' The Greek verb used by Mark is *eskandalizonto*, which conveys more than mere offense: they are positively scandalized by Jesus' appearance in their synagogue.

There are a few likely reasons for their reaction. For starters, the message Jesus preaches is surely the same challenging message he has brought everywhere else. 'The Kingdom has come! The world is on notice. Things will never be the same again, nor should they be. The world, including Israel, including Nazareth, has been traveling in the wrong direction. It is time to turn around, to do justice, to save the oppressed, to drive back the darkness, to honor God.' In small town Nazareth, such a

The Challenger

provocative message surely challenges parochial traditions and community complacency. Not the sort of challenges people naturally embrace.

The congregants may also feel a mix of jealousy and self-loathing. ‘Where does *this guy* get his wisdom and power from?’ They seem to understand that Jesus possesses wisdom and power. They just can’t stomach the fact that he does. ‘This is the craftsman. We know his family. They live here with us!’ In John’s Gospel, Nathaniel asks whether anything good can come from Nazareth.⁴⁹ Nazareth was at the time a despised town in a despised region of Israel. It is incredible to think that such power and wisdom – that the Messiah – might come from here. It is simply too much for them to accept that Jesus, their one-time neighbor, might be someone like that.

And if he is, well, that is scary too. Nazareth knew Rome’s attitude toward would be Messiahs. A ‘Messiah’ from Nazareth might bring the wrath of the Empire down upon them. Yes, having Jesus in town was dangerous. The last thing they need is a wannabe Messiah in their midst.

Adding it all up, the congregants come to a collective decision not to believe in Jesus. Life with Jesus is just too challenging, too unbelievable, too dangerous. It would be better, they decide, to live a life *without* him.

So Jesus leaves his hometown in the company of those who had accepted the call to live a life *with* him. He takes the twelve and travels from village to village, teaching as he goes. Then one day he decides it’s time for them to take the next step in their training. It is time for them to put their belief into practice. He sends them out in pairs, giving them authority over evil spirits. Their marching orders are simple: take nothing

⁴⁹ John 1:46.

The Challenger

with you but your faith (they can take a staff and sandals but will have to rely on God for everything else). Accepting this challenging assignment, they step into the great wide open and discover that God is more than able to provide. Challenging the world as Jesus has, they experience miracles along the journey. In Jesus' name they drive out demons. They heal the sick by anointing them with oil. Simply trusting in Jesus and in the Father's providential care, they experience the wonders of the Kingdom.

It's quite a contrast with what happened in Nazareth. There, where people chose to live without Jesus, the Challenger was not able to perform mighty miracles (although he did find a few souls who were willing to accept his grace). But those who chose life with Jesus experienced something wonderful. We shouldn't glean from this that the presence of faith means that you will always see miracles, or, as many false teachers say, get whatever you want. But we should take from this that if you reject Jesus and his Kingdom, if you choose to live without him, you will miss out on some wonderful stuff.

Making the decision to follow the Challenger isn't easy. But those who choose life *with* Jesus will experience the miraculous life one would expect to find in the Kingdom of God. Those who choose life without him will most likely experience the kind of life one would expect to find in a world that is headed the wrong way.

Thought to ponder: what is the difference between life with Jesus and life without Jesus?

The Challenger

Mark 6:14-29

The Way of the World

King Herod Antipas heard about what was happening. Jesus was becoming famous, and some people were saying, 'John the Baptizer has risen from the dead, that is how he is able to work such miracles.' Others said, 'He is a prophet, or like one of the prophets.' When Herod Antipas heard these opinions, he said, 'This is John, whom I beheaded. He has risen from the dead.' John had been arrested and placed in prison under orders from Herod Antipas, who wanted to please Herodias. Herodias had been married to Herod Antipas' brother Phillip but was now married to Antipas. John had confronted Herod Antipas, saying, 'It is not lawful for you to be with your brother's wife.' Herodias wanted to kill John, but her husband would not allow it. Herod Antipas was afraid, for he knew that John was a holy and righteous man. He was greatly perplexed by the things John said and enjoyed listening to him. Herodias finally had her way on her husband's birthday. Herod Antipas threw a party for himself and invited nobles, high government officers, and the leading men of Galilee. Herodias' daughter performed a dance, which pleased both Herod Antipas and his guests. The king said to her, 'Ask me for whatever you want, and I will give it to you.' He swore an oath and said, 'Whatever you ask of me, it is yours, even up to half my kingdom.' She went to her mother and asked, 'What should I request?' Herodias said, 'The head of John the baptizer.' She ran back to the king and said, 'I want you to give me, right now, the head of John the baptizer on a platter.' The king regretted his words, but because of the oath he had made in front of his guests, he did not wish to refuse her. He sent a guard to do the deed. The soldier went to the prison and came back with John's head on a platter. He gave it to the girl, who brought it to her mother. When John's disciples learned what happened, they came and took John's body and laid it in a tomb.

The Challenger

The word is spreading. Jesus' ministry is multiplying as his disciples spread the word, heal the sick, and drive out demons. The question of the day is: 'Who is Jesus?' Who is this man who stands at the epicenter of this world shaking, demon demolishing movement? Some people say he is John the Baptist raised from the dead, others a prophet...wait, what? John the Baptist is dead? The last we heard about him he had been arrested but this is big news.⁵⁰ The messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah is dead! What happened?

It is a sordid tale, one that revolves around the 'love story' of Herod Antipas and his wife Herodias. Antipas was the son of Herod the Great, the megalomaniacal ruler who infamously slaughtered all the boys two-years-old and under in and around Bethlehem in his failed attempt to kill the newborn Jesus.⁵¹ Antipas was his second son, and at the time of our passage, the ruler of the region of Galilee (Herod the Great's kingdom had been divided after his death). On a trip to Rome, Antipas fell for his brother Philip's wife and convinced her to run away with him. The couples' marriage photos surely made the front page of the Jerusalem Inquirer.

John had challenged Antipas and Herodias for their adulterous behavior. But there was more to the scandal than their relationship, which was merely symptomatic of a deeper problem. Antipas and Herodias were steeped in a Roman value system that considered such behavior acceptable. It was a value system completely at odds with the way of Jesus. Think about it: not only were Antipas and Herodias living in sin in a sexual sense, but they were also collaborators with empire, living decadent lives in a land where most lived day to day, using violence as a

⁵⁰ John's arrest is noted in Mark 1:14.

⁵¹ See, Matthew 2:7-18.

The Challenger

means to hold on to power. They did not follow the way of Jesus. They followed the way of the world.

The interesting thing is that Antipas seemed a bit troubled by his choices. Not enough to change his behavior; he didn't seem able to help himself on that score. But he was perplexed by John. John's call to repentance, to him personally and to Israel generally, was something Antipas found rather interesting. On the one hand, he seemed to have been little more than amused by John's words. But on the other, he had just enough awareness of his sin that he didn't want to mess with John. Antipas understood that John was a holy and righteous man, and behind every holy and righteous man there just might be a Holy and Righteous God. So even as his wife plotted to kill the baptizer, Herod held her back.

But now, Mark reports, Herodias senses opportunity. The scene is Antipas' birthday party, and all sorts of important people, including many fellow collaborators with Rome, are in attendance. The daughter of Herodias dances, and both Antipas and his guests are pleased. Mark doesn't tell us precisely what it is about the dance that pleases them, but given the family's history and Roman value system, it's a safe bet it is something a little more than PG-13. Antipas offers her whatever she wants and ends up giving her John's head on a platter. He didn't really want to kill John, but because he cared more for his standing with his guests (and the lifestyle they shared) than doing the right thing, the baptizer's life came to an end.

There are many lessons in this story, two of which coincide with the theme of this commentary. The first takes us to Antipas' sardonic response to the news about what Jesus and his disciples were doing: 'This is John, whom I beheaded. He has risen from the dead.' To be sure, Antipas didn't believe John had come back from the dead any more than

The Challenger

he believed in Santa Claus.⁵² He simply realized that he could not stop the movement that was taking place in his kingdom. He had killed John, and twelve more men had risen in his place, men who were able to heal the sick and drive out demons. This Jesus fellow, to whom John had pointed, obviously had incredible power, and try as he might, there was simply no way Antipas would be able to stop his movement. He was right. The Kingdom of Jesus is more powerful than the kingdom of Herod Antipas, or Rome, or any other kingdom of this world. No one will ever be able to stop its forward momentum.

But secondly, we see in this tale both the folly and the danger of embracing the way of the world. Antipas embraced the value system of Rome and lost himself. Deep down, he knew John was right. He knew he had been wrong to steal his brother's wife. And, in the decisive moment of the story, he knew that to kill John was a tremendously evil act, one that might well bring the wrath of God down upon his head. Yet he could not help himself. Deeply ensconced in the way of the world, he followed that way until he wound up with blood on his hands. That's the way it works. The way of the world leads to loss, death, and grief.

Antipas would have done much better to have followed the way of the Challenger.

Thought to Ponder: are you living according to the values of the world, or the values of Jesus?

⁵² Saint Nicholas wasn't born until the late third century BC.

The Challenger

Mark 6:30-44

The Army of Jesus

The disciples returned to Jesus and told him about the things they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Let us go into the wilderness so that we can rest awhile,' for there were so many people coming and going that they didn't even have time to eat. So they went away to a deserted place to be alone. But when the people saw them sailing away, they ran along the shore, gathering people from many towns as they went, and arrived at the place before them. As Jesus stepped from the boat, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things. When it was late in the day, his disciples came to him and said, 'We are in the boondocks, and it is getting late. Send the people away so they can go into the surrounding villages and buy bread, for they have nothing to eat.' But Jesus answered, 'You give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We would have to work for months to earn enough to buy bread for so many!' Jesus said, 'How many loaves do you have? Go and see.' The disciples went to see and came back to Jesus. 'We have five loaves of bread and two fish,' they said. Then he commanded his disciples to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. They sat down in companies, by hundreds and fifties. Jesus then took the five loaves and two fish, looked to the heavens, and blessed them. He broke the bread into pieces and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. He did the same with the fish. And all ate and were filled. When they collected the leftovers, there was just enough to fill twelve lunch baskets. A total of five-thousand men ate that day, not including the women and children.

It's one of the Church's favorite miracle stories, and the only one recorded in all four Gospels: *The feeding of the five thousand*. It's many

The Challenger

depictions in early Christian art evidences its value to the first generations of Jesus followers who had been tasked with bearing the light in a dark Roman world. This was a story that deserved prominence; a story to come back to repeatedly in the struggle to carry on the work of the Challenger in grim times.

It begins in the wilderness, emphasizing again that the nature of Jesus' Kingdom is best comprehended when we are far removed from the centers of power and empire. Jesus' decision to take his disciples to a remote place is in part, no doubt, intended to drive this point home to them. Even they remained under the impression that the Messiah would follow the traditional 'power-over' approach to changing the world. They assumed that he would, eventually, raise up an army, hand out swords, and drive out the Romans in a typically Roman way. That was, after all, the logical way, the only way, to challenge power.

The disciples initially go into the wilderness with Jesus to rest, having become physically and spiritually exhausted from their whirlwind ministry tour of Galilean villages.⁵³ But alas, there is no rest for the weary, and the crowds follow them. Indeed, the disciples arrive at their destination only to discover that the people have already cut them off at the pass and are waiting.

Jesus steps from the boat and is, as we have by now come to expect, immediately filled with compassion. The people may have interrupted his mini sabbatical, but they strike him as sheep without a shepherd, lost and wandering about with all sorts of half-baked ideas that will only lead them into trouble. So he sits down and begins to teach them. The hours drag on, and the disciples, longing for some of their promised R&R, suggest to Jesus that the people be sent away so they can find something to eat.

⁵³ See, Mark 6:7-13.

The Challenger

Jesus will hear nothing of it. 'You give them something to eat,' he says. The disciples look at Jesus like he has hamsters hanging from his ears. Jesus is unmoved. 'How many loaves have you?' he asks, 'Go and see.'

In the whole crowd, all they manage to find are five loaves and two fish. The remarkable thing is that whoever brought them is willing to share them.⁵⁴ That is to say, they are willing to give up their lunch for the sake of others, trusting that if Jesus asks for something, he has both good reason and a plan up his sleeve. The trust is well-placed, and from this initial sharing comes a more general sharing, as Jesus blesses the bread and fish, breaks them into pieces, and hands them to the disciples to pass along to the people. Most of us would give anything to have been able to see the looks on the disciples faces as the miracle unfolded. In the end, all eat and are filled, and in a final punchline that proves that it is always safe to trust Jesus, the disciples fill twelve lunch-sized baskets with leftovers. In other words, there is enough fish and bread for everyone, disciples included.

That much almost every church person knows. The part of the story we often miss is where Jesus asks his disciples to have the people 'sit down in groups on the green grass.' The people do so, forming companies of fifty and one hundred. Had the Romans been watching, they would have become nervous.⁵⁵ Having men sit down in such groups (notice only the men were counted) would have looked like the formation of divisions for an army. It is likely the people themselves thought that was what Jesus was doing. After all, if he was the Messiah, that was the sort of thing, in their minds, that he was supposed to be doing! But Jesus, and his biographer Mark, subversively turn everyone's expectations on their

⁵⁴ Mark does not record who brought them. John tells us it was a young boy (see, John 6:9).

⁵⁵ Perhaps this is another reason for Jesus' choice of a remote location.

The Challenger

head. The Greek word Mark uses for ‘companies,’ *praisai*, refers to the divisions of a garden bed. The point is as beautiful as it is revolutionary: while the people thought Jesus was forming regiments of conquest and preparing to hand out swords, Jesus was planting a garden of peace and preparing to feed a hungry world.

Loaves and fish. We think they are merely symbols of Jesus’ ability to provide. They are that, but so much more. They are symbols of the army of Jesus, reminders that his followers do not change the world with violence. They do not take up swords that Jesus never handed out. They plant gardens. One might say they turn their swords into plowshares.⁵⁶ They take the lessons of this miraculous story, lessons of compassion, trust, and sharing, enlist in the army of Jesus, and go forth to feed a hungry world.

Thought to ponder: what should the army of Jesus be doing today?

Mark 6:45-56

Safely to Shore

Immediately, Jesus made his disciples get into their boat and go back across the sea to Bethsaida while he sent the people away. After he said goodbye to them, he went up into the hills to pray. During the night, the boat was in the middle of the sea while Jesus was alone on the land. He saw his disciples in trouble, struggling to row against the wind and waves, and so he went to them, walking on the sea. This was around three o’clock in the morning. He intended to pass them by, but when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought he was a ghost and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But Jesus immediately spoke to them: ‘Take

⁵⁶ See, Isaiah 2:4.

The Challenger

courage! It is I! Don't be afraid!' He got into the boat and the wind stopped. They were beside themselves with amazement, for they had not yet understood about the loaves, as their hearts were too hard. When they had crossed to the other side, they landed at Gennesaret and moored the boat to the shore. People immediately recognized them as they got out of the boat, and they ran throughout the region, bringing back those who were sick on mats to wherever they heard Jesus was. Wherever he went, in villages, cities, or into the country, people laid the sick in marketplaces and begged Jesus to let them touch the fringe of his robe, and all who did were made whole.

The miracle of the loaves and fish should have taught the disciples that their Master could be counted on to come through in any situation; that in any given circumstance, Jesus is all they need. But sometimes it takes a while for even the most basic lessons to take root in the stony ground of the human heart.

The disciples and Jesus had gone into the wilderness for some rest and relaxation. The disciples probably got at least a little as Jesus taught and preached to the multitudes that followed them into the wild, but Jesus, who has now expended even more of his energy in both teaching and the performance of a great miracle, requires renewal and refreshment. Accordingly, he sends his disciples back across the sea and heads off into the hills to pray. His intent is to walk around the northern side of the Sea of Galilee, spend some time with his Abba, and catch up with the boys on the western side later. But alas, it is not to be.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Then again, it could be that he knew it was not to be all along and that the whole thing was a set up to see how the disciples would respond to a tough situation.

The Challenger

As Jesus walks through the hills, he looks out across the sea and finds his disciples in trouble. The weather has turned, and they are struggling to stay on course amidst the wind and waves. This is, of course, not the first time such a thing has happened. In Mark 5, we read of the time they had been caught out on the sea in a demonic storm. On that occasion Jesus had been with them, sleeping in the stern, and when they ran to him, he woke up, rebuked the wind and waves, and stilled the storm. This time, however, the disciples are alone.

But not really. Jesus might not be physically present in the boat, but they have never left his thoughts. He keeps track of them as he walks through the hills, and the moment he sees their distress, he comes to them. It's almost a parable of the Incarnation. Jesus, on high, spots the ones he loves in distress, and races into the maelstrom to deliver them. It's just the kind of thing Jesus does.

The way he comes is particularly amazing. He comes to them walking on the water, evidencing once again his mastery over nature. Mark tells us that he 'intended to pass them by,' which sounds more than a bit odd. The phrase has led to many theories. Is he testing them? Trying to teach that they sometimes must handle things on their own? Showing off? No, no, and no. The Bible often uses the phrase 'pass by' to describe situations in which God wishes to reveal himself to people.⁵⁸ The idea expressed here is that Jesus intends to reveal himself to his disciples, to let them know he is there, that their hearts might be filled with fresh courage. But instead of filling them with courage, Jesus' visit fills them with terror. Why? Well, it's not just that they think he is a ghost. Mark tells us in verse fifty-two that they had not yet understood the lesson from the miracle of the loaves and fish. They still didn't understand that their Master could

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Exodus 33:18-22; 1 Kings 19:11-13.

The Challenger

be counted on to come through in any circumstance. They still didn't understand the principle that Jesus is all you need. Thus, they did not expect Jesus to show up, and the thought that he is present, ready to help them, never enters their minds.

Jesus doesn't get angry. With infinite patience, he simply cries out, 'Take courage! It is I! Don't be afraid!' The disciples let out a sigh of relief, and Jesus gets into the boat. Just like that, the wind stops blowing and the sea becomes calm. In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, it is déjà vu all over again.

We can imagine the disciples' embarrassment as they make their way to the shore. 'Boy, we blew that one, didn't we?' When they arrive, they discover people waiting. People who, perhaps, at least on some level, are beginning to understand that Jesus is all you need. They bring their sick friends to him that they might be healed. In a touching tribute to the woman from Mark 5:24-34, they touch the fringe of Jesus' robe and find healing. Just like her, these once sick people demonstrate the faith they have in Jesus, faith that believes he has the power to remedy any situation.

Friends, Jesus is all we need. Sometimes, like the disciples, we forget this. Sometimes, like them, our hearts are too hard to remember, too calloused by the frustrations and disappointments of life, to realize that Jesus is enough or to believe that he will come through for us. How glorious then, that even when we forget, Jesus still comes. He still cries, 'Take courage! It is I! Don't be afraid.' He still comes through in every conceivable situation.

Yes, he can still be counted on, amidst any storm, to get us safely to shore.

The Challenger

Thought to ponder: what storm are you currently facing? What difference might it make if you believed that Jesus can be counted on to get you through?

Mark 7:1-23

The Wellspring

Then some Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem and gathered to see Jesus. They saw that some of his disciples did not wash their hands before eating their bread. (The Pharisees, and Jewish people in general, don't eat until they wash their hands and forearms, holding to the tradition of their elders. They don't eat when coming from the marketplace until they have bathed themselves, and there are many other similar traditions they hold to, including the ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, bronze vessels, and dining couches). The Pharisees and scribes therefore asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples follow the tradition of the elders? Why do they eat bread with unwashed hands?' Jesus answered them, 'Hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you! As it is written, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching their own doctrines as if they were commands from God.' For you set aside the commandment of God in favor of your own tradition.' Then he said, 'And you do it on purpose! You adeptly reject the commandment of God in favor of your tradition. Here's one example: Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'anyone who speaks evil of his father or mother must be put to death.' But you teach, 'it is acceptable to tell your father or mother, 'whatever I would have given to help you I have instead given to God,' and thereby absolve people of the responsibility to care for their parents. You cancel the very word of God to carry on this tradition, and this is just one example. You do many things like this.' Then Jesus called the crowd over and said, 'Listen to me, all of

The Challenger

you, and understand. It's not what goes into a person that defiles them, but what comes from inside. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear! Once Jesus went inside, away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about this parable. 'Don't you understand either?' he asked, 'Can you not perceive that the food you eat cannot defile you? Food doesn't go into the heart. It goes into the stomach and then the sewer!' (By saying this, Jesus made all foods clean). 'It is what comes from the inside that defiles a person. For from within, from the heart, come evil thoughts, adultery, sexual immorality, murder, theft, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, blasphemy, pride, and foolishness. All of these come from within. They are what defile a person.'

Anyone who has read Mark's Gospel up to this point will have noticed that Jesus breaks a lot of rules. He touches lepers. He eats with notorious sinners. He allows his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath. He heals on the Sabbath. All big 'no no's' in the religious scheme of the Pharisees and scribes, who have dogged Jesus at every turn. 'How dare you break the Law, or at least our interpretation of it?' Jesus responds repeatedly by teaching his interlocutors the error of their ways, rejecting their interpretations and extrapolations of the Law, and identifying himself as the final arbiter of what it means. In this passage, as they once again attempt to challenge the Challenger, Jesus seizes the moment and places his finger on the heart of the religious leaders' error.

A dispute arises over the fact that some of Jesus' disciples don't wash their hands before eating. Not the most hygienic move to be sure, and one that might freak us out in a Covid-19 world, but the issue at hand (pardon the pun) doesn't have anything to do with washing for cleanliness' sake; it is about the pharisaical take on ceremonial hand washing, which in this case relates to the perfunctory running of water over one's hands prior to eating. The Pharisees and scribes are zealous

The Challenger

for such rituals, considering them to be key to living a good, religious life. And so, they are quick to draw attention to what they consider to be, at best, poor religious etiquette.

Jesus, aware of the deeper issues involved, rebukes the Pharisees' obsession with religion. 'Hypocrites!' he cries, identifying them as those who mask their true intentions behind a religious dog and pony show. 'Isaiah was right about you! You work hard to maintain the illusion of righteousness, but your *hearts* are far from God! You're quite adept at maintaining traditions and looking the part, but you forsake the heart of the matter – and which is more, you build traditions that allow you to neglect the clear commandments of God!' Citing one example, Jesus explains how they use a tradition concerning vows and charitable giving to justify the neglect of their own parents. 'Sorry Mom and Dad. I'd love to help, but I just gave at the Temple.' Giving at the Temple might look pious, and may even be a good thing to do, but when done at the expense of one's own parents' needs, it is mere religious posturing. And this, Jesus says, is just one example of the many ways they abuse the law for the sake of their religious standing.

Which, sadly, is what these guys are all about. They use religion to get what they want, including power, and then use that power to oppress people, to lock them in dungeons of self-contempt and despair. This is the reason why Jesus is so systematic in violating their laws. He's engaging in a form of civil disobedience, challenging unjust rules and practices that hurt others (and setting an example for those who follow him to do the same).

As the Pharisees and scribes stand with their mouths open and the words 'Well I never!' floating in thought balloons above their heads, Jesus calls the crowd over. Apparently, people had gathered to listen to Jesus'

The Challenger

rebuke of the religious folks (they probably liked it). ‘Listen guys and gals,’ he says, ‘Don’t let these people fool you with their dog and pony show. Don’t believe that this is what life with God is about. It’s not about external appearances. It’s about the heart! It doesn’t matter whether you wash your hands, or what kind of food you eat. None of that defiles a person. What defiles a person comes from the heart. I’m not here to give you a bunch of rules to follow. I’m not here to give you more religion. I’m here to change your heart!’

The Pharisees and scribes, like many in our own day, believed that religion was the answer. So much so that they forgot that a life with God is ultimately a matter of the heart. Which is why it is so important for us to listen to Jesus and seek God with all our heart. ‘Guard your heart,’ the proverb says, ‘for it is the wellspring of life.’⁵⁹ Jesus agrees. It isn’t religion that gives a person life. It is a heart beating in tune with the heart of its Creator.

Thought to ponder: do you spend more time working on your religion, or on aligning your heart with God’s?

Mark 7:24-30

A Faith for the World

Jesus left Galilee and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He found a house to stay in and wanted to keep it a secret, but people found out anyway. A woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, ‘Let the children be filled first, for it is not

⁵⁹ Proverbs 4:23.

The Challenger

appropriate to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But she replied, 'Yes Lord. But even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Jesus said to her, 'Well said. Go your way, for the demon has left your daughter.' She went to her house and found her daughter in bed. The demon was gone.

Jewish men and women of Jesus' time knew well the story of Elijah and the widow at Zarephath⁶⁰. Zarephath was a small village near Sidon, a major city of the Phoenician Empire. It was a strange place for a godly prophet like Elijah to visit. This was pagan territory, the birthplace of the infamous Jezebel. Not a nice place for a good Jewish prophet to go. Yet it was here that Elijah found a woman of great virtue who provided for him in a time of need. When the woman's son became ill and died, she cried out in anguish that Elijah had only come to point out her sins and punish her by taking the life of her son. But Elijah proved otherwise, raising her son to life by the power of God. This miracle, arranged by God for the benefit of an outsider, was a powerful witness to the identity of Elijah as the Lord's prophet: 'Now I know for certain that you are a man of God,' the woman said, 'it is clear that the Lord speaks through you!'

As Jesus leaves the familiarity of Galilee for the region of Tyre and Sidon, the disciples surely remember this story.⁶¹ As he leads them north into pagan territory the elements of Elijah's story bounce around in their minds. Will Jesus meet with a woman too? Will there be another miracle? Will it bear witness to Jesus' identity? Yes, yes, and yes. And then some.

Jesus, tired by both the journey and all that preceded it, tries to hunker down in secret, but word about him has reached even here, and

⁶⁰ 1 Kings 17:8-24.

⁶¹ Mark doesn't mention the disciples being with Jesus. Matthew does. See, Matthew 15:23.

The Challenger

so before long he has a visitor. A Syrophenician woman – a Gentile – comes a calling. The woman is in desperate straits: her young daughter is plagued by a demon. She falls at Jesus’ feet and begs for help. Matthew tells us the disciples’ compassionless response. Bothered by the woman’s begging, they tell Jesus to send her away.⁶² It’s a perplexing response when you stop to think about it. They have been with Jesus long enough to know they are supposed to love and welcome everyone. He has healed and delivered both men and women. But for *some* reason, they don’t like that *this* woman is begging for help. You have to wonder why. Could it be that this woman is a Gentile, a foreigner, an ‘other?’ There isn’t much doubt about it. This is a matter of prejudice. They don’t think a Gentile woman has any standing to approach Jesus. This may help explain why Mark doesn’t mention the disciples being present, let alone their comment. Not because he wants to protect them, but because he knows that some of his readers will undoubtedly feel the same way they did. He doesn’t need to mention the disciples. Their prejudice, or at least a similar prejudice, will be well represented in the hearts of many who read his Gospel.

In any event, the next lines in the story are shocking. Jesus looks the desperate woman in the eyes and says, ‘You know, we need to fill the children first. It’s not right to take food from the children and toss it to the dogs.’ In other words, ‘I help my own kind. I don’t toss around miracles for dogs.’ Ouch! Did Jesus really say that? Yes. He calls the poor woman and her daughter dogs. Now, before you start thinking Jesus isn’t who you think he is, you need to understand this comment on two tracks. The first relates to what the disciples hear. In Jewish culture, calling someone a dog is an insult of the highest order.⁶³ But have they not

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See, Matthew 7:6, Philipians 3:2, and Revelation 22:15.

The Challenger

already expressed it in their hearts? I can imagine Jesus looking at his disciples as he speaks, raising his eyebrows and rolling his eyes in their direction. Sometimes we don't understand how ugly our words and thoughts are until we hear them come from the mouth of someone we respect.

The second way you need to understand Jesus' comment is to hear what the woman hears. When Jesus calls her a dog, he does not use the usual word. Mark uses *kunarios*, which describes, not wild, unclean dogs such as one might find in the street, but tame dogs that were kept as house pets.⁶⁴ Thus, as Jesus calls the woman a 'dog,' she hears something quite different from the disciples. She pictures an almost endearing scene, such as those who have dogs today take part in when they sneak a treat to their pup from the dinner table. In other words, what sounds awful to us (and to both the disciples and Mark's readers) may well sound disarmingly charming to the Syrophenician woman. It is almost an invitation to ask for help again.

The woman does. She plays along with the image and helps drive the lesson home to the disciples. 'Even the dogs deserve crumbs from the master's table,' she says. The disciples get the point. Here before them is a woman whose daughter is suffering. A woman who loves her daughter just as much as they love their children. How could they have seen her in any other way?

Jesus, impressed by the woman's cleverness and glad of his disciples' conversion, immediately drives the demon from the woman's daughter, long distance style. We can be quite sure that when she got home and

⁶⁴ Charles John Ellicott, ed., *A New Testament Commentary for English Readers, Vol.1: The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, and Saint Luke*, by Edward Hayes Plumtre (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1877-79), 93.

The Challenger

found her daughter sitting up in bed, eating potato chips and surfing the web on her smart phone (okay, that's an anachronism), she echoed the words of the woman at Zarephath: 'Truly today I know that Jesus is a Man of God! The Lord truly works through him!' The identity and power of Jesus is confirmed.

The lesson of this episode, for the disciples, Mark's readers, and us, should be clear. There is no room for prejudice in the Kingdom of God. None. You can be part of that Kingdom, or you can be a bigot, but you cannot be both. The Challenger's message isn't just a message for Israel. Nor is it, for those of us today, a message for just one of any number of racial or ethnic groups. The faith Jesus offers is not a faith for a single tribe.

The faith Jesus offers is a faith for the world.

Thought to ponder: do I really believe, and function as if I believe, that Jesus offers a faith to the world?

Mark 7:31-37

To the Glory of Jesus

Jesus left Tyre, went up to Sidon, and then passed on to the Sea of Galilee by way of the Decapolis. People there brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment. They begged Jesus to lay hands upon the man. Jesus took him away from the crowd for privacy and put his fingers into the man's ears. He then spit on his own fingers and touched the man's tongue. Looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to the man, 'Ephphatha,' which means, 'Be opened!' Immediately the man's ears were opened, and his tongue was released so that he could speak clearly. Jesus commanded the people to tell no one, but the more he told them, the more widely they proclaimed what happened. There was no measuring their

The Challenger

astonishment, and they said, 'He does all things well! He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!'

After visiting Tyre and Sidon, Jesus travels to the region of the Decapolis, the confederacy of ten towns on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has been here before. Well, almost. His last journey didn't get farther than the tombs along the shore, where he delivered a man who had been enslaved to a 'legion' of demonic forces.⁶⁵ Fearing both the power of Jesus and the consequences that flowed from his actions, people had been so frightened in the wake of the exorcism that they begged Jesus to leave the area. He did, but not before leaving a witness to what had happened. The ex-demoniac had begged Jesus to take him away, but Jesus insisted he stay in his own land. 'Go home to your friends,' Jesus said, 'and tell them what the Lord has done for you.' The story concluded with Jesus sailing away with his disciples, and the man, free and whole, returning to spread his story throughout the Decapolis.

It appears from our present passage that the man's testimony had the desired effect. The story got around, and when Jesus returns, the people of the Decapolis welcome him with open arms. The initial fright has worn off, and now they are filled with wonder. As soon as Jesus arrives, they come running to him with a man who is both deaf and mute. Surely, they think, if Jesus can expel a legion of evil, he can cure their friend. Jesus does not disappoint. Taking the man aside, he puts his fingers in the man's ears and spits on his tongue (I know, gross, but spittle was believed to have medicinal properties, so the man would have expected this; just another example of Jesus meeting people where they are). 'Be opened!' Jesus cries. Immediately the man can hear, and his

⁶⁵ See, *supra*, Mark 5:1-20.

The Challenger

tongue is loosed to sing a heavenly theme.⁶⁶ Jesus tries to keep a lid on things, but, as has been the case throughout Mark's story, it just doesn't work. The more he tells the people to be quiet, the more they tell of his wondrous power.

It all seems like a straightforward miracle story, not even as glamorous as some of the others. But it is remarkable for a few reasons. First, we see in this story the victorious tenaciousness of Jesus. Jesus had been told to go away after his first visit, but now returns as the conquering hero. Indeed, by the end of the story, the people of the Decapolis are shouting, 'He does all things well!' or, as the New Living Translation puts it, 'everything he does is wonderful!'⁶⁷ Like the relentless flow of water that over time splits the hardest granite, Jesus has a way of breaking stubborn minds and hardened hearts. Indeed, he is exceedingly persistent in his cause. The mere fact that Jesus returned after having been so rudely treated on his first visit shows that he is not one to give up on people. Like the 'Hound of Heaven' in Frances Thompson's famous poem of the same name, or the relentless God described in Psalm 139, Jesus simply meets our resistance with his persistence, until he wins our hearts.

Secondly, the miracle is a parable about Jesus' entire ministry. All along, Jesus has been opening ears to the Good News and helping people find their voices. In a world where many are deaf to God's truth and love, Jesus 'ephphathas' (opens) ears and hearts that people might hear and believe. And in a world where broken men and women are marginalized, silenced by the indifference or contempt of the crowd, Jesus seeks people

⁶⁶ At least that's how Isaac Watts might have put it. 'Begin, my tongue, some heavenly theme, and speak some boundless thing, the mighty works or mightier name, of our Eternal King.' From his hymn, *Begin my tongue, Some Heavenly Theme*.

⁶⁷ See, Mark 7:37 (NLT).

The Challenger

out and helps them find their voices. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus has precisely done this, giving voices to the voiceless that they might tell the wondrous stories of what God has done in their lives.

Finally, the story is a reminder of the importance of *witness*. It reminds us that once we have been empowered to speak, it is imperative that we do so. The demoniac had been set free, and with that freedom came the responsibility to share what Jesus had done for him so that others might hear the Good News and find freedom as well. His exercise of that responsibility led to exactly that outcome. This, my friends, is the task and privilege of all who have been touched by the Challenger, the great and glorious Savior who hunts us down, finds us, and teaches us to sing. Once we hear his Good News, once we are touched by it, once we are given our voice, we cannot keep it to ourselves. We must use what we have gained to the glory of Jesus.

Thought to Ponder: in what ways has Jesus set me free? How might I share this news with others?

Mark 8:1-21

Missing the Kingdom

In those days, another great multitude gathered around Jesus. They had nothing to eat, so Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion on these people. They have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry, they may faint on their way home, for some of them have traveled far.' The disciples answered, 'How are we to gather enough bread for so many in this deserted place?' Jesus asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' 'Seven,' they replied. Jesus then commanded the people to sit down on the ground. He took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks, broke them, and gave them to the

The Challenger

disciples to pass along to the people. They also had a few small fish, so Jesus blessed these and had the disciples pass them along as well. All the people ate and were filled. There were seven large baskets filled with leftovers. There were four-thousand people in the crowd that day. After they had eaten, Jesus sent them home. Immediately Jesus entered the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. A group of Pharisees came to Jesus and began to argue with him, asking for a sign from heaven to prove himself. He sighed deeply in his spirit and said, 'Why does this generation seek a sign? Surely, I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.' Jesus left them, got back in the boat, and headed to the other side of the sea. As they made their way, the disciples realized that they had forgotten to take any bread. They only had one loaf with them. Jesus warned them, 'Watch out! Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.' They consulted with each other and said, 'It's because we have no bread.' Jesus, knowing this, said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not know or understand? Are your hearts really that hard? You have eyes, don't you see? You have ears, don't you hear? Don't you remember anything? When I broke the five loaves among the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces were left over?' They answered, 'Twelve.' 'And when I fed the four thousand with seven loaves, how many baskets full of leftovers did we have?' 'Seven,' they replied. He asked them, 'Don't you understand yet?'

If you feel like you have been this way before, it's because you have been paying attention to Mark's story. Jesus and his disciples are once again in a remote place. Once again, there is a hungry crowd. Once again, Jesus has compassion on the people and asks his disciples to feed them. Having already miraculously met the needs of five thousand men, plus women and children, with a mere five barley loaves and two fish, we expect the disciples to say, 'You bet Jesus! Do it again!'

The Challenger

But of course they don't. They raise the same objection they did before: 'we're in the middle of nowhere! How can we feed so many?'⁶⁸ One can only hope that as Jesus asks them, as he had before, to see how many loaves of bread they had, the disciples remember the prior occasion and realize their mistake. Once again, everyone is fed and there are enough leftovers for the disciples. Once again, the lesson is driven home: in any given situation, you can trust Jesus to provide. Jesus, in any circumstance, is all you need.

But as subsequent events unfold, we discover just how thick-headed people can be. The Challenger and his company first sail to the western shore of the Galilee, where they are accosted by a group of Pharisees. Despite all the miracles, all the evidence of Jesus' power and authority, they remain unconvinced. 'Give us a sign from heaven,' they say, 'then perhaps we will believe in you.' Jesus shakes his head. He has given enough signs. One more won't make a difference. For such men as these, nothing he does will ever be enough. Their trust is in their own traditions and power. Frustrated by their unbelief, he answers them, 'No. I will not give you a sign.' Then he leads the disciples back into the boat and across the sea.

As they make their way, the disciples realize something. They had seven large baskets of leftover bread at their disposal but forgot to bring enough for their lunch. All they have is one measly loaf. This is not a problem. The same Jesus who fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, and four thousand with seven loaves and a few fish, can surely feed twelve with one loaf. The disciples only need to turn to their Master. But the thought never enters their minds. Instead of turning to Jesus (who is right there!) they sulk, tighten their belts, and prepare to go hungry.

⁶⁸ See, Mark 6:37.

The Challenger

Jesus, if he weren't Jesus, would be incredulous. Being Jesus, he simply warns them: 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod.' It is an interesting statement. A little yeast transforms a small lump of dough into a large loaf of bread. Here, Jesus is using the image negatively. The Pharisees have just expressed their doubt, their unbelief. Jesus therefore warns his disciples not to allow unbelief into their hearts. Unbelief, manifesting itself in this case as a failure to trust that Jesus is enough to meet the need of any situation, can be a dangerous thing. It can prevent your 'bread' from rising. It can cause you to miss what God offers. 'Hey guys,' Jesus is saying, 'don't let unbelief creep into your hearts. If you do, you may wind up missing out on a lot more than lunch!'

That much makes sense. But Jesus' mention of the 'yeast of Herod' seems out of place. Herod hasn't made an appearance in the Jesus story for some time. But his mention here makes sense. Herod didn't believe that God could meet the need of his situation either. He followed the way of the world, the way of political and military power. Neither Herod nor the Pharisees accepted the proposition that one could trust God in every conceivable circumstance. The Pharisees clung instead to all sorts of laws, traditions, and religious threats, believing these were essential for success. Herod trusted in raw power. Jesus warns his disciples that unbelief comes in various hues. It can manifest itself in any system of thought that holds that God is not enough. Trusting in religious power, or political power, or any other kind of power, can cause you to miss the grace that God sets before you. It can cause you to miss the provision that is available from a loving Father who is simply waiting for his children to ask.

Poor disciples. They still don't get it. They take Jesus' words about yeast as another reference to bread. Jesus does a face palm (well, not really, but you get the idea) and asks them, 'are you kidding? Do you still

The Challenger

not understand? Are your hearts that hard? Can you not see with your own eyes? Or hear with your own ears? Don't you remember anything?'

Crickets from the disciples.

'Let me dumb it down for you. When I fed the five thousand with five loaves, didn't you have enough? And when I fed the four thousand, didn't you have enough again? Goodness! Can't you see that I am all you need?'

We shouldn't be too hard on the disciples. It is, after all, a hard lesson. We live in a world where self-reliance is king. We may claim to believe that Jesus is enough, but then we add our little additions. 'Sure, Jesus is enough, but God helps those who help themselves.' 'Sure, Jesus is enough, but how about I try X or Y before simply going to him?' 'Sure, Jesus is enough, and we know he's done great things, but maybe we should make him prove himself to us again before we trust him this time?'

Beware of such yeast my friends. Let even a little bit into your heart, and you just might miss the Kingdom, even when it's sitting a foot away in your boat.

Thought to Ponder: what 'yeast' threatens to undermine my trust in Jesus?

Mark 8:22-26

Learning to See

When they arrived in Bethsaida, people brought a blind man to Jesus. They begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took him by the hand and led him out of the village. He then spit on the man's eyes and laid hands upon him. He asked the man if he could see anything. The man looked up and said, 'I see people, but they look like trees walking around.' Jesus laid hands on the man's eyes a second time. The man's eyes were opened, his sight was

The Challenger

restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home but told him not to return to the village on his way.

Jesus likely arrives in Bethsaida shaking his head. He has repeatedly and patiently shown his disciples what he can do. Twice, he has fed crowds with a meager number of loaves and fish. He has calmed a storm. He has walked on water. He has performed many signs and wonders. He has shown them, over and again, that in any situation, he is all they need.

But they just aren't getting it.

What happens next captures the essence of the situation. As the disciples pull their boat up on the shore (yes, this episode could have happened elsewhere, but let us go with that) people come and ask Jesus to heal a blind man. Interestingly, Jesus does not do so in their presence. Rather, he leads the blind man out of the village. Perhaps this is because Jesus does not want everyone in Bethsaida to witness the miracle. It was, after all, near Bethsaida where Jesus fed the five thousand.⁶⁹ John informs us that after Jesus had fed the people there, they tried 'to force him to be their king.'⁷⁰ Jesus may therefore want to perform his miracle in secret to prevent a repeat performance on the part of the more militant members of the Bethsaida community. Or perhaps Jesus takes the man outside of the village because he is upset with this community for previous demonstrations of unbelief.⁷¹ Or maybe the matter of healing this man is just so deeply personal that Jesus wants to give him some privacy. It's an interesting issue to ponder, but in the final analysis, Mark just doesn't say.

⁶⁹ Luke 9:10.

⁷⁰ See, John 6:15.

⁷¹ Matthew's Gospel reports that Jesus was upset with them for failing to repent in the wake of the many miracles he performed there. See, Matthew 11:20-22.

The Challenger

If you want to know why Jesus led the man out of the village, you will have to ask him yourself someday.

Once outside the village, Jesus spits on the man's eyes. We can presume he didn't just spit in the man's face. More likely, he wet his fingers with his spit and then touched the man's eyes.⁷² 'See anything yet?' Jesus asks. 'Yes,' the man replies, 'I can see people. But they look like walking trees,' from which we may glean that the man was not blind from birth, as he has an awareness of what trees and people look like. Jesus touches the man's eyes a second time, and with this, his eyes are opened, his sight is restored, and he sees everything perfectly. People are people. Trees are trees. All is as it should be under God's bright blue sky.

Jesus tells the man to go home, but to avoid the village. This might bolster the theory that Jesus had taken the man outside of the village because he did not want the people of Bethsaida to know what he was doing. Or maybe Jesus just wanted the guy to take the long way home that he might savor the sights about him before being mobbed by his neighbors. Again, Mark doesn't say.

But of all the things that Mark doesn't say in recording this miracle, the one we might most wish for clarity on is this: why did it take Jesus two touches to restore the man's sight? Jesus certainly could have done it with one. One might suppose Jesus healed the man progressively to ease him back into the world of sight, rather than overwhelm him with light and color and shape all at once. But given that a little later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus will heal a man's sight all at once, that theory is dubious.⁷³ It seems more likely that Jesus uses two touches as a commentary on his disciples' bumbling faith (at the very least, it seems likely that is what Mark is doing

⁷² See, Mark 7:33.

⁷³ See, *infra*, Mark 10:46-52.

The Challenger

in placing this story where he does in his Gospel). Jesus' disciples, not to mention everyone else, have seen many miracles, yet they still don't understand either who Jesus is or what he can do. That's kind of the way a journey of faith goes. Coming to faith, learning to 'see' Jesus, is most often more than a one and done event. It is a process. It takes more than one 'touch' before people can truly see. The disciples themselves are, at this point in the story, an ongoing witness to this reality. We humans can be challenging cases when it comes to opening our eyes, not to mention our hearts, to the challenge of Jesus.

The good news is that Jesus never gives up. He keeps on touching, teaching, and leading us. He keeps on challenging us to embrace new possibilities and go where we haven't gone before. He keeps reaching out to us, over and over again, until our eyes finally open. Until we can finally see.

Thought to ponder: has it ever taken more than one 'touch' to get you to open your eyes and heart to Jesus?

Mark 8:27-30

Cards on the Table

Jesus and his disciples then went up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do the people say that I am?' They answered him, 'Some say John the Baptizer. Others say Elijah. Still others say one of the prophets.' Then he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.' Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus knows. It is time to lay his cards on the table, and for his twelve core disciples to do the same.

The Challenger

These are the twelve he has chosen to continue his work when he is gone, a time that is drawing nearer with each day. They will be tasked with taking the challenge of Jesus beyond Jerusalem and Judea, into Samaria and to the ends of the earth.⁷⁴ There they will face the lions, so to speak, the beasts of imperial and religious power, monsters that will strive to make them turn tail and run. To ensure they do not, Jesus needs them to understand who he is and what he can do. He needs to at least begin to drive home the lesson that will eventually make that clear.

And so he takes them, and others who are tagging along, to the region of Caesarea Philippi. Located north of the Galilee, Caesarea Philippi bears the name of both Caesar and Philip the son of Herod the Great. The city boasts a place called the 'Rock of the gods,' where there are shrines to Caesar, the Greek god Pan, and other false deities. There is also a large cave known as 'the Gates of Hades.' Hedonistic rituals are part and parcel of the religion practiced here. The city, and most particularly its 'rock' and 'gate,' speaks to everything wrong in Israel. It fittingly represents all the pagan influences that lay beyond her borders, and it is natural for the people of Jesus' day to identify it with 'the Gates of hell.'

We can imagine them, walking along, the city itself coming into view. Suddenly, Jesus stops in his tracks. He turns to his disciples and asks, 'Who do the people say that I am?' Surprised, they repeat different things they have heard people say. 'John the Baptizer back from the dead.' 'The prophet Elijah returned.' 'One of the other prophets.' Jesus nods. 'Yes, I know that. But who do *you* say I am?' The disciples don't know what to say. They look at their feet, scratch their heads, and otherwise try not to be called on. They have been with Jesus a long time, but still struggle with

⁷⁴ See, Acts 1:8.

The Challenger

the question they asked one day in their boat: ‘Who is this man?’⁷⁵ They *hope* he is the Messiah who will deliver Israel and the entire world. But they aren’t quite sure. We can imagine the awkward silence that follows Jesus’ question. But then, into the silence steps Peter. Bursting with hope and filled with the Spirit, he blurts it out: ‘*You are the Messiah!*’

Interestingly, Mark leaves out some material here. Matthew, for example, notes that this is where Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter, ‘the Rock.’⁷⁶ Mark just starts calling him Peter. Moreover, Matthew records that along with the name change, Jesus told the newly monikered disciple, along with the others, that ‘upon this rock I will build my Church.’

Protestants and Catholics spend a lot of time debating whether the ‘rock’ in question relates to Peter or his confession. But considering where this happened, considering that Jesus specifically took them to Caesarea Philippi before asking his question, there isn’t much doubt that such debate largely misses the point.

The ‘rock’ in question is the Rock of the gods. Jesus is telling his disciples that it will be here in Caesarea Philippi, and in places like Caesarea Philippi all over the world, where imperial and demonic power hold sway, that he will assemble his people.⁷⁷ As the disciples look toward the Rock of the gods, they likely quake in their boots. ‘There? You want us to gather there?’ The words hover in their thought balloons. ‘Yes,’ Jesus answers in his own thought balloon, ‘right there. I will build my Church, gatherings of disciples right smack dab in the middle of a world hostile to God.’ Turning to his disciples, he points to the city itself and adds aloud, ‘And the Gates of Hades will not prevail against it!’ This is the language of siege warfare. Evil may hold out for a while, but eventually, it

⁷⁵ See, Mark 4:41.

⁷⁶ See, Matthew 16:17-18.

⁷⁷ I am indebted to seminary colleagues for this insight.

The Challenger

will fall. All that is evil in this world, even death itself, will one day fall before the power of Jesus moving through the life of his *ecclesia*, his gathering, his Church.

Jesus has laid his cards on the table. This will be the way of those who follow him. They will pick up right where he left off. They will go forth into the world on offense, into the very places where God is maligned, where people are utterly lost, where decent people dare not go, and strike at the very gates of hell with his words and way. They will replace the rocks of the gods, wherever they are found (for there are many), with the rock of Peter's confession. They will batter the gates until they fall. They will challenge the world as Jesus challenged it. And they will prevail.

Of course, Mark doesn't specifically say all of that. He doesn't have to. For one thing, his readers were already part of the churches fighting for survival against the pagan world and its gates. For another, Mark's Gospel has been declaring this message all along. Jesus has been on offense on every page. Mark's story is the story of the Challenger, prevailing against the dark powers of the world.

The disciples now know. Jesus is the Messiah. He, and not Caesar, is the Son of God. His Kingdom is forever. And just like him, their task is to charge the darkness, knowing that the gates of hell will never prevail against the power of the Lamb.

Thought to ponder: do you believe that Jesus and his Kingdom will prevail?

The Challenger

Mark 8:31-9:1

The Way

Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but after three days rise again. He spoke to them openly. Peter took him aside to reprimand him. Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and reprimanded Peter. He said, 'Get behind me Satan! You are thinking like a human, not like God!' He then called the crowd to join the disciples and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose their life? What will a person give in exchange for their life? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will live to see God's Kingdom come in power.'

The disciples know that Jesus is the Messiah. The one who will challenge the world and emerge victorious is standing in their midst. There is just one problem. They have the wrong idea about what this means.

The Messiah's victory, as Jesus has previously demonstrated, will not come about by violent means. His is not a mission to raise an army, kick Roman butt, and establish a political kingdom that will outlast all others. This is what everyone, disciples included, believe. But Jesus' way will not follow the way of empire, because the way of empire is not the way of God.

The Challenger

Many years before this moment, the prophet Isaiah wrote: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord, “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.”⁷⁸ Years after, the Apostle Paul would elaborate by saying of Jesus:

‘Though he was God, he did not consider equality with God as something to cling to. Rather, he emptied himself of his divine privileges and prerogatives, taking on the form of a servant. He was born as a human, and as such, humbled himself, becoming obedient to God to the point of death, even death upon a cross. Because of this, God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.’⁷⁹

This is the way of God. This is the way of Jesus.

Jesus explains this to his disciples. He will not conquer in the expected fashion. He will conquer by means of his cross. ‘I am going to suffer terrible things,’ he says. ‘I will be rejected and killed. Then, on the third day, I will rise again.’

It is too much for Peter. He grabs Jesus by the arm and pulls him aside. ‘No way Lord! You are the Messiah. You shouldn’t talk like that.’ Or something to that effect. Mark doesn’t record his exact words, only that he reprimands Jesus. Jesus is not pleased. He takes Peter’s words for what they are: a temptation. Satan had tempted him in the wilderness to avoid the way set before him. Now Peter, however unwittingly, is doing the same, doing the devil’s work. ‘Get behind me Satan,’ Jesus scolds, ‘you

⁷⁸ Isaiah 55:8 (NLT).

⁷⁹ Philippians 2:6-11.

The Challenger

are thinking like human beings who believe that the way to victory passes through violence. That is not my Father's way!

He calls over the crowd. Yes, there is a crowd. Jesus has more disciples than the twelve, and there are always other hangers on as well (including, perhaps, some who oppose him who follow along to keep an eye on things). He tells them all, plainly, what the way of God is. Moreover, he tells them all, plainly, what they must do if they are to follow it themselves. *'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.'* Three extremely hard to swallow pills there, to be sure.

First, *'Deny yourself,'* as in renounce your agenda, your hopes, your dreams, your plans, and your preferred way of doing things. Surrender every aspect of your life to the Lordship of Jesus. You may want to take over the world one way, you may want a lot of things. But this business of following Jesus isn't about what you want. It's about what God wants. Like Jesus, you will have to empty yourself of your privileges and prerogatives and become a servant.

Second, *'Take up your cross.'* Make no mistake. Everyone got the picture on that one. Crucifixion was well known to them. Only men condemned to die took up crosses. To be a disciple of Jesus, you must be ready to go the distance. To give up everything, including your life, in his service.

And third, *'Follow me.'* The perennial call of the disciple is to follow Jesus. To embrace his life. To imitate him. To walk in his way. Even to the point of death.

This is not what the disciples had been expecting or wanted to hear. Nor anyone else in the crowd for that matter.

The Challenger

Jesus presses on. He tells them that if they choose any other way, they will lose. There is only one way to life and victory, and that is his own. Yes, you might gain quite a bit by following the way of the kings and princes. Maybe even the whole world. Empires do get large chunks of it, for a time. But in doing so, what looks like winning will be losing. In doing so, you will not find life. You will only find death.

Seeing the confused looks on the faces of his audience and sensing the temptation rising within them to turn around and quit, he issues a warning. ‘Don’t be ashamed of this! Don’t be so scandalized that you wind up on the wrong side of things. If you are, then you will feel shame on the day when the entire world bows before me and acknowledges that my way is right!’

Jesus then ends on an encouraging note. ‘Some of you,’ he says with affection, ‘will live to see God’s Kingdom come in great power.’ He doesn’t explain what he means. Given what Jesus has said, one must wonder. What does it mean for God’s Kingdom to come in ‘great power?’ What could Jesus possibly be talking about?

The answer will become clear later in Mark’s Gospel.⁸⁰ For now, perhaps we should bear in mind that among those in the crowd that day, in addition to the twelve, there were some who, up to this point, have yet to enter Mark’s story by name, nor will they for some time to come.

But when they do, they will be among the first to truly understand the Way.

⁸⁰ It could be argued that the next passage is the opening act in the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise and that Pentecost represents its culmination (see, Acts 1:8; 2:1-4). In the context of his Gospel, however, Mark conveys a specific understanding of the way the Kingdom’s power is manifested. We will come to that understanding in due course.

The Challenger

Thought to ponder: does the way of Jesus encourage or frighten you? Why?

Mark 9:2-13

Listen to Him!

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain privately, to be alone. There he was transfigured before their very eyes. His clothes became luminously white, as white as newly fallen snow, whiter than any launderer could ever make them. Elijah and Moses appeared before them and began talking with Jesus. Peter responded by saying, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here! Let's make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' It was all he could think to say, he was so frightened. A cloud came and overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud saying, 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!' Suddenly, as they looked around, they saw they were alone again with Jesus. As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. This they did, but they often wondered what 'rising from the dead' could mean. Then they asked Jesus, 'why do the scribes say that Elijah must come before the Messiah?' Jesus answered them, 'Elijah does come first, and restores things. So why is it written that the Son of Man should suffer many things and be despised? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they did to him exactly what they wished, just as it is written about him.'

The disciples have a lot to think about. Their world has been turned upside down. Jesus has made it plain that he is not the Messiah they had been expecting. His way is not the way of the sword. It is the way of the cross. Just as shocking, they have been told that they are to carry crosses too.

The Challenger

It would be nice to think they immediately accept this. But they do not. Questions linger in their minds, now more than ever. ‘Who is this man?’ they ask themselves, ‘And what on earth are we supposed to do with him?’

Jesus lets them ponder such questions for several days, which are spent in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Just to the north stands Mount Hermon.⁸¹ Its snow-covered peaks provide a breathtaking backdrop to the city. Then one day Jesus calls three of his disciples, his inner circle if you will, Peter, James, and John, to climb the slopes with him. They surely believe they are in for a grand adventure. They have no idea just how grand it will be.

They climb into a pure, pristine, marshmallow world. Breathing in the crisp mountain air, they savor the sunlight that warms their faces amidst the cold. They turn to see Jesus and receive the shock of their lives. In a flash, he is no longer the plain looking Galilean carpenter from Nazareth. He is the magnificent Son of God, resplendent in all his pre-incarnate grandeur, more luminous than the sun reflecting off the snow. This is Divinity before them. There is no other explanation. Words fail to describe either the scene or their emotions.

As the disciples adjust to this new revelation of Jesus’ identity, they discover they are not alone (one wonders if they passed out and then woke up to make the discovery). Jesus is talking with two men. The disciples have never seen these men before, but as they listen to the

⁸¹ The traditional site of the Mount of the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor, which is located some distance from Caesarea Philippi. This is disputed, however, and many scholars posit Mount Hermon as the more likely site. There really is no way of knowing this side of eternity. For story telling purposes, Mount Hermon is chosen as the site here.

The Challenger

conversation, they are doubly amazed. Jesus is speaking with Elijah and Moses!

It is an amazing gathering. A conclave of Challengers. Elijah had challenged the evils of his day, personified in King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal. Moses had partnered with God to challenge the Egyptian Empire, the mightiest in the world at the time. These men are legends, heroes of the faith, prophets who threw down the gauntlet and prevailed. The greatest challenger of all now sits with them, likely seeking counsel and encouragement. Yes, in his humanity, Jesus needs that. He knows what lies ahead. He sees his cross on the horizon. He needs strength for the journey, the kind that is gained by talking with those who have walked similar, if not identical, paths.

There is much to this passage. Enough to preach dozens of sermons and fill commentaries. But the most important part of the story comes when a cloud overshadows the six men, and a voice comes from it. It is nothing less than the voice of Jesus' Abba. The voice of God.

'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him!'

For Jesus, this is the voice of affirmation. He heard his Father's voice speak of his identity as the beloved at his baptism.⁸² He has likely heard it many times since. But he really needs to hear it now. More than the counsel of Elijah and Moses, it will be the assurance of his Abba's love that will sustain him on the dark road ahead.

For the disciples' part, well, they really need this. For six days, they've scratched their heads and asked their questions. The Father now answers them definitively.

⁸² Mark 1:11.

The Challenger

'Who is this man?'

'He is my Beloved Son.'

'What are we supposed to do with him?'

'Listen to him.'

It is no coincidence that these words come in the wake of the hardest thing Jesus ever said to his disciples: 'Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me.' It is a command that they, and we, would prefer not to obey. But they are the words of the Abba's Beloved, and they have been affirmed by the voice of God.

Peter, James, and John were still confused after the Transfiguration, still troubled by the idea of listening to Jesus, which may partially explain why Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what happened until after he rose from the dead. He knew it would take an event like that to make them understand and listen. But those of us who live in the light of the Resurrection should get it right away. The way of Jesus is hard, and perhaps one we would prefer to ignore. But it is the path to glory. It is the path for all who seek to be the beloved sons and daughters of God; the path that leads to the Abba of Jesus. It is, in fact, the path taken by God Himself.

Listen to him.

Thought to ponder: what commands of Jesus do you have trouble listening to?

The Challenger

Mark 9:14-29

Weapon of Choice

Returning to the other disciples, Jesus found them arguing with some teachers of the religious law in the presence of a great crowd. As soon as the crowd saw Jesus, they ran to greet him, filled with amazement. Jesus asked, 'What is the argument about?' A man answered, 'Teacher, I brought my son to you, because he has a spirit that has rendered him mute. Wherever it seizes him, it throws him down. He foams at the mouth. He grinds his teeth. He becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they weren't able to do it.' Jesus answered him, 'O this faithless generation! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you! Bring the boy to me.' They brought him to Jesus, but when the spirit saw Jesus, it convulsed him and he fell to the ground, where he rolled back and forth and foamed at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' 'Since he was a young child,' the father replied, 'it often casts him into fire or water to destroy him. If you can do anything, please have compassion on us and help us!' 'If I can?' Jesus replied, 'All things are possible for the one who believes.' The father cried from his heart, 'I believe! Please help my unbelief!' As the crowd drew nearer, Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit: 'Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of this boy, and never enter him again!' With a shriek the spirit convulsed the boy once more as it left him. The boy fell over as if dead, and most of the crowd believed he was. But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet. Later, when Jesus and his disciples were alone in the house where they were staying, his disciples asked him, 'Why couldn't we cast it out?' Jesus replied, 'This kind can only be cast out by prayer.'

The Challenger

There can be no scenario more nightmarish for a parent than to receive a shattering medical diagnosis that promises to take away their child's future, and then to watch as that future is slowly taken from them. If you can imagine such a scenario, or worse, if you have ever had to walk through one, you can appreciate the desperation and anguish of the father in this story.

He has watched his son deteriorate before his eyes since he was a young child. He has yearned for words from his son's lips but heard none. He has rescued his child whenever the seizures cast him into fire and water. How many times? 'Often,' the father says. This desperate and defeated Dad has day by day borne witness to the clenching of his son's teeth, the foaming at his mouth, the rigidity of his body, the death of his dreams. If anyone can read of the plight of this father and son and not feel their sorrow, at least a little, they must have a heart of stone.

Jesus does not have a heart of stone, and so when the man comes to him and explains the situation, he is more than willing to help. Learning that his disciples have been unable to intervene successfully on the boy's behalf, he comes as close to 'losing it' as we can ever apply such a term to Jesus. 'O you faithless people! How long will I have to put up with you?' Whether this is directed wholly at the disciples for their failed attempt or at all of humanity for having broken faith with God in the Garden and thus plunged countless fathers and sons into such misery, Mark doesn't say.⁸³

As Jesus learns about the boy's history, the father cries from his heart, 'Jesus, if you can do anything to help, please have compassion on us. Please, save my son!' Jesus' heart bursts with compassion. 'If I can?'

⁸³ By now you should know that when Mark doesn't say something, he either is saying something by his silence, or is at least inviting us to do some deep and imaginative thinking.

The Challenger

he says, 'anything is possible for the one who believes.' Now be careful. Jesus is not endorsing 'name it and claim it' theology. He is simply telling this broken-hearted man that there is hope. He is saying, 'Sir, it isn't a question of 'if.' I and my Father can do anything. If something is in accordance with his will, there can be no stopping it. There is no limit to what God can do. Have faith.' And with that sentiment expressed, the man, infused with new hope yet lacking the rock-solid faith of Jesus, utters what is perhaps the most honest prayer recorded in the Bible: 'I believe! Help my unbelief!'

Jesus does. He takes the man's shaky yet sincere faith and heals his son. He raises him, in a sense, back from the dead and onto his feet. He returns the boy's stolen future and places him back in the loving arms of a loving Dad.

It's the kind of story to give you chills, at least if you imagine it properly. But the kicker comes at the end, when the disciples, alone with Jesus, ask him why they had not been able to do what Jesus did. Jesus' reply is rather curt: 'This kind,' he explains, 'can only be cast out by prayer.'

In other words, the disciples weren't 'prayed up' for the battle. Jesus was.

People in our day mock the notion of 'thoughts and prayers.' There is something to their disdain, whenever people blithely use that phrase as an excuse to do nothing in the face of evil. But there is nothing about the power of prayer that deserves derision. In a world of pain, prayer is the ultimate and most effective weapon. It has the power to bring down strongholds.⁸⁴ Tennyson wrote, 'more things are wrought by prayer than ever this world dreams of.' He was right. Prayer should not be the

⁸⁴ See, 2 Corinthians 10:4.

The Challenger

weapon of last resort in our struggles against the darkness. It should be our go to option, our constant companion, the fuel that enables us to follow in Jesus' footsteps and take on the powers that rage in a sin-sick world.

Prayer was the Challenger's weapon of choice. And so, to every father or mother in anguish before their child's pain, to every advocate for justice who weeps at the racism and inequity that permeates the very bones of their society, to every battered soul who faces obstacles that no man or woman can climb alone, remember: prayer must be your weapon of choice too. There are limits to what you can do in the world, but there is no limit to what God can do.

Start praying.

Thought to Ponder: what might happen if you fervently and consistently carried your greatest trials to God in prayer?

Mark 9:30-37

Greatness

They resumed their travels and passed through Galilee. Jesus wanted to travel in secret because he wanted to teach his disciples. He said to them, 'The Son of Man will be handed over into the hands of men. They will kill him, but on the third day he will rise again.' But they didn't understand what he was saying and were too afraid to ask what he meant. They arrived in Capernaum and set up house there. Jesus then asked his disciples, 'What were you arguing about back there on the road?' They didn't answer because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'If any of you wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and set him in the middle of the disciples. Taking the child

The Challenger

in his arms he said, 'Whoever receives a little child like this one receives me, and whoever receives me receives not just me but the one who sent me.'

Jesus and his disciples are walking. They walk a lot. It is impossible to pin down the exact number of miles they log while strolling under the open sky. Hiking along roads and across fields, camping beneath the stars, cooking meals on the campfire, this is where Jesus and his disciples spend much, perhaps even most, of their time together. It is where Jesus explains the things they most need to understand. He is doing so now. Whoever says you need a building to have church doesn't know what they are talking about. A road, a field, a beach, a copse of trees, anything really, will do just as well. All you need for church is Jesus plus people. Nothing more.

The lesson this day on the road is a repeat.⁸⁵ 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed and killed, but on the third day he will rise again.' The redundancy is needed. The disciples didn't understand him the first time, and he doesn't want them to be unprepared for what lies ahead. He needs them to understand precisely where the path before them leads.

They offer no response. At least not directly. We can imagine the disciples muttering as they walk along. 'What does he mean?' 'Why does he keep saying that?' 'You ask him.' 'No you.' They are afraid to ask for some reason. Perhaps because the last time Jesus said something like this, Peter spoke up and got the reprimand of his life, or because Jesus had then connected his prediction of death with the responsibility of the disciples to pick up their own crosses and die.⁸⁶ Would they have to die

⁸⁵ See, Mark 8:31.

⁸⁶ See, Mark 8:32-35.

The Challenger

too? Maybe it's best not to know. Whatever their reason, they are afraid of Jesus' words, too afraid to ask for clarification.

The conversation casually drifts into more agreeable territory. Someone brings up the issue of which of them is the greatest. Maybe they phrased this in terms of being Jesus' favorite, or the one he would one day put in charge over the others. The conversation gets heated and, apparently, dominates their discussion on the way to Capernaum.⁸⁷

Jesus hears the argument but bides his time and lets it run its course. Then, once in Capernaum, he saunters over to the disciples to begin his belated intervention. 'What were you guys arguing about back there on the road?' he asks with a knowing glint in his eyes. The disciples blush with shame. 'O God, he knows,' they think. Their hands have been caught in the cookie jar of ambition and pride. No one answers Jesus. No one dares.

Jesus simply sits down and calls them closer, a signal that a teachable moment is at hand (rabbis traditionally sat to teach). 'You know,' he says, 'if you want to be first, you need to be last. You need to become a servant to all.' It's a subtle recap of all that has happened so far, a reminder that his is an upside-down Kingdom. Perhaps he elaborated further. 'I didn't begin building it at the top,' we might imagine him saying. 'I began in the wilderness. I didn't pick the best and brightest. I picked you. I don't hang with the hoi polloi. I spend my time with society's castaways. Brothers, don't you see? In my Kingdom, to be the greatest, you start at the bottom. If you want the first place, take the last. Don't try to be a master. Be a servant.'

⁸⁷ This will not be the last time the topic comes up (see, *infra*, Mark 10:35ff).

The Challenger

Then, for emphasis, he does one of the things he is most famous for down to this day. He draws attention to a little child. He has the child stand with him in the midst of the disciples. He picks up the child and holds it in his arms. Notice that the child lets this happen; he or she allows Jesus to have his way with them. Children in those days didn't have much in the way of status. They were low on the totem pole. Jesus wants his disciples to know they need to care for those low on the totem pole. Making this mere child the center of attention is his way of telling them, 'If you want to be great, you will need to change the way you think. You will need to let me have my way with you. You will need to stop thinking about greatness and spend your time and energy on the people no one else values. Love them. Serve them. That is what I do, and that is what my Father wants you to do.'

In this, Jesus once again challenges his disciples. Indeed, he challenges the world. Worldly thinking says to seek position and influence, the fellowship of the powerful. Kingdom thinking says, 'go where the losers are.'

There, Jesus says, you will find me. There, you will find my Father. There, you will find greatness in the eyes of God.

Thought to ponder: identify the people your circles ignore or castaway. Do you think you would experience more of God if you spent more time with them?

Mark 9:38-49

Competitive Ministry

John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name. We got in the way and stopped him though because he doesn't follow us.' Jesus said, 'Don't stop him! No one who does a mighty work in

The Challenger

my name will be able to easily speak evil of me. Whoever isn't against us is for us. Whoever gives you a drink of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will in no way lose their reward. But anyone who causes one of these little ones who believes in me to stumble would be better off having a millstone hung around his neck and tossed into the sea. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off! It is better to enter life crippled than to take two hands with you into the unquenchable fires of Gehenna. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet as you are cast into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out! It is better to enter the Kingdom of God one-eyed than to have two as you are cast into Gehenna, where the worm never dies, and the fire never goes out. For everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its saltiness, how will you season it? Be salty! And be at peace with one another.'

Jesus has gently corrected his disciples' yearning for greatness. He has taken a child in his arms to let them know they must cease competing with one another and start focusing on the needs of the least around them. You would think they might have at least been chastened. Not so.

John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, is particularly daft. He decides this is the perfect time to tell Jesus about a prior incident involving himself and the other disciples.⁸⁸ Apparently, some time before, the disciples had run into a man driving out demons in Jesus' name. This bothered them greatly, as they believed the man was operating on their turf. Jesus had given *them* authority to cast out demons, not this guy.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ It is plausible that this event happened between the events recorded in Mark 9:33-37 and 38-49. The flow of the text, however, suggests continuity between those passages.

⁸⁹ See, Mark 3:14-15; 6:7,

The Challenger

Just who did he think he was? It surely didn't help matters that the disciples themselves had recently flunked an attempt to drive an unclean spirit from a young boy.⁹⁰ Basically, their pride and desire for adulation had taken a hit. Envious of another's ministry success, they immediately shut the interloper's ministry of healing down.

John lays out the details: 'Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, but we stopped him because he doesn't follow us.' (Note the presumption: 'he doesn't follow us;' this is supposed to be about following Jesus!). He no doubt expects a commendation. Jesus responds altogether differently. Still holding the young child in his arms, he rolls his eyes and says, 'Oh John. You shouldn't have stopped him. He's an ally. Just because he isn't in our group means nothing. He'll be with us soon enough. Do you honestly think anyone could do anything in my name without God's permission? Don't think I don't know what this is about. Your jealousy is getting in the way of Kingdom work. The people who are doing my work are allies, not enemies! Stop competing with one another! Ministry is not about who comes out on top!'

Then comes the warning. Still cradling the child, Jesus says, in effect, 'John you must be careful. The rest of you too. If you keep jockeying for position, you will only hurt the ministry. And along the way, you will set a bad example for little guys like this one. You know, the ones who aren't into the whole competition thing, the ones who are willing to just let me have my way with them, the ones you are supposed to be helping! Your petty, jealous behavior is the kind of thing that can turn these little ones off and cause them to leave the Kingdom. Or, even worse, teach them that the way to follow me is to be just as petty and competitive themselves! Dude, I know you. You'd prefer to be tossed into the sea

⁹⁰ See, Mark 9:14-29.

The Challenger

with a millstone around your neck then see that happen. So if any part of you, any action, any thought, any inclination, tends in such a direction, as your envious competitiveness surely does, then I advise you, right now: cut it out!

Many are confused by Jesus' words about cutting off hands and feet and gouging out eyes to avoid the fires of Gehenna.⁹¹ But in context they make sense. It is better to lose those parts of yourself that may potentially harm yourself and others than cast shame on the name of Jesus, drive people away, or otherwise prevent the work of his Kingdom. Basically, Jesus is telling John and his compadres that they can either lose their ministry envy, together with their incessant jockeying for position, and get about the work of the Kingdom, thereby experiencing the life it offers, or they can hold on to their foibles and carry on in a miserable hell of their own making.

Disciples are supposed to be, as Jesus implies at the end of this passage, the salt of the earth.⁹² We're supposed to flavor it with joy, gladness, and peace, not sour it with bitterness, envy, and rivalry. We are supposed to work together for the common good, not jockey for position and tear down one another's ministry efforts. We would do well to bear this in mind today. Too often, ministry leaders play head games. They jockey for position. Compare congregation size. Boast (or lament) about the number of recent baptisms in 'their' church compared to someone else's. In this passage, Jesus lets us know what he thinks of that. It's all garbage worthy to be thrown in the fires of Gehenna.

⁹¹ Gehenna is the Greek word for Gei Hinnom, the valley outside of Jerusalem which served as the municipal garbage dump. Fires burned there all the time. That fact, along with its past unsavory history involving child sacrifice (see, Jeremiah 32:35), made it the perfect metaphor for the place of final judgment.

⁹² See Also, Matthew 5:13.

The Challenger

If we would rightly follow Jesus, we will lose the desire to be top dog in the Kingdom, along with the notion that we are somehow competing with others. We will focus on what God gives us to do and just stick to that.

The little ones will be impressed, and Jesus will thank us for it.

Thought to ponder: have you ever been a witness to competitiveness in ministry? What good did it accomplish?

Mark 10:1-12

One Flesh

Jesus left Capernaum and went to the region of Judea and the land beyond the Jordan. Crowds gathered around him once again, and as usual, Jesus began to teach them. Some Pharisees came to test him, asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' Jesus answered, 'What did Moses say?' They said, 'Moses allowed for a man to issue a certificate of divorce and divorce his wife.' But Jesus said to them, 'Moses wrote that command as an accommodation to your hard hearts. But from the beginning of creation, God made human beings male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be joined with his wife, making the two one flesh. What God has brought together, let no man separate.' Later, when Jesus and his disciples were alone in the place they were staying, they asked him about this. Jesus said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery as well.'

It's a sad reality, but in Jesus' day, women were hardly equal citizens under the law. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the divorce customs of the time. Rabbis debated the circumstances under which a

The Challenger

man could divorce his wife, with one school arguing he could do so only in the event of marital unfaithfulness or substantial moral failure, the other allowing a man to cast his wife away for virtually any reason whatsoever, including finding another woman to whom he was more attracted. Many men followed the latter school. Women, of course, did not have the same freedom to cast away their husbands.

As Jesus teaches the crowds in the region beyond the Jordan, a group of Pharisees tries to trip Jesus up with this issue. There is more at stake than a theological debate. The region beyond the Jordan is the territory of Herod Antipas and his wife Herodias. You may recall that John the Baptist had been beheaded for calling out their adulterous relationship.⁹³ The Pharisees therefore seek to trap Jesus into saying something that might cause him to suffer a similar fate.⁹⁴

Jesus bravely accepts their challenge as a means to speak openly about the sanctity of marriage. He asks them what Moses had to say on the subject, and they reply that Moses allowed a man to issue a certificate of divorce to his wife. This is, first of all, an oversimplification. Deuteronomy 24:1 does say that a man may issue such a certificate to his wife, but only in the event he discovers ‘something unseemly’ about her, words that imply that the school of thought requiring marital unfaithfulness or significant moral failure as a prerequisite to divorce was in tune with the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees who question Jesus omit this fact. In their minds, a man may divorce his wife. Period.

⁹³ See, *supra*, Mark 6:14-29.

⁹⁴ See, William Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark. The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974), 354, 358.

The Challenger

Jesus sets them straight. A man may not divorce his wife ‘period.’ There must be a justifiable reason. He points out that Moses only wrote this Deuteronomic provision as an *accommodation* to the hard heartedness of men. The Law in question said nothing about whether a particular divorce might be right or wrong, it only specified what a man should do for his wife in the event he divorced her. He could not simply cast her away, he had to give her a certificate proving she was no longer married so that she could be free to marry someone else.⁹⁵ In other words, Moses, knowing that men would divorce their wives in all manner of situations, both justifiable and non-justifiable, included this provision in the Law - indeed, was inspired by God to do so - as a ‘merciful concession for the sake of the woman.’⁹⁶

Jesus therefore shines the light of moral clarity onto the Pharisees’ view that a wife can be cast away for any reason. ‘No way,’ he says. ‘Marriage is sacred. From the beginning of creation, it has been God’s design for a man and a woman to be joined as one flesh. Women are not property to be cast off at a man’s whim. A man is supposed to cherish his wife. He breaks even the bonds that hold him to his mother and father for her. He is to love her with all his being. They are one flesh. She is a part of him, as he is a part of her. How dare a man recklessly cast away the one whom God has made his partner in life? No my dear Pharisees, your interpretation of the Law is dead wrong.’

Later, alone with his disciples, Jesus explains that a man who divorces his wife without just cause and marries another commits adultery, and that a woman who so divorces her husband and marries another does the same. The last clause is a bit of an egalitarian twist. Yes, a man is to hold

⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 24:2.

⁹⁶ Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, 355.

The Challenger

his marriage vows sacred, so much so that he may not divorce his wife for any reason that suits him. But women are bound to the same standard. They cannot desert their husbands without just cause either. That Jesus enforces his teaching both ways affords women a dignity and position that had been denied them in the culture of his day. But it also represents a broadside against Herodias, who had left her husband to marry Herod Antipas. John the Baptist was right. Both Antipas and Herodias had violated God's Law. Marriage is sacred. It is not to be treated so lightly.

In this episode, we see Jesus doing what he does so well: challenging the erroneous views of his day. Men, you may not treat your wives so poorly. Women, you are equals to men and must uphold God's standards as well. Marriage is a sacred gift. It is to be cherished and nurtured. In a culture today where both men and women so often treat marriage as lightly as Herod and Herodias, Jesus' words challenge still.

Thought to ponder: given that marriage is sacred, how might the Church help married couples strengthen their relationships? If you are married, how might you strengthen yours?

Special Note: If you are in an abusive marriage or relationship, please know that abuse certainly qualifies as both unfaithfulness and serious moral failure. If you are being abused physically, verbally, emotionally, or in any other way, please seek help and get to safety. God does not want you to remain in an abusive relationship. He loves you and wants you to be safe.

Also note that Jesus' words do not justify the harsh directives and judgments that some churches have issued and still issue to divorced persons in our day. Jesus does not say that the victims of divorce may never remarry or hold positions in the church, nor does he imply that those who wrongfully seek a divorce are beyond God's grace. Grace is,

The Challenger

thank God, always available, no matter who a person is or what they have done. The God revealed in Jesus is the God of fresh starts and new beginnings.

Mark 10:13-16

Faith Like Caleb

People were bringing their little children to Jesus so that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them for doing so. When Jesus saw this, he became angry and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them. The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you: unless you receive the Kingdom of God like a little child you will never enter it.' Then he took the children in his arms and laid his hands on them to bless them.'

Hiking in the mountains along the 'Treehouse Trail,' my family and I came upon, likely enough, a treehouse. It sat about twelve feet in the air. To access it, you had to climb a wooden ladder that didn't quite reach the top and then reach up and feel around for handholds carved into the treehouse floor to pull yourself up the rest of the way. You couldn't see them from below, so it was a bit tricky. Getting up wasn't so bad but coming down was dicey. We had to take hold of the handholds, throw our legs over the side, and then grope around with our feet until we found the top rung of the ladder. It wasn't much of a problem for me. But for my son Caleb, who was only five at the time, it was scary.

As Caleb made his way down, I made sure I was nearby. I positioned myself on the ladder so that if he fell, I would be there to catch him. I held on to the ladder with one arm and draped the other around in an arc just below the top rung. The idea was that if Caleb slipped, I would be able to quickly scoop him up with my free arm. Caleb began his descent, and, just

The Challenger

as I had predicted, had trouble finding the ladder with his feet. That's when my wife, standing below, called out, 'Don't worry Caleb, Daddy is there to catch you.'

That's when Caleb did something extraordinary. He immediately let go of the handholds and threw himself backwards, right into my waiting arm.

My first reaction was, 'Thank God, I caught him.' My second was, 'Wow, my son really trusts me.'

This seems to be the idea behind Jesus' famous words: *'Truly I tell you, unless you receive the Kingdom of God like little children, you will never enter it.'* The mistake many make is to think Jesus is talking about the kind of faith that gets you into heaven. But that is not what Jesus means. True, there is a sense in which we need to let go and trust Jesus for salvation. We all must reach the point where we realize how helpless we are to save ourselves and allow ourselves to fall into his arms of grace. But that's not what Jesus is driving at. Jesus doesn't say, 'Unless you have child-like faith, you will never go to heaven.' He says that child-like faith is needed to enter the Kingdom of God. And that is something different.

The Kingdom of God is eternal, but it exists in the here and now.⁹⁷ It is the community of men, women, and children who follow Jesus, the community through whom Jesus manifests himself to the world. It is the community of peculiar people who live radically different, challenging lives. The community of disciples who strive to live as Jesus lived and thus embody another way to be human. Such folks stand as living signposts pointing to another way of life, the way things can be now and will be on the day Jesus returns to fully bring heaven into the real world.

⁹⁷ Recall Jesus' proclamation: 'the Kingdom of God is *at hand!*' See, Mark 1:15.

The Challenger

To be part of such a community requires a great deal of faith. To live as Jesus commands, a person must be confident in a variety of circumstances that God will be there to catch them. Jesus asks his disciples to share with one another, trusting that God will provide enough for our needs. He asks us to love our enemies, to shun violence as a means to obtain security, trusting only in the power of his redemptive love. He compels us to take up our crosses and follow him, trusting that the way of sacrificial love is the pathway to life.

People with worldly minds, obsessed as they are with power, pleasure, and security, will tell you that living like that doesn't work. They will tell you that if you share as Jesus asks, you will go broke. If you love your enemies, you will only get hurt. If you reject violence as a means to defend yourself, others will most certainly use violence against you. If you take up your cross, you are likely to wind up nailed to it. And the thing is, they aren't wrong. Sometimes, following Jesus leads to a life of poverty. Sometimes, it leads to pain and suffering. Sometimes, it even leads to a cross.

But the call remains the same. 'Have faith in me,' Jesus says. 'Have faith in my Father. We will meet your needs. We will commingle your love with our own and use it to conquer, even to convert, your enemies. Our love will guarantee the victory when violence is of no use, and it never is. We will help you bear your cross. We will be with you. Follow. Trust. Believe. No matter what happens in this world, my Father and I will always be there to catch you.'

The world says you have to be crazy to believe like that. Jesus says you just need to have faith like Caleb.

Which is why, I suppose, only those with faith like Caleb can enter the Kingdom of God.

The Challenger

Thought to ponder: what do you think it means to have child-like faith? What might be holding you back from trusting God as Caleb did his father?

Mark 10:17-31

The Life of the Ages

As Jesus started out along the road, a man ran to him, knelt before him, and asked, 'Good Teacher, what must I do that I might inherit eternal life?' Jesus replied, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder,' 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not commit fraud,' 'Honor your father and mother.' The man said, 'Teacher, I have observed all of these commands from my youth.' Jesus looked at the man and loved him. He said, 'There is still one thing you lack. Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When the man heard this response, his face fell, and he went away full of sorrow, for he had many possessions. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it is for the rich to enter God's Kingdom!' The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus again said, 'Children, how difficult for the rich to enter God's Kingdom! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom.' This amazed them even more, and they began asking among themselves, 'Then who is able to be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For humans this is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God.' Peter began to speak, 'Look, we have left everything to follow you...' 'Yes,' Jesus interrupted. 'Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, who will not receive one hundred times more in the present age, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields – with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal

The Challenger

life. But many who are now first will be last, and many who are now last will be first.'

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' It is an important question, truly the most important of all. The rich man certainly thinks so. He has everything the world has to offer. He has worked hard to obtain God's favor and believes that God has richly rewarded him for his faithfulness. But he wants more. He wants *zoe aiwnios*, the life of the ages, usually translated, 'eternal life.' He wants the kind of life that only God can give, life that is full to the brim and bubbling over with the blessings of heaven. And yes, the man wants heaven too. It would be a shame if, after a lifetime of rigorous rule-keeping, he is not able to take his blessings with him, or better still, experience the greater ones found on the shores of eternity.

The man approaches Jesus as he walks along the road with his disciples. They have just come from an encounter with children, little ones who exhibit child-like faith, complete reliance on the Father, and a willingness to let God have his way with them. The rich man is their antithesis. He has the faith of a worldly-wise adult. He has made his own way, earned his own keep. He is in complete control of his destiny. Jesus immediately sees that he is a slave. A slave to his wealth and possessions. A slave to feelings of insecurity should they ever fail him, as he knows they will at death. A slave to the notion that they confer upon him an exalted status. A slave to self-reliance. Cruel masters all, the type that prevent him from obtaining the one thing he most desperately needs and even seeks: life in God. So, with a heart full of love, Jesus challenges his thinking and offers him a better way.

'Let it go,' he says. 'Give your wealth and possessions to the poor. Then come, follow me.' He isn't asking the man to give up much. Nothing

The Challenger

at all, really. Sure, the man will lose his money and possessions, but he will gain his freedom. He will gain the ability to rest in the Father's love. He will gain life in the Kingdom, a life that is indeed full to the brim and bubbling over with the blessings of heaven, and which is more, lasts forever.

But alas, the rich dude cannot do it. He enjoys his wealth and the illusory security it brings. He lacks the faith of a child, the faith that trusts the Father in any and all circumstances. How will he eat? How will he survive without his personal security blanket of wealth? And what of his status? What will people think if he is poor? All of this and more troubles his heart, and so, though we can hope that he will one day change his mind (all things are possible with God, after all) he walks away from Jesus, sad.

With a deep sigh, Jesus echoes the man's sadness as he watches his diminishing figure vanish down the road. 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle,' he remarks, 'than it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!' The disciples are stunned. They, like the man, believe wealth is a sign of God's favor. If a rich man can't enter the Kingdom, who can?

Hoping for affirmation that he and the others have won the eternal life the rich man rejected, and possibly fearing that they have not, Simon Peter chimes in, 'We've left everything to follow you Jesus!' Jesus looks at his blustery disciple, smiles, and makes a remarkable promise: 'Everyone who has left their home, field, and family, for my sake and the Good News I bring, will gain a hundred times more houses, fields, and family in this life, and of course, they will have the life of the ages, a life that will last into eternity.'

The last part of that promise, of a life that will last into eternity isn't hard to grasp. Most of us have at least a vague concept of heaven. But

The Challenger

the first part of Jesus' promise sounds, well, beyond our experience. What does Jesus mean? How does one obtain a hundred times as many homes, fields, and family members when they give up everything they have for Jesus?

To know the answer to that is to know what the rich man passed up. The community of Jesus is a community where people look out for each other. It is a community of mutual caring and sharing. It is a family in which all find provision. Perhaps in our modern culture, we rarely see this as Jesus intended, but it is available, and on full display in the book of Acts, where the blessings of God fell on those in the Church in the form of overflowing waves of generosity, and where, consequently, everyone experienced economic stability as the resources of the entire community were available to every person in it.⁹⁸ Everyone had a hundred times, even more, in the community of God's people than they ever possessed on their own.

The rich man, like many of us today, rejected this bold new way of life. Fearing what might happen if he shared with others, he clung to his possessions. In so doing, he foolishly passed up the very life he supposedly sought.

The challenge of Jesus to the rich man, coupled with his promise to the disciples and its fulfillment in the early Church teaches that when we lose everything for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel, we find so much more than what we left behind. We find more than the best invested and managed stock portfolios could ever offer. More than individual wealth. More than status. More than the illusory security we so foolishly seek on our own.

⁹⁸ See, Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37.

The Challenger

We find each other. We find our home. We find our family. We find, in short, the life of the ages.

Thought to ponder: if Jesus asked you what he asked the rich man, would you obey? Why or why not?

Mark 10:32-34

The Third Prediction

Jesus led the way as he and his disciples traveled on to Jerusalem. The disciples were astonished, and the people who followed behind them were afraid. Jesus took the twelve aside and told them again what was going to happen to him. 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem. Once there, the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and kill him. Then, on the third day, he will rise again.'

The final leg of the Challenger's journey begins. His destination is Jerusalem, and he knows what will happen there. He leads the way, with the twelve following close behind. Behind them are still other disciples, as well as potential disciples, who have chosen to make this last journey with him.

Mark tells us that the twelve are astonished, and the ones who follow behind are afraid. Both groups know that this journey to Jerusalem is a big deal. They have come to believe, or at least hope, that Jesus is the Messiah, and that his triumphal entry into Jerusalem will bring about a whole new world. What will happen once Jesus arrives? Will he begin a war against Rome? Will he set the world on fire? Will the Kingdom of God arrive in splendor, power, and glory? Or will Jesus turn out to be another 'close but no cigar' imposter, trampled down by Rome as previous

The Challenger

wannabe Messiahs had been. No doubt they are more hopeful in Jesus' case; they have witnessed his wonderful works. Surely things will be different this time. Still, it is a remarkable thing to stand at the threshold of a new world, and so astonishment and terror are appropriate emotions for the moment.

It is significant that Mark uses two different words to describe the states of mind of the two groups. The people, who arguably grasp the gravity of the situation better than the twelve, are frightened; the twelve are merely astonished. The Greek word for astonished is a form of *thambeo*, which conveys the sense of being dumbfounded, thoroughly overwhelmed with amazement. Of course they are. They can feel things coming to a head. This just might be the trip that ends in the dawn of the Messianic reign, and they get to be part of it! Providence is smiling on them, and they can hardly believe it. Nonetheless, their astonishment should be, and perhaps is to some degree, tinged with fear. For they, more than the others, have reason to believe that things will not go the way standard first century Messianic theology predicts.

Jesus has twice told them, privately, that the religious leaders in Jerusalem will eventually kill him. In other words, that it will be in Jerusalem (technically just outside its walls) that he will die. He has even mentioned something about a cross. This has, of course, gone completely over their heads, which may explain how they are merely astonished rather than terrified. Ignorance, as they say, is bliss. But now, as he nears his rendezvous with destiny, Jesus again pulls them aside. 'My friends,' he says, 'listen to me. I will be betrayed. I will be condemned by the religious leaders and scribes. I will be handed over to the Gentiles, the *Romans*. I will be mocked, spit upon, scourged, and killed. Then, on the third day, I will rise again.'

The Challenger

There are more details this time. The mention of scourging makes explicit what was only implicit in Jesus' prior warnings. Jesus will be handed over to Romans who will, as they often did to those deemed enemies of the empire, flog him to within an inch of his life. That his ultimate death will involve scourging and mockery speaks volumes to the manner of his impending death. Crucifixion was the means by which Rome sought to humiliate its enemies and was often prefaced with scourging. Jesus is making it plain. 'Friends,' he tells his disciples, 'I am going to be crucified.'

It's amazing that the disciples, who will, when the chips are down, run away, don't immediately do so. Perhaps it is Jesus' last comment that keeps them where they are, the promise that on the third day following his death, he will rise again. Maybe this gives them reason to hope. More likely, it only adds to their astonishment. Resurrection, in their minds, is something that happens at the end of time. It is connected to what the prophets referred to as 'The Day of the Lord,' the day when everyone would rise to face judgment, the day God would finally show up and clean house for the last time. The prophet Malachi had said of that day, 'Who can abide?'⁹⁹ Yes, if Resurrection is part of the picture, it means the world really is about to change, and in ways they cannot even begin to imagine. There is indeed reason to be astonished, even to be, as the people are, afraid.

Do the disciples understand this? Do they finally grasp both the terribly cruel things that will happen to their Master and the frighteningly wonderful things that will break upon the world on the third day? Subsequent events will reveal they do not (see the next entry). Nor will they until all is said and done and they are able to look back on events

⁹⁹ See, Malachi 3:2.

The Challenger

through the light of the Resurrection dawn. But in this episode, we see the Challenger once again trying to make things plain. His Messiahship will not follow the standard model. It will follow the path that leads to Calvary.

This is Jesus' way, and yes, it brings about the birth of a whole new world.

Thought to ponder: how would you have felt had you been in Jesus' company as he made his way to Jerusalem?

Mark 10:35-45

Not So with You

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus and said, 'Teacher, we would like you to do something for us.' Jesus asked, 'What would you like me to do for you?' They answered, 'Grant that we may sit on your right and left when you come into your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They answered, 'We are able.' Jesus said to them, 'You shall indeed drink the cup that I drink, and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. But to sit at my right and left is not mine to grant. Those places are reserved for the ones for whom they have been prepared.' When the other disciples heard this, they became angry with James and John. Jesus called them all over and said, 'You know that among the Gentiles, those recognized as rulers lord it over their subjects, and the 'great ones' exercise their authority over them. But it will not be so with you. Whoever wants to be great among you must become your servant. If you want to be first, you must become a servant to all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

The Challenger

Jesus has a nickname for James and John: ‘the Sons of Thunder.’¹⁰⁰ Mark doesn’t explain the name’s derivation, but Luke records an episode wherein the brothers, irate at the residents of a Samaritan village for not welcoming Jesus, asked if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy them.¹⁰¹ Jesus rebuked them of course, but the story makes sense of the nickname. These guys literally wanted to call down lightning on their enemies; they were eager to wield power. In this passage from Mark, we get another glimpse into how the ambitious brothers Zebedee may have earned their thunderous moniker.

They come to Jesus with vainglorious dreams. Amped up over the possibility of what may happen in Jerusalem and ignoring what Jesus has just said about dying there, they come with a request that would have made an ambitious politician proud. ‘Jesus, when you come into your glory, let us be the ones who sit on your right and left.’ The way they figure it, someone will have the places of honor and power in Jesus’ Kingdom. Why not them?

They don’t know what they are asking, and Jesus tells them so. ‘Can you drink my cup? Can you be baptized as I will be?’ The cup is the cup of suffering, the cup of passion, which will overflow in a baptism of blood in Jesus’ scourging and crucifixion. ‘You bet Jesus!’ they answer, ‘We can do it!’ Jesus, with sadness, says they will indeed drink from his cup. The world is going to hate and persecute them just as it did him. But as for the places at the left and right, those have already been reserved. It’s a bit cryptic, but later in the Gospel, Mark reports that two revolutionaries are crucified along with Jesus, one to his left, the other to his right. The

¹⁰⁰ See, Mark 3:17.

¹⁰¹ See, Luke 9:54.

The Challenger

symbolism is clear: if you want to be honored in the Kingdom, you must be willing to take up your cross and follow Jesus, all the way to Calvary.

The other disciples catch on to what is happening. Angry that James and John would seek to pull such a trick, and perhaps at themselves for not thinking of it first, they lash out at the Sons of Thunder. Basically, they pick up with their argument over who among them is the greatest, an argument Jesus had tried to lay to rest back in Capernaum.¹⁰²

Jesus assembles his spirited followers and explains again how his Kingdom works. 'Guys. Listen. We're not the Romans. We're not an empire. Imperial leaders, the so called 'great ones,' here Jesus may have used air quotes, 'love to do what you are doing now. They seek authority over others, and then lord it over their subjects.' The disciples know this well. They have lived as Roman subjects. They know what it is like to be 'lorded over.' 'But not so with you,' Jesus continues. 'We do not seek that kind of authority. We don't operate from the top down. We operate from the bottom up. If you want to be a leader, you need to be a servant. Do you want to know who is honored in my Kingdom? It is the one who serves everyone else. My Father bestows the highest honor on those who take such a posture.'

Jesus pauses. He envisions the path that lies before him. He thinks of his cup. His baptism. His cross. 'Friends, don't you see?' he continues. 'Even I, the Son of Man, came not to be served but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.'

It is a lesson that even James and John will eventually learn. But it is a hard lesson, one that even today, many Christians, dare we say most, fail to grasp. In a world where the so-called 'great ones' still fight for the

¹⁰² See, Mark 9:33-37.

The Challenger

power that enables them to lord authority over others from the top down, where even Christians vie for political, religious, and institutional power in ways that would have made James and John blush, where Christians have literally shackled themselves to those in power to procure their favors, enmeshing themselves in the twisted politics of empire, Jesus' words challenge still. Jesus does not call us to rule people. He calls us to serve them. He does not honor those who seek the world's power and glory. He honors those willing to take cruciform positions at his left and right for the sake of those around them.

Disciples of Jesus are only great when they, like their Master, renounce the first position, embrace the last, and serve the world.

Thought to ponder: do Christians today act as those who serve, or as those who seek to be served? What would Jesus say about that?

Mark 10:46-52

The Light of the World

They came to Jericho. As they were leaving, Jesus and his disciples were accompanied by a large crowd. A blind beggar, Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the side of the road. When he heard that Jesus was coming, he cried out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' The crowd rebuked him and told him to remain silent. But he cried out all the more, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stopped in his tracks. 'Call him over,' he said. They did, saying, 'Take heart! Get up. The Master is calling you.' Bartimaeus tossed away his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus asked, 'What would you have me do for you?' The blind man said, 'Rabbouni, let me see again!' Jesus said to him, 'Go, your faith has restored you.' Immediately his sight was restored, and he followed Jesus on the way.

The Challenger

Jesus stops in Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. This is where, according to Luke, Jesus meets Zacchaeus, the vertically challenged tax collector.¹⁰³ Mark makes no mention of that encounter, giving full attention instead to the miraculous healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus. The healing occurs as Jesus and his entourage are leaving the city, followed by his disciples and a large crowd. No doubt many in the crowd know of Jesus. Others may be pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem (Jesus will arrive there at the beginning of Passover week). It was wise in those days to travel in large groups, especially along the Jericho Road leading to Jerusalem, where bandits and robbers were known to waylay vulnerable travelers.¹⁰⁴

Jesus leads the people through the city gate. Beggars often congregate outside city gates, where the traffic is thickest, and thus the opportunities for almsgiving (and taking) more abundant. Bartimaeus is one such beggar. He hears the approach of the crowd and learns, likely from a sighted panhandler, that Jesus of Nazareth is approaching. Bartimaeus has heard of Jesus, the gentle healer who makes the lame walk and the blind see. How long Bartimaeus has waited, hoped, and prayed for an opportunity to meet Jesus is a mystery, but the moment the opportunity presents, he holds nothing back.

'Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!'

The crowd pounces, commanding Bartimaeus to be silent. To them, he is nothing but a nuisance. Like the stepped-over homeless person on the sidewalk, his mere existence is an irritant. His daily cries for alms, annoying to the extreme. And to think he would cry out today, as they are

¹⁰³ See, Luke 19:1-10.

¹⁰⁴ The parable of the Good Samaritan, which tells of a man so waylaid, takes place along the Jericho Road (Luke 10:25-37).

The Challenger

on their way to Jerusalem, for Passover, with Jesus no less! Who is this human scum to inject himself into their merriment? Who does he think he is to believe that someone like him, a filthy beggar, has the right to call on Jesus in the first place?

But Bartimaeus will not be silenced by the voices of the crowd. Theirs are the universal voices of oppression, indifference, and marginalization. The voices that keep the riff raff in their place. The voices that react, sometimes violently, whenever those beneath them dare attempt to better their position in life. The voices that keep people like Bartimaeus, and a thousand other varieties of outcast, at the fringes of society. The voices that keep the down and out down and out.

'Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!'

Jesus stops dead in his tracks. 'Call him over,' he commands his disciples. 'Take heart!' they cry. 'The Master wants to see you.' Bartimaeus doesn't need to be invited twice. Tossing his cloak aside he makes a beeline for the sound of Jesus' voice. The casting off of his cloak is not an insignificant detail. As a beggar, that cloak is likely the only protection he has against the elements, but even that is expendable in the pursuit of Jesus. Bartimaeus has faith that Jesus can provide far more than what his cloak can.

'What would you have me do for you?' Jesus asks.

'My teacher,' Bartimaeus pleads, 'Let me see again.'

Jesus smiles. 'Go. Your faith has restored you.' And just like that, Bartimaeus can see. The story ends with Bartimaeus heading down the road, following Jesus (there is no mention of him going back for his cloak).

The Challenger

It is a beautiful story, perhaps all the more so because it is the last healing miracle recorded by Mark.¹⁰⁵ Firsts and lasts are usually significant, and that is the case here: Jesus' final healing involves an outcast. Throughout Mark's story, Jesus has challenged the world to pay attention to the outcasts and the marginalized. He has listened to and encouraged others to listen to their voices. This miracle is Mark's exclamation point to Jesus' ministry of healing. The crowds may not value outcasts. But Jesus does. They matter, and he wants them to matter to us too. If we miss this point, I daresay we may be missing the greater part of the Challenger's message.

There is another point to this final story of healing as well. It is significant that it involves the restoration of sight. The whole world, like Bartimaeus, is blind, and whether it recognizes it or not, crying out to see. Jesus, who elsewhere refers to himself as the 'Light of the World,' has come to open the whole world's eyes.¹⁰⁶ In a sense, Jesus, the King of Glory, stopped in his tracks for all of us, that he might illumine us and show the way.

The story of Bartimaeus shows us the only appropriate response when you find the one who can do that. You cry out to him as loud as you can. You leave everything behind to get to him. And then, you follow him wherever he leads.

Thought to ponder: is there anything in this story that 'opens your eyes?' If so, what will you do about it?

¹⁰⁵ In all four Gospels, there is only one additional miracle of healing recorded, that of Malchus in the garden (Luke 22:49-51). Luke is the only one who mentions it.

¹⁰⁶ See, John 9:24.

The Challenger

Mark 11:1-11

A Peculiar Procession

When they came near Jerusalem, to Bethany and Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead, telling them, 'Go into the village. Just as you enter it, you will find a young donkey tied there, one that has never been ridden. Untie him and bring him to me. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and he will send it to me straight away.' They did as they were told, and found the young donkey tied to a door out on the street. They untied him. Some who stood there asked, 'What are you doing, untying that donkey?' They answered as Jesus had instructed and were permitted to take the donkey. They brought the donkey to Jesus and threw their garments on it, and Jesus sat on it. Many spread their garments on the road, and others spread branches cut from trees. Both the people in front of Jesus and the ones behind shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!' Jesus entered the Temple in Jerusalem and looked around at everything. Then, because it was late, he went back to Bethany with the twelve.'

Few spectacles in the ancient world rivaled a Roman Triumph. Commanders who exhibited great skill at conquering and killing the enemies of Rome were lauded with spectacular parades. The celebration would begin outside the gates of Rome amid great pomp and ceremony, culminating in a glorious procession into the city. At the conclusion of the procession, which included chained captives from defeated armies, the champion, dressed to appear as a god, would ride in on a white war horse, or else a chariot drawn by four such horses. In such fashion he would proceed to the Temple of Jupiter, where in a graphic demonstration of

The Challenger

Rome's might and invincibility, the enemy captives would be killed. This was, after all, the whole point of a Roman Triumph, to celebrate Rome's ability to conquer and kill her enemies.

Those who follow Jesus to Jerusalem expect something similar to, if not precisely, this. The Messiah will enter in victory, defeat the Romans, and establish his everlasting kingdom. Had they studied their scriptures, they might have avoided the mistake. Zechariah had prophesied long years before that when the Messiah came to Jerusalem, he would come riding on a young donkey.¹⁰⁷ You might wonder why that makes a difference, but here is the thing: conquering kings rode horses in war; they rode donkeys when they came in peace. This was a twist to the Messianic story that people conveniently chose to forget. The Messiah, when he came, would not come as the triumphal, conquering warrior. He would come as the Prince of Peace.

The story of what we so often call 'the Triumphal Entry,' begins with Jesus having his disciples procure the beast that will fulfill Zechariah's prophecy. 'Go into the village and you will find a donkey. Untie it and bring it to me.' While they miss the significance of the donkey, they sure get the part about the Messiah riding one. As Jesus rides over the Mount of Olives, their expectations soar. Zechariah had also said that the Messiah would stand on this very mountain.¹⁰⁸ As the Holy City comes into view, specifically the eastern entrance, they remember yet another prophecy, foretold by Ezekiel, of the Messiah arriving through that very gate.¹⁰⁹ 'This is the moment of triumph!' they think, 'The Messiah is coming into his own.'

¹⁰⁷ Zechariah 9:9.

¹⁰⁸ See, Zechariah 14:4.

¹⁰⁹ See, Ezekiel 43:1-4.

The Challenger

As Jesus rides on, amidst the throngs of Passover pilgrims who are simultaneously arriving in Jerusalem, his followers lay their coats on the road before him. They cut palm branches from the trees and do the same with them.¹¹⁰ Palm branches are a symbol of victory. In 164 BC, when Israel had been occupied by the Seleucid Greeks, the mighty warrior Judas Maccabeaus and his brothers raised an army, tossed the Greeks out, and established, for a brief time, independence for Israel. When the victorious heroes rode into Jerusalem, the people waved palm branches.¹¹¹ The followers of Jesus know what they are doing: fanning the flames of messianic expectation. The palms are a sign to other pilgrims that the Messiah has come to free the land.

‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,’ they cry. ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David!’ To this they add, ‘Hosanna in the Highest!’ Hosanna literally means ‘Save now!’ Some of those around, who are not part of Jesus’ original group, undoubtedly join in. Whether they believe Jesus is the Messiah or not is an open question. Perhaps they just think this is good street theater, proclaiming the universal longing for the Messiah’s coming. Some, no doubt, want to believe. But not everyone in the crowd is a believer. In fact, most of the Passover pilgrims outside of Jesus’ entourage probably don’t know what is happening. Jerusalem has hundreds of thousands of pilgrims streaming through its various gates during Passover week. To most of them, what is happening with Jesus as he comes down from the Mount of Olives is about as noticeable as a fight breaking out on the other side of the stadium during a football game. To most Passover pilgrims, the ‘Triumphal Entry’ may as well not have happened.

¹¹⁰ Mark doesn’t specify the type of branches used. John’s Gospel does, thus explaining the tradition of palms on Palm Sunday (see, John 12:13).

¹¹¹ See, 1 Maccabees 13:51.

The Challenger

Then comes the climax. Jesus passes through the eastern gate. He heads straight for the Temple. He dismounts and climbs the stairs into that magnificent edifice to God. He looks around, notices the time, and says, 'Okay. That's it. Time to go back to Bethany.' He then leads his disciples out of the city.

Talk about anticlimactic. You can imagine Jesus' disciples, as well as the others in his entourage, scratching their heads. Wasn't something else supposed to happen?

But what both Jesus and Mark want us to see, is that the triumph of the Messiah will not follow the anticipated pattern. It has already diverged from it and will diverge more by week's end. Jesus' triumphal procession has, in fact, only begun. It will continue throughout the week, with its final leg down the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows, finding its end at Calvary. There, Jesus will turn the concept of a Roman triumph upside down. He will not shed the blood of his enemies. He will allow his enemies to shed his for their sake.

A more thorough repudiation of both Roman ways and Jewish expectations could scarcely be imagined. Jesus, in this peculiar procession into Jerusalem, rejects the way of conquering kings. He rejects the use of violence as a means to an end. He rejects the notion that the Kingdom of God could ever be advanced through standard political or military means.

The triumph of the Challenger will be peculiar, one that will seem to be, at first, no triumph at all. But in the end, it will put the triumphs of Rome, the triumphs of kings and generals, to everlasting shame.

Thought to ponder: how might this challenge the traditional version of the 'Triumphal Entry?' How is Jesus' procession into Jerusalem tied to his Cross?

The Challenger

Mark 11:12-21

Time for Something New

The next day, they left Bethany. Jesus was hungry. In the distance he saw a fig tree with leaves and went to it to see if he might find some fruit. But when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not yet the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one from this age eat fruit from you again!' His disciples heard him say this. They pressed on and came to Jerusalem. Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out those buying and selling there. He overthrew the tables of the moneychangers and the chairs of those selling doves. He prevented others from bringing merchandise into the Temple. As he did this, he taught them, saying, 'Has it not been written in the scriptures, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you have made it a den of robbers!' The chief priests and scribes heard this and began plotting his destruction. But they were afraid of him, because all the people were astonished by his teaching. When evening came, Jesus and his disciples left the city. Early the next morning, they passed by the fig tree and saw that it had withered away from the roots. Peter, remembering Jesus' words, said, 'Look Rabbi! The fig tree you cursed has withered away.'

The anticlimactic ending to Jesus' donkey ride into Jerusalem doesn't mean that Jesus is finished with his business there. Far from it. As noted in the last entry, Jesus is just getting started.

He has gone to the Temple and taken in the sights, sounds, and smells of what is happening there. None of it is to his liking. The money changers, who are supposed to provide a service to traveling pilgrims by exchanging their foreign currency into the proper coinage to pay the Temple tax, are instead fleecing people by tacking on exorbitant transaction fees. Similarly, those selling doves and other animals for the

The Challenger

ritual sacrifices are charging way more than the going rate. Worse still, although Mark doesn't specifically mention it (though it is subtly implied), this is all taking place in the Court of the Gentiles, the place in the Temple reserved for non-Jewish persons to come and pray to the One True God. Israel had been called to be a 'light to the nations.'¹¹² But her religious leaders have turned the one place where the nations could find God into a circus, a circus owned and operated by the High Priest, Annas, and his family.¹¹³

Our passage begins then, with Jesus leading his disciples back to the Temple. The veins in his temples are throbbing. His nostrils flaring. His heart racing. How dare people turn his Father's house into a den of robbers? How dare they get in the way of the Gentiles' search for God? His hunger builds (we might say, Jesus is 'hangry'). He sees a fig tree up ahead, covered in leaves. It isn't fig season, but he approaches anyway, hoping to find at least one piece of fruit. He finds none. 'May you never bear fruit again!' he shouts. The disciples wonder why he's mad at a tree.

Jesus isn't mad at a tree. He's mad at what Israel has become, specifically what her religious leaders have done at the Temple, the very heart of the nation. In the Old Testament, Israel is sometimes depicted as a fig tree. Hosea recorded God explaining that when he first found Israel, it felt like finding early fruit on a fig tree; a wonderful surprise, something that held forth promise for the coming season.¹¹⁴ Jesus sees little promise in the Israel he sees now. Perhaps, as he speaks his words, he recalls the lesson of Jeremiah 24, wherein the people of Israel were compared to two baskets of figs, one good, the other bad. The good would be preserved,

¹¹² Isaiah 49:6.

¹¹³ Annas wasn't the sitting High Priest at the time, his son-in-law Caiaphas was (John 12:13). Still, Annas kept the honorary title.

¹¹⁴ See, Hosea 9:10.

The Challenger

but the bad would be thrown out. As Jesus marches to the Temple, he knows it's time to toss out the bad fruit. The religious authorities have corrupted his Father's house. They have turned the sanctuary of the Lord into a self-serving, money-making business enterprise. They have specifically disregarded the needs of those furthest from God. They are emblematic of the spiritual state of the nation, far from God, failing in her mission, showing no sign of promise that she will be able to turn things around.

It's time to toss out some bad figs.

Jesus does. He drives out the moneychangers and flips over the tables of the hucksters. He prevents anyone from carrying any more of their paraphernalia into the Temple, at least as long as he is there. He cries out, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for the nations! But you have turned it into a den of robbers!' The people, aka, 'the fleeced' love it. It's about time someone turned the place upside down. But the religious leaders themselves, who are made rich by this shameless activity, are furious. They begin to devise a way to get rid of Jesus once and for all.

At the end of the day, Jesus leads his disciples out of the city once more. In the morning they return, and as they make their way, his disciples see the fig tree. 'Look Rabbi,' Peter says, 'the fig tree you cursed is withered.' That it is, from the roots up. There will be no pruning this tree's branches to save it. It is unsalvageable. The imagery is damning. Jesus has 'pruned' the Temple, if you will, but he knows it won't last. When he returns, the moneychangers and dove traders will have set up again. The problem runs deeper than a onetime cleansing can fix. It is systemic. The entire religious order is corrupt, from the High Priest down. There is only one way for Israel to move forward, her institutions will have

The Challenger

to be uprooted entirely and replaced with something new. It's time for a new wineskin.

That new wineskin is, of course, the Church, the New Israel that, unlike the old, will not be confined by architecture or geography. It will be a new and global community of both Jews and Gentiles (for of course God still loves and redeems both groups) who will shine Jesus' light to the nations.

That's what Jesus was setting the stage for in his famous cleansing of the Temple. He was telling Israel that her institutions had had their day. It was time for something new. It was time for a new community to be born, a new community of both Jews and Gentiles who would bear fruit, in and out of season, to surprise and nourish the world.

Thought to ponder: do you think this 'starting something new' thing was just a onetime event? Or does God toss out bad figs and start new things to this day?

Mark 11:22-26

Moving Mountains

Then Jesus answered his disciples, saying, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and cast into the sea,' and does not waver in his heart but believes it will happen, it will be so for him. So I say to you, whatever you pray for, believe that it will happen, and it will be so for you. But when you pray, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins.

Jesus and his disciples are still standing before the withered fig tree. The previous morning, Jesus had cursed it, and now, 24 hours later, it has

The Challenger

withered and died. As the disciples marvel at the sight, their minds drift back to picture other amazing things Jesus has done. They recall him stilling a storm, driving out demons, feeding the masses, healing the blind, deaf, and lame. Perhaps they even think back to some of what they have done in Jesus' name, for they too, speaking and praying in the name of Jesus, have driven out demons and healed the sick. Looking at the fig tree, they wonder: what else might we be able to do?

Sensing their thoughts, Jesus answers with an extraordinary statement: 'Have faith in God. If you do, you can say to this mountain, 'Be thrown into the sea,' and it will be! If you believe, you can pray for anything, and it will happen!' That's a mighty big promise, one that is ripe for misinterpretation and abuse, the kind that can literally ruin a person's faith when mountains don't move. So let's take a moment to parse things out a bit.

First, while Jesus doesn't specifically say so here, Jesus is talking about praying in his name.¹¹⁵ The name of Jesus is powerful. He is, after all, the one through whom all things were made, whose name is above all names, and who possesses power and authority over everyone and everything.¹¹⁶ It should not therefore be surprising when praying in the name of Jesus results in miracles. The maker of the mountains can certainly move them.

But it is also important to note that praying in the name of Jesus is not a matter of naming and claiming whatever you want, tagging it with the line, 'In Jesus name I pray,' and POOF, it's yours. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray in the spirit and character of Jesus. Jesus prayed in accordance with his Father's will, as will be famously exhibited a bit later

¹¹⁵ See, e.g., John 14:13-14; 16:23.

¹¹⁶ See, Colossians 1:16; Philippians 2:9; Ephesians 1:21-22.

The Challenger

in Mark's Gospel as Jesus wrestles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Similarly, it is when we pray in tune with the will of our Abba that we can be confident our requests will be granted.¹¹⁷ You can't expect a mountain to move just because it's in the way of what you want to accomplish. Our prayers become reality only when we pray for what God wants to accomplish.

Even when we do pray in this manner, we should further note that Jesus doesn't provide the time frame in which your particular mountain may move. Sometimes, our requests are granted quickly, even instantaneously. But most of the time, praying in the spirit and character of Jesus is an exercise in the long haul. Mountains do indeed move all the time, but usually, what casts a mountain into the sea isn't a sudden earthquake, but the slow process of erosion, which can take millions of years. You may not have to wait that long for your God-tuned prayers to be answered, but you may have to wait, nonetheless. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus exhorts us to be persistent in prayer and not give up.¹¹⁸ The promise isn't that things will happen on our schedule, but that, in God's time, the things we ask in the spirit and character of Jesus will come to pass.

Interestingly, Jesus concludes this little lesson with a challenge to forgive. 'When you pray,' he tells his disciples as they continue their journey to Jerusalem, 'make sure you have forgiven those who have done you wrong. That way, your Father will be able to forgive you. If you don't forgive, don't expect forgiveness yourself.' Apparently, an unforgiving heart is, in addition to being potentially fatal to one's relationship with God, something of a prayer blocker. That only makes sense. An

¹¹⁷ See, 1 John 5:19.

¹¹⁸ Luke 18:10.

The Challenger

unforgiving heart is hardly in tune with the spirit and character of Jesus. If you refuse to forgive, you can't expect to be forgiven or to have your prayers answered.

But there is another reason Jesus' mentions forgiveness in conjunction with his statement about moving mountains. Forgiveness is hard. People do things to us that can be difficult to get over, and if we aren't careful, we can wind up building mountains of resentment in our hearts. These not only block prayer and divine forgiveness: they ruin our lives. Unforgiveness hardens our hearts, shriveling their capacity to love, turning us inward until we become twisted, broken versions of our true selves. To live a life of unforgiveness is to live in the darkness, far from the light of grace, miserable, alone, and cut off from both people and God.

If we would avoid such a fate, we must forgive. We must pray in the name of Jesus that any mountains of resentment in our hearts be moved and cast into the sea.

Thought to ponder: have I built any mountains of resentment in my heart? How might I ask Jesus to help me move them?

Mark 11:27-12:12

The Vineyard Master's Son

Jesus and his disciples came again to Jerusalem. As Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, scribes, and elders came to him and asked, 'By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you the authority to do them?' But Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you a question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I do the things I do. Was the baptism of John authorized by heaven or was it merely of human origin? Answer me.' They talked about this among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'from heaven,' he will ask us, 'why then did you not believe him?'

The Challenger

But if we say, 'it is of human origin,' what then?' For they were afraid of the people, who believed John to be a prophet. So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.' Jesus said to them, 'Then I will not tell you by what authority I do what I do.' Then Jesus told them a parable. A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a pit for a winepress, built a tower, and rented it out to tenant farmers. He then went on a journey. At the time of the harvest, he sent his servant that he might collect from the fruits of the vineyard. But the tenant farmers beat him and sent him away empty. So the man sent another servant, but they insulted him and struck him on the head. So he sent another, whom they killed, and many others, some of whom they beat, others they killed. Still, he had his beloved son. So he sent him, reasoning, 'Surely they will respect my son.' But the tenant farmers said to themselves, 'This one is the heir. Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!' They seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What do you think the master of the vineyard will do? He will come and destroy the farmers and give the vineyard to others. Don't you know the scripture: 'the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was from the Lord, and it is amazing in our eyes.'" The religious leaders wanted to immediately seize Jesus, for they knew the story he told was about them. But fearing the crowd, they left him and went away.

The religious authorities are furious with Jesus. His recent stunt at the Temple has simply torn it. He has overtly challenged their authority, and they will not stand for it. So, they approach Jesus as he strolls about the Temple, demanding to know where he gets off disrupting their lucrative business enterprise there: 'By whose authority do you do these things?'

The answer should be obvious by now. He acts with the authority of God. But Jesus will not answer them. These men represent the religion

The Challenger

of the nation, a religion that has, quite frankly, gone off the rails. He will not allow himself to be trapped or defined by religion, and so he cleverly dodges the question. It's almost something of a metaphor, that Jesus will not allow religion to trap him. Religion, to this very day, always tries to trap Jesus, box him in, place him in a cage. But Jesus is beyond religion. He is totally free. He is his own authority.

Exercising his authority, he proceeds to tell his interlocutors a parable. And what a parable! For the longest time, Jesus has told stories that you have to chew on a while before you understand what they mean. Not so with this one.

The parable parallels Isaiah's 'Song of the Vineyard,' in which the prophet of old recorded one of God's many love songs for Israel.¹¹⁹ Israel is compared to a vineyard that the Lord loved with all his heart. He planted her in the perfect spot, provided for her protection, and gave her everything she needed to thrive. He expected her to produce a bountiful harvest of sweet grapes, defined more specifically in the song as a harvest of justice and righteousness. Instead, he found the bitter fruit of oppression and violence. Therefore, with great sadness, he withdrew from her and allowed her to face the consequences of her own choices and actions. Those consequences are spelled out in latter portions of Isaiah's book, as well as the books of other prophets: destruction, captivity, and exile.

Jesus tells a similar tale. With almost identical language, he speaks of a man planting a vineyard and providing her with all she needs to thrive. But when it comes time to check on the harvest, the tenants who had been given the responsibility to tend the vineyard beat the master's servant and send him away empty. The master sends a second, and a third servant,

¹¹⁹ See, Isaiah 5:1-7.

The Challenger

both of whom are met with escalating violence. Still others are sent, some of whom are beaten, others killed. Finally, the vineyard's owner sends his son, thinking he will be respected. But he is not. The son is slaughtered by the tenants, who believe that by doing so they will gain control of the vineyard.

The parable is so transparent it hardly needs explanation. The Master of the vineyard is, as in Isaiah's song, God. The Vineyard is again Israel, and the tenants are her leaders. The servants who are beaten and killed are the prophets, all of whom, like Isaiah, met fierce and sometimes fatal resistance as they called Israel to produce the sweet grapes of justice and righteousness rather than the bitter grapes of oppression and violence. And the son, well, if you don't know who that is, you really aren't paying attention. He is the one telling the parable, the one sent by the Father to call Israel back to faithfulness. But, alas, the leaders of Israel will do the same to him as they have done to the others.

The religious leaders would execute Jesus on the spot if they could. He has challenged them long enough. Now he has compared them to the evildoers from Israel's past who brought destruction, captivity, and exile to the nation. Jesus has bluntly told them that they are no better and should expect a similar fate. They are purple with rage.

But there are people nearby. People who are enthralled by the teaching and person of Jesus. People who seem to relish the manner in which he challenges the corrupt religion of his day. So the religious leaders walk away, biding their time.

Nevertheless, the die is cast. Jesus has openly challenged the religious leaders on their own turf. He has revealed them to be the corrupt fools that they are. It will only be a matter of time before they put

The Challenger

their dreams into action, seize the owner's son, murder him, and toss him from the vineyard.

Little do they know that the Son of the Master won't go away so easily.

Thought to ponder: are religious leaders today better or worse than the ones to whom Jesus told this parable? Is the vineyard producing sweet grapes, or sour ones?

Mark 12:13-17

A Tale of Two Kingdoms

They sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus, hoping they might catch him with his own words. When they came to Jesus, they said, 'Teacher, we know you are an honest man. You do not defer to anyone or make decisions just to please those with whom you speak, but rather teach according to God's truth and way. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them, or should we not pay them?' But Jesus, knowing their hypocrisy, answered, 'Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius, that I may examine it.' They brought one to him. Jesus asked, 'Whose image and inscription do you see?' They answered, 'Caesar's.' Then Jesus said, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But give to God what is God's.'

If there is one thing history should have taught us by now, it is that whenever you see religion and empire collaborating, pulling in the same direction to attend a common end, you should run for the hills. In this episode, we see how the Challenger reacted when they began working together against him.

The Challenger

After hearing the Parable of the Vineyard, the religious leaders walk away angry. But their efforts to crush Jesus are just getting started. They run off and round up an odd mix if ever there was one: a group comprised of Pharisees and supporters of Herod's family (aka collaborators with Rome). Pharisees, in general, didn't like the idea that Israel labored under Roman Rule, though they stopped short of endorsing the violence of the Zealots. The Herodians, on the other hand, openly curried favor with Herod's family, enjoying the perks and power such an alliance provided. On an ordinary day, these two opposing forces might have been at odds. But on this day, they come together to trip up Jesus.

Their story is as phony as a three-dollar bill. 'Oh Teacher,' they begin, 'we have an academic dispute we would like you to settle for us. We know you won't worry about what we think but will give the answer God requires.' The dispute in question? Whether it is appropriate to pay taxes to Caesar or not. It's the very sort of issue these guys might have legitimately debated on another day. But this day it is a trap. If Jesus answers with a straight out, 'Yes,' they will paint him as a collaborator with Rome, undermining his camaraderie with the common people. If he answers with a straight out, 'No,' they will claim he is a violent revolutionary who wants to overthrow the current system, a claim that will surely lead to his arrest. The whole dog and pony show is rank with hypocrisy. Here are the Pharisees, conspiring with the Herodians, who are in fact collaborators with Rome, wishing to either tag Jesus as a collaborator himself or otherwise condemn him for being anti-Roman, which, of course, the Pharisees are! In any event, they figure they have Jesus in a 'darned if you do, darned if you don't' situation, and that there is no way he can wiggle out of it.

Jesus, however, sees through their mask of false sincerity and, as he so often does, elevates the conversation. 'A denarius if you please?' They

The Challenger

hand one over. Jesus looks at it, first one side, then the other, and asks, 'Whose image and inscription is this?' His interlocutors do not even need to look. Roman coins were stamped with the image of the emperor and, if they had an inscription, which this one obviously did, it proclaimed the emperor's chosen title: 'Son of God.' Which, of course, as has been clear from the very first verse of Mark's Gospel, he most certainly is not. That title belongs to Jesus, not Caesar.

Still holding the coin, Jesus makes his famous declaration, 'Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' A brilliant response that extricates himself from the trap laid by his questioners. Jesus avoids being labeled either a collaborator with empire or a violent revolutionary (for of course he is neither). His answer instead reframes the discussion. Rather than answer a question about taxes, he challenges the coin's inscription. Caesar has laid claim to divine prerogatives. 'Caesar,' the coin proclaims, 'is worthy of worship and allegiance.' Jesus refutes this categorically. Caesar may control the government mint, but he may not claim the prerogatives of God. Whatever right Caesar has to his coinage, he deserves neither our worship nor our allegiance.

The lesson is certainly applicable to our day. We live in a time (and it is hardly unique in history) when the lines between Church and State, the Kingdom of Jesus and the Kingdom of Empire, are often blurred to the point where you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. 'God and Country' is a pairing we hear so often that you might think they are as compatible as love and marriage.¹²⁰ They are not. Whenever you see or hear people bringing the power of religion and empire together, you should run for the hills. Before long, someone will be claiming privileges

¹²⁰ Those who profess fidelity to God and Country typically do so in reverse order.

The Challenger

and prerogatives, such as allegiance and worship, that are not theirs to take. It never ends well.

Which is why Jesus makes it abundantly clear: citizens of his Kingdom owe no allegiance to Caesar and dare not syncretize their worship. Their allegiance and worship belong to God alone.

Thought to ponder: where do you see a fusion of empire and church in the world today?

Mark 12:18-27

One Bride for Seven Brothers

Some Sadducees, who say there is no Resurrection, approached Jesus. They said, 'Teacher, Moses wrote that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife behind, but no children, his brother should marry the wife and raise up children for his brother. Imagine there are seven brothers. The first married but died without children. The second married his brother's widow but also died without descendants. The third did the same, as did all the remaining brothers. Finally, the wife herself died. At the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? All seven had married her?' Jesus answered them, 'It is for this reason that you are mistaken: you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. When they rise from the dead, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They will be like angels in the heavenly realms. But concerning those who die, whether they are raised or not, have you not read in the Book of Moses about the thornbush? How God spoke to him and said, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is the God of the living, not the dead. You are sorely mistaken.'

Is there life after death?

The Challenger

It would seem a silly question to ask those reading a commentary on the Gospel of Mark. Chances are that almost everyone reading this book believes there is. But perhaps not everyone, and, in any event, most of us, if we are honest, find ourselves haunted by the question from time to time. Even the great Christian Reformer Martin Luther, in the wake of an illness that nearly ended in death, confessed that though his faith in the afterlife remained, the ordeal had nonetheless brought him face to face with his natural reason that told him his hope was a ‘preposterous lie.’ Many, whether they face death or not, lack the faith to believe in the possibility of life beyond the grave. Such as these embrace the morbid mindset of Sir Walter Raleigh, who commented centuries ago:

‘O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! Whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet!* [Here lies].’

The question of life after death was asked as often in Jesus’ day as it is today. Many, such as the Pharisees, believed in the resurrection of the dead; that one day, God would raise everyone who had died to face judgment. The wicked would rise to face punishment; the righteous to embrace everlasting life.¹²¹ The Sadducees, however, were squarely in the Raleigh camp. Death, for them, was the final curtain. They did not believe

¹²¹ Such a mindset lies behind Jesus’ parable of the Sheep and the Goats, recorded in Matthew 25:31-46. For a discussion of judgment day, I invite readers to explore my book *Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on Salvation, Hope, and the Love of God*.

The Challenger

in any sort of life after death. Which was, as the old church joke goes, why they were 'sad, you see' (feel free to groan).

Why didn't they believe? Well, maybe after so many years of being beaten down by Israel's oppressors, they just couldn't bring themselves to believe God cared enough about people to keep them around forever. Maybe they felt as if God were as good as dead, that the only path forward in life was a self-reliant one, and their hearts simply had no more room to believe in miracles. Maybe their religious power (and they had a lot of it) was so great that they had become so full of themselves that they lost sight of truth. Maybe they were too preoccupied with their power in this world to care about what might come next. Or maybe, since they had no hope themselves, they didn't want anyone else to have any either, other than the transient religious hope (a thin gruel there) that they themselves could provide. In any event, they did not believe in anything as fanciful as the resurrection.

Back to Mark's story. One day, during what we now know as Holy Week, as Jesus teaches in the Temple, the Sadducees decide to have some fun. They believe they can make Jesus, whose growing popularity displeases them, appear a fool, and in the process, cast a little foolishness upon the Pharisees as well. They come to Jesus with a ridiculous question about one woman who winds up marrying seven brothers. Under Jewish Law, men were required to do this sort of thing for a deceased brother, procreating and raising children in the brother's stead, so that his name would be remembered.¹²² Legal considerations aside, the bad luck scenario the Sadducees paint is one that warrants the seating of a grand jury to investigate the wife! The import of their twisted fable is to make

¹²² See, Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

The Challenger

belief in the resurrection seem foolhardy. 'If this happened,' they suggest, 'just look at the mess God would have to sort out in the age to come!'

Jesus of course knows what they are doing, and immediately steals their thunder. 'You are sorely mistaken,' he says. 'Relationships don't work like that in the afterlife. But let's get to what this is really about: you don't believe God can raise the dead. This proves you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.' Turning to those he has been teaching, he says, in essence, 'Don't let the Sadducees steal your hope. My Father can do anything! Moses clearly calls Him the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of the living, not the dead. There is, indeed, life beyond the grave.'

The people's hearts overflowed with joy that day. The miracle maker from Galilee had affirmed their deepest hopes. And which is more, in the process, he had once again challenged a major religious power of his day. He had told the Sadducees that their views on resurrection were wrong. That God does care enough about people to keep them around forever. That miracles, even one so great as resurrection, are real. That they should look beyond their own temporal power and embrace the eternal power of God. That they need to offer the people more than mere religious practice and proclaim God's promise of resurrection and everlasting life.

That day in the Temple courtyard, Jesus made his position on life after death plain. 'The resurrection is real,' he said. Had anyone seen his thought balloon, they might have read, 'Watch me. I'm about to prove it.'

Thought to ponder: why is it difficult for some to believe in life after death?

The Challenger

Mark 12:28-34

Jesus for Dummies

One of the scribes had been listening to the questioning of Jesus. Recognizing that Jesus answered well, he asked, 'Which of the commandments is the greatest of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is this: 'Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to Jesus, 'Yes Teacher. Truly you say that there is only one God and no other, and to love him with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God.' No one dared ask Jesus any more questions after that.

We don't know the identity of the scribe in this passage, but he proves that not everyone in the company of Israel's religious elite was beyond reclamation. Chances are he was a bit of a free thinker in a sea of party-line fools. While others were furious over Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, he was perhaps relieved, and ever since, has been watching and listening. He has seen and heard the challenge to Jesus' authority, the pathetic attempt to paint him as either a Roman collaborator or a violent revolutionary, and the ridiculousness of the Sadducees question about resurrection. He has seen and heard Jesus' response in each instance, and he is impressed.

Tired of the attempts to trap Jesus, he bravely poses a different sort of test, one that offers Jesus an opportunity to prove himself wise in his understanding of God's Law. 'Which commandment,' he asks, 'is the

The Challenger

greatest of all?’ Jesus doesn’t miss a beat. He winks at his new friend as if to say, ‘Thanks for the opportunity to sum up my message,’ and refers to the *Shema*, the classic morning and evening prayer of all faithful Israelites.¹²³ ‘The first commandment is this: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone. You shall love him with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’¹²⁴ Jesus continues with a reference to Leviticus 19:18, ‘There is a second commandment too, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these.’

There is both a sense of priority and synergy in Jesus’ words. That the first command is to acknowledge and love God is vital, for how can one properly love their neighbor, or even themselves, otherwise? Humans speak of love as the highest virtue, but human love can be both fickle and foolish. God’s love is anything but. When John famously said in his epistle, ‘God is love’ what he actually wrote in Greek was ‘God is *agape*.’¹²⁵ Agape is that form of love wherein the lover seeks what is best for the beloved, whether they deserve it or not. It is the kind of love that drives a man or woman to lay their life down for the sake of the other, even when that other is an enemy. It is hardly a natural form of love; it is supernatural. One must encounter God before one can even begin to truly know what this kind of love is.

Yet the commandment to love (agape) neighbor is no less important. The two commands are in fact inextricably linked. When we love God, we will love those made in his image, and when we love people, we exhibit obedience to, and love for, God. In fact, if we skip over to Matthew’s

¹²³ See, Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

¹²⁴ The original text of Deuteronomy doesn’t actually say ‘all your mind,’ though it is implied. Could Jesus’ addition be a tip of his hat to the scribe’s willingness to think critically?

¹²⁵ 1 John 4:8.

The Challenger

Gospel for a moment, we learn that when we love people, we are in fact expressing love directly to Jesus.¹²⁶ In fact, as John insists in his first epistle, if we don't love people, we don't love God.¹²⁷ Thus, the two commands cannot be separated, which is why Jesus punctuates his answer to the scribe's question with the tag line, 'There is no commandment greater than *these*.'

The scribe is elated. One wonders how many times he has listened to his peers and betters argue over such a question. Now he hears an answer that breaks beyond dog and pony religion into the very heart of God's Law.¹²⁸ 'Thank you,' he says, 'I've long believed that to love God and one's neighbor is more important than all the offerings and sacrifices.' Jesus' heart nearly bursts with joy. 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God,' he replies. You can bet this wasn't the last time the two men spoke.

The others, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, give up. Their arms are clearly too short to box with Jesus. They don't dare ask any more questions. They now know they can't beat Jesus in a fair fight. They will have to fight dirty.

That one scribe did right though. He gave Jesus the opportunity to concisely present his message. Jesus for Dummies. Love God, love people. Do that, and you've outdone all the burnt offerings and sacrifices in the world.

Thought to ponder: think of ways you can show your love for God and people, then put them into practice.

¹²⁶ See, Matthew 25:40.

¹²⁷ See, 1 John 3:17.

¹²⁸ The great Rabbi Hillel had answered similarly long before Jesus. But it was still nice to hear someone get the answer right.

The Challenger

Mark 12:35-37

The God-Man

Jesus continued to teach the people at the Temple, saying, ‘How is it that the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? For David himself said, by the Spirit, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ David himself calls the Messiah ‘Lord,’ so how can he be his son?’ The people enjoyed themselves as they listened.

His enemies foiled, at least temporarily, Jesus turns back to the crowd and continues to teach. ‘Why do you suppose,’ he asks, ‘the scribes teach that the Messiah is David’s son?’ It seems an odd question. The word son, in context, refers to one’s descendant, and everyone knows that the Messiah will belong to David’s line.¹²⁹ One might therefore have responded, ‘Well, duh. The scribes say that because he will be a descendant of David.’

But the scriptures say more about the identity of the Messiah. Isaiah brings together the notion that the Messiah will be a descendant of David with the shocking reality that he will also be the ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,’ titles for God himself.¹³⁰ That the Messiah would be deeply connected to God, in fact none other than God himself, is echoed by Ezekiel, who tells of God coming to shepherd his people.¹³¹ He would be the rescuer, the restorer, the one to bring them home.

¹²⁹ See, e.g., Isaiah 11:1. Jesus was adopted into David’s line by his father Joseph, a ‘son’ of David (Matthew 1:6-16; 20; Luke 1:27; 3:23-32).

¹³⁰ See, Isaiah 9:6-7.

¹³¹ See, Ezekiel 34:11-16.

The Challenger

In other words, the Messiah would be from David's line, yes. But he would also be God. Such a notion was scandalous to the scribes and religious elders. But it was there, in the scriptures, nonetheless. And so, Jesus follows up his question by quoting the first verse of Psalm 110, which is considered by the scribes and Pharisees to be a Messianic passage: 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'sit at my right hand [the place of honor], until I put your enemies under your feet.' 'Notice how,' Jesus continues, 'David calls the Messiah 'my Lord.' Obviously, the Messiah is more than just his son.'

The people thoroughly enjoy Jesus' teaching on this point. Probably because it shows up the scribes. It is doubtful they realize that Jesus is making a statement about his identity. He is the God-Man, the one who is both fully human, a descendant of David, and yet simultaneously, fully God. He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, co-eternal with the Father and Spirit. He is both Son of God and Son of man. God incarnate. Very God of very God, as the historic creeds of Christianity put it, living a fully human life.

If this were all there was to this short teaching of Jesus, it would be enough to pack a wallop. It means that God himself has come, to shepherd his people and bring them home. That God would do this, that he loves the world so much to enter it to save it, is Good News of the highest order. It means that God is indeed with us and for us. He has come to walk among us, as one of us. He knows what it feels like to be human, not just because he is God and knows such things, but because he has been in our shoes. Never again will anyone need wonder if God understands our pain. He does, deeply, because he has been one of us and felt it too. He has lived the totality of the human experience and faced down more than any of us will ever have to face. We can, therefore, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, approach God's throne with confidence, for there is one there who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, who

The Challenger

has been tempted and pressed in every way, just like us.¹³² We can tell the God revealed to us in Jesus anything, knowing with certainty that he will understand.

But there is something else in Jesus' words. In quoting Psalm 110, Jesus is perhaps, if you will pardon the pun, planting what may be the ultimate 'easter egg,' into the story.¹³³ After the portion of the Psalm quoted by Jesus, his ancestor David continued:

'The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes. Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew your youth will come to you. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.' The Lord is your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter heads over the wide earth. He will drink from the stream by the path; therefore he will lift up his head.'¹³⁴

Perhaps some of the language seems un-Jesus like (filling nations with corpses, shattering heads) but you need to remember, this is a Psalm of David, and David was a violent guy. But behind the violence is a simple song of triumph. The Messiah, David says, will apparently have some enemies. The kings of the earth will array against him, but God will ensure his victory.

¹³² See, Hebrews 4:14-16.

¹³³ An 'easter egg' is a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, image, reference, or message in a book, video game, or film. It often provides a clue to something that is going to happen further along in the story.

¹³⁴ Psalm 110:2-7 (NRSV).

The Challenger

In coming days, the kings of the earth, in this case the Roman empire and the religious leaders of Israel, will indeed array against the Messiah. They will conspire and kill him. But, at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, that will not be the end. The Lord himself has sworn it; he will not change his mind. Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Great High Priest. And though the world may lay him low, he will, when all is said and done, lift up his head.

When he does, he will be lifted to the place of honor, at God's right hand. He will be, as Paul wrote in Ephesians, 'far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but in the world to come.'¹³⁵ His enemies, in other words, will indeed be placed under his feet.

When they are, those who challenged the Challenger will fall on their faces and declare that, yes, Jesus the Messiah is none other than the Lord.

Thought to ponder: what does it mean to you that Jesus is fully God and fully human?

Mark 12:38-44

From the Heart

As Jesus taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, the ones who long to walk around in long robes, to be greeted in the marketplaces, and to be seated in the places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They devour the homes of widows and make a public display with their long prayers. They will receive great punishment.' He then sat down opposite the treasury and watched as people cast their coins into it. Many coins were cast by those who were rich. A poor woman came and cast in two small

¹³⁵ See, Ephesians 1:21 (NLT).

The Challenger

copper coins, equal in value to a quadrans. Jesus called his disciples over and said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow gave more than all the others, for they gave out of their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Still teaching at the Temple, Jesus next turns his attention to the hypocrisy of the scribes, the supposed preservers of the books of the Law and Prophets, in order to dish out a long-deserved comeuppance. 'Look at them!' he says, perhaps pointing in their direction. 'They wear such long, fancy clothes, hoping to be noticed and lauded in the marketplaces. They make sure everyone gives them the respect that is due, taking their seats of honor in the synagogues and jockeying for position at banquets. They seem so pious, with their longwinded prayers. Oh how righteous they look! Oh how learned they sound! But don't be fooled. They do the very thing they know they should not. They cheat widows out of their homes! For such hypocrisy, they will face judgment, as they well know!'¹³⁶

Jesus sits down, and, as if on cue, a widow enters the scene (seriously, how on the nose is this? You can almost hear a director say, 'cue the widow!'). As she approaches the Temple treasury, the place where people present their financial offerings, Jesus watches, and listens, to rich people (scribes among them, no doubt) casting coins into the money box. 'CLING! CLING!' The sound echoes off the walls of the Temple court, exactly as intended. After all, what is the point of offering large sums of money to God if no one knows about it? Not that they want the attention, heavens no! It's just that they want to provide an example for others to emulate

¹³⁶ They certainly should have known. Commands to care for widows and orphans, together with warnings for those who mistreat or neglect them, are consistently found throughout the books of the Old Testament, the very books in which the scribes were expert (see, e.g., Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 27:19; Psalm 82:3-4; Isaiah 1:17; Zechariah 7:9-10).

The Challenger

(if you aren't catching on, that's meant to be sarcastic). 'Look at me, everyone! I'm tithing!'

The widow approaches. She looks around, perhaps embarrassed. She hasn't much to give. In fact, all she has are two *lepta*, two small copper coins. Mark tells us that *together*, they are equal in value to a Roman quadrans, the least valued unit of Roman currency. Today, this would be like dropping a penny in the collection plate. Her offering made, she looks around again, and, avoiding the glances of the pious givers around her, slowly walks away.

Jesus is beside himself. Probably in tears. He calls to his disciples, 'Hey guys! Did you see that? Wow. That was amazing. That woman, yes, Philip, that one over there, the one in the ratty clothes, she's the real deal. She gave more than anyone else. All those rich people with their clinkity-clackity coins, they gave out of their abundance, a mere pittance compared to what they kept for themselves. But she,' Jesus stops to wipe a tear away, 'She gave *everything*. That money was all she had to live on. Oh how my Abba delights in her!'¹³⁷

My suspicion is that Jesus went straight over to her and gave her something out of the disciples' common purse. Mark doesn't say so, but of course he doesn't. Jesus, unlike the scribes, never did things for show.

Passages about money are among the most challenging in scripture. Passages about giving money and sharing resources are the most challenging of all. We often hear in churches that 'Jesus didn't mean to make a normative example of the widow in this story; it's not like we are all supposed to give everything we have to God.' Pious Christians today

¹³⁷ It may have been all she had to live on because the rest had been 'devoured' by the aforementioned religious folks in long robes.

The Challenger

make a big deal about tithing, giving 10% of their income to the church. It's a point of honor for many, sort of like sitting in the places of honor and being noticed in marketplaces, synagogues, and banquets was a point of honor for the scribes.

This story, however, shows a lot of those folks up. Rich or even middle-class Christians who can afford to give more than ten percent of their hefty incomes to support the work of God's Kingdom have nothing to brag about.¹³⁸ They are merely giving out of their abundance. They are keeping far more for themselves than they are giving to God and the causes close to His heart. The loss of that ten percent hardly makes a dent in their bank account.

But somewhere, say, on the other side of the world, a missionary is holding a service in an impoverished village. There, as a collection plate is passed, a small child drops in the few coins he made running errands that week, knowing the money will be used to help someone worse off than he. Or perhaps closer to home, an elderly woman, recently bereft of her husband, carefully parses out her social security check to pay her rent, food, and medical costs. She weeps that she only has five dollars left for the church. Yet she gives all she has, only to be indelicately mocked behind her back by the church elders at the next business meeting.

The Challenger's message is clear, to both the rich and the financially struggling. To the former he says, 'I want you to give as much as you can. I'm not interested in a phony show of giving. You might fool yourself, but you don't fool me. You have given nothing at all.' To the latter he says,

¹³⁸ While not everyone fits this classification, many if not most Christians in America are rich by the world's standards.

The Challenger

‘My child, thank you. You have done more for me than you can imagine. You have given me your heart.’

Thought to ponder: how generous are you when it comes to supporting God’s work in the world?

Mark 13:1-23

The Coming War

As Jesus left the Temple, one of his disciples said, ‘Teacher, look at these remarkable stones and buildings!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Do you see them? By no means will one stone be left upon another. They will all be thrown down.’ As he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? What will be the sign that these things are about to be fulfilled?’ Jesus answered, ‘Be careful that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he.’ They will deceive many people. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled. It is necessary for these things to happen, but the end will not come yet. Nation will rise against nation. Kingdom will rise against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in many places. There will be troubles and famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. But as for you, watch out, for they will hand you over to councils. You will be beaten in synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings for my sake, as a testimony to them. The Good News must be preached to all nations. When they lead you away and deliver you to the authorities, do not be anxious about what you will say. Just say whatever is given to you at that time, for it will not be you who will speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child. Children will rise against their parents and cause them to be put to death. You will be hated by all men for my name’s sake, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. But when

The Challenger

you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing where it should not be,' (let the one who reads understand), 'then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, and let the one on his housetop not go down into his house to gather his belongings. Let the one who is in the field not go back for his cloak. Woe to those who are pregnant or nursing in those days! Pray that it will not happen in winter. For in those days there will be tribulation such as has not been seen from the beginning of creation, nor ever will be. Unless the Lord shortened the days, no one would be saved. But for the sake of the chosen he has shortened the days. Then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or 'Look, there he is!' don't believe it. For false Messiahs and false prophets will arise to perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the chosen ones. As for you: watch out! I have warned you about all these things.'

To be fair to Herod, the man could build things. The Temple in Jerusalem was a spectacular architectural achievement. Though Herod was about as pious as Frederick Nietzsche, it stood as a tribute to the unassailable religion of Israel. The unnamed disciple in this passage is hardly the first to be overwhelmed at the sight of Herod's Temple. 'Wow!' he thinks, 'Just look at this place! It will surely stand for a thousand years!'

Jesus sighs. 'You think so, huh? I tell you, soon enough, not one of these stones will be left standing on another.' You can almost hear his heart break. Jesus knows he will soon be rejected, handed over to the Romans, and crucified. He knows that Israel will, by and large, reject his challenge to live differently and go their own way. And he knows where their way leads: absolute annihilation. The thought is crushing to Jesus.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Luke's Gospel records that as Jesus approached Jerusalem in his 'triumphal entry,' he openly wept over the people's failure to recognize or receive him, lamenting, 'If you, even you, understood today the things that bring peace. But

The Challenger

Jesus' dark words will become reality in the years 66-70 AD, when the pent-up rage of the nation will explode in open revolt against Roman rule. False Messiahs will spur on the bloody endeavor. Nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom (i.e., Israel against Rome). In the end, Rome will have her way. Her General, Titus, will breach Jerusalem's walls, set fire to the Temple, raze the city, and crucify thousands.

After returning to the Mount of Olives, the four fishermen disciples ask Jesus when this will happen (not quite understanding what 'this' means). 'What sign can you give us as a warning?' The only sign Jesus gives is a reference to the 'abomination of desolation' that will stand where it ought not to be. This refers to the book of Daniel, wherein the prophet warned of a day when a foreign army would occupy and profane the Temple grounds, end the sacrificial offerings, and set up an a desolating sacrilege.¹⁴⁰ Such an event happened when the Seleucid Greek Antiochus Epiphanies IV, in the execution of his policy of shoving Greek culture down the throats of the Jews, slaughtered a pig on the holy altar of the Temple and erected a statue of Zeus before the Holy Place. Here, Jesus seems to be pointing to a similar, if not altogether exact, act of profound desecration. Josephus, in his history of the Jewish-Roman War, reports that during the rebellion, Zealots occupied the Temple, allowed criminals to enter the Most Holy Place, and even committed murder on the Temple grounds.¹⁴¹ Perhaps this is what Jesus means. Or perhaps it's

now they are hidden from your eyes. the days are coming when your enemies will throw up ramparts against you, surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will dash you and your children within you to the ground. They will not leave one stone upon another, for you did not recognize the time of your visitation.' (Luke 19:41-44).

¹⁴⁰ See, Daniel 9:26-27; 11:31; 12:11.

¹⁴¹ Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, 469, citing Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* IV, iii. 4, 7, and 10.

The Challenger

the false Messianic claims of the Zealots (claiming a title that belongs to Jesus alone isn't all that different than giving Zeus the place of Yahweh). Or maybe just the Roman invasion in general. Mark implies that his readers know the answer to the riddle ('let the one who reads understand'). Whatever 'the abomination that causes desolation' is, it signifies a profound desecration of God's will and way.

When these things start to happen, Jesus says, the thing to do is run. Don't look back! Don't bother to pack your things. Don't go back for your coat, even if it's winter. The times will grow dark fast, and there will be anguish in Jerusalem such as has never been seen or will be seen again. The Jewish historian Josephus records events that prove Jesus was not exaggerating. He reports that the Roman siege caused famine so severe that at least one woman cooked her own child. When Rome finally entered Jerusalem, soldiers burned the city and slayed everyone they met, dashing even children to the ground. The blood that gushed through the streets was so deep it was able to extinguish many of the fires.¹⁴² Whatever the abomination of desolation is, Jesus' advice is to get out of dodge the moment you see it coming.

But hey, the disciples themselves will be safe, right? Sadly, no. Jesus mentions more than the fate of Jerusalem in these verses. He seems to paint a picture of the vast struggle of the ages. Kingdom will rise against kingdom in more than one sense, as the empires of the world will clash, throughout all subsequent history, with the Kingdom of God and His Messiah. There will, Jesus explains, be 'earthquakes,' collisions of tectonic proportions between those kingdoms throughout the earth. Disciples of Jesus, and not just the twelve, will be handed over to governments, beaten, called to stand before kings and governors. Families will turn

¹⁴² Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 6.3.4; 6.8.5; 6.9.3-4.

The Challenger

against one another in this clash, brother against brother, parent against child. The world will hate the followers of the Challenger no less than it hated the Challenger Himself.

It is not a pretty picture, but it reveals a couple of key things. First, there is a cost to rejecting the path of God to follow the path of the world. History tells the story, and not just in what happened to Israel, of what happens when the world pursues violence instead of peace. It never ends well. Down to this day, governments and nations glamorize violence and war as the solution to intractable problems. Yet every war sows the seeds of the next, and each generation pays the continual price of such martial insanity.

Second, the road for those who follow Jesus in challenging such a world isn't much easier. But there is one consolation. Followers of Jesus will face hardship, as Jesus explains, 'but the one who endures to the end will be saved.'

Perhaps, in light of the horrors Jesus predicts, that seems small consolation in this world. But we must never forget: another world is possible, and those who follow in the Challenger's footsteps will find it.

Thought to ponder: what is the cost of following Jesus? What is the cost of not doing so?

Mark 13:24-37

Carry the Fire

'In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. He will send out his angels to gather

The Challenger

his chosen ones from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the sky. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: when its branches become tender and it puts forth leaves, you know summer is coming. Similarly, when you see these things come to pass, you will know the end is near, at your very doors! Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But concerning the day and hour when these things will happen, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor even the Son. Only the Father knows. So beware! Stay awake! For you do not know when the time will be. Imagine a man going on a journey. He leaves his house and gives authority to his servants. Each has their own work to perform, and the doorkeeper is given the responsibility of keeping watch. Therefore, keep watch! For you do not know when the Lord of the house will return, whether it will be in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning. You don't want him to find you sleeping, do you? I tell you, keep watch!

As the disciples listen to Jesus describe Jerusalem's fate (see previous entry), they can only imagine he is talking about the end of the world. If the Messiah is supposed to save Israel, and the Holy City falls, what could be left? Certainly, they think, the Master is talking about the end of all things.

Jesus reads their thoughts. 'No, the end will happen after the tribulation I just described. Sometime after those events,' note that Jesus does not say how long after, 'the sun will grow dark, the moon will cease to give light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will themselves be shaken.' In other words, before the end comes, the world will grow so cold and dark that the very heavens will tremble.

The Challenger

But then: *Glory*. Jesus will return in power to make all things new. He will come on the clouds of heaven.¹⁴³ He will gather his people from the four corners of the earth and preserve them from the judgment that is to fall upon those who persist in rejecting God's will and way. Like a mother hen gathering her chicks, Jesus will protect his disciples from the coming storm.¹⁴⁴ But the usurping kingdoms of empire, false religion, and demonic mischief will fall before the omnipotence of God. The world will then be restored, heaven and earth become one, and Jesus, with the help of all who belong to him, will reign, as the famous refrain goes, 'forever and ever.'

'Okay,' the disciples think, 'but if not when Jerusalem falls, when will this be?' Jesus only offers cryptic clues. 'When you see these things happen,' that is, when you see the world growing cold and dark, 'you will know my return is near. It's like the fig tree, when it starts to bloom, you know summer is coming. In this case, when the world grows dark and cold, you will know the time is at hand.'

'Yes Jesus, but when?' we imagine the disciples' cry. 'You're being vague! We want the deets! Will it be next week? Next year? A century from now? Ten-thousand years? We get that the world will grow dark and cold, but Geez Louise, we thought you were going to save us from all that now! When will you fulfill our hope and make all things new?'

Jesus will not say. First, because he does not know. 'Only the Father in heaven knows,' he says. If ever there were a statement that called for humility! How many times have people tried to ascertain the exact day

¹⁴³ The initial image of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven is from Daniel 7:13-14, a prophecy of the Ascension (see, Acts 1:9-11 and Ephesians 1:19). In Acts, the disciples are informed that Jesus will return to earth in the same way.

¹⁴⁴ See, Psalm 91:4; Luke 13:34.

The Challenger

and hour of Jesus' return? How much heartache has it caused? How tragically has such speculation detracted from the greater mission of the church? We would do well to accept, with reverence and humility, that if Jesus didn't know the day or hour, we won't be able to figure it out either.

The second reason Jesus doesn't tell them (i.e., even if he did know he wouldn't have shared the information) is that its best if they don't know. I once had a wonderful English Shepherd named Phoenix. Phoenix was a rescue dog, and exceptionally well trained. When we first brought her home, we noticed she had been taught not to go on the furniture, at least not in our presence. But when we were away, things changed. We would come home and find the cushions rearranged, pillows on the floor, blankets piled up. Obviously, Phoenix had taken advantage of our absence to do what she believed she could not in our presence: occupy the couch. She thought she was getting away with something (we just thought it was cute).

But soon enough, it happened. One Sunday morning, we left for church. Phoenix had become accustomed to us being away for hours on Sunday mornings and took full advantage. But this time, we forgot something and circled back to the house to get it. I opened the door and there was Phoenix, standing on the couch, pawing the pillows out of the way, ready to settle in for a nice, long snooze. I wish I could adequately describe what she looked like when she saw me. Her eyes went wide (yes, a dog's eyes can go wide), her body froze a moment, and then, as the initial shock at being discovered wore off, she leapt from the couch with her tail between her legs, as if she deeply regretted her transgression. Even though it wasn't a big deal to us, she felt she had let her master down, and suffered the humiliation of having done so. Phoenix stayed off the couch a long time after that day.

The Challenger

Phoenix thought she knew when her masters would return. She took for granted that she had time to do what she wanted. But when her masters returned early, she was caught unawares, and felt as if she had let them down. Jesus tells a similar tale of another master who leaves on a journey. His servants are given tasks to do, including the duty of keeping watch for his return. As long as they don't know when he is coming back, they will keep busy at their assigned tasks and be on the lookout for his homecoming. But if they know they have, say, six months, or six years, or sixty years, before he comes back, it's a sure bet that at least some of them will slack off, take a nap, or otherwise fail to faithfully perform the work the master assigned.

This is why the Father keeps the day and time to himself. It is impossible to know when Jesus will return. That is a good thing. It keeps us honest. When Jesus returns, we don't want to be found on the couch. We want to be found honest and faithful, diligently going about our work and witness.

In a world that grows increasingly dark and cold, we don't need to spend time speculating about the 'when' of the Second Coming. We need to carry the fire that will both illuminate and warm the earth until the day of Jesus' return.

Thought to ponder: when Jesus comes, what would you like to be found doing?

Mark 14:1-11

Extravagant Love

It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and scribes were scheming to find a way to treacherously seize and kill Jesus, for they said, 'Not during the festival, or the people

The Challenger

might riot.’ Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the Leper. As he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of expensive perfume, pure nard. She broke the jar and poured it over his head. Some present became angry and said to one another, ‘Why has this perfume been wasted? It might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ They continued to grumble against her. But Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a kindness to me. You will always have the poor with you. You can do good for them whenever you want. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed me ahead of my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the Good News is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.’ Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus. When they heard this, they were glad, and promised him money. Judas began to look for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them.

Jesus’ timing is exquisite. Passover approaches. The celebration of the Exodus, the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery to freedom, from death to life. The religious leaders want Jesus out of the way, but do not want to provoke trouble while the city is filled with hundreds of thousands of faithful pilgrims. Their Roman overlords would not be pleased. They are therefore willing to wait until after the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the seven-day celebration that follows Passover. But Jesus has arranged things perfectly. On the day of Passover, as the sacrificial lambs are prepared, he will lay down his life for the sake of the world. He will become the paschal Lamb of God, the inaugurator of a New Exodus, the one who will deliver the people from slavery to freedom, from death to life.

The catalyst that hastens the religious leaders’ plans takes place just outside of Jerusalem, at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany. Simon

The Challenger

is throwing a dinner party, and Jesus is in attendance. Obviously, Simon has been healed of his leprosy, for while Jesus might have come if he were not, no one else would have entered the home of a leper (or even allowed him to remain in town). Perhaps Jesus had healed Simon. Or perhaps, having once been outcast, the erstwhile leper has sympathy for Jesus' mission. Maybe they are just friends. In any event, a pleasant dinner party is about to turn scandalous.

An unnamed woman, who obviously knows Jesus, rushes into Simon's home and crashes the party. She carries an expensive alabaster jar of perfume. Breaking it open, she pours its contents over Jesus' head. Biblical kings were anointed with oil in similar fashion. Mark no doubt wants us to catch the allusion. It is almost as if the woman, aware of Jesus' impending rejection, has come to proclaim her allegiance. 'If no one else is willing to do it,' she seems to say, 'I will. Jesus is my King!' We are not told how she knows Jesus, or what he has done for her to inspire such extravagance, but whatever it was, she clearly loves him with all her heart.¹⁴⁵

The guests are indignant, as the woman's actions are scandalous on many levels. How dare she crash this party? How dare *a woman* crash this party? 'What does she think she's doing,' they say aloud, 'pouring out expensive perfume like that? Its value might have served the poor well!' Mark doesn't say what they don't vocalize, but we can imagine the raised eyebrows and knowing nods beneath their thought balloons, 'You know what kind of woman does something like this, don't you? Jesus should be

¹⁴⁵ Many have attempted to synergize this passage, along with its parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke, with John's story of Jesus being anointed by Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-3). This is a debatable position, and in any event has no bearing on Mark's purpose in telling the story.

The Challenger

more careful of the company he keeps. Oh, but maybe that's just how he rolls. He likely has lots of women like this.' You know how people can be.

Jesus, however, is touched, probably to the point of tears. 'Leave her alone,' he says. 'I love what she has done for me.' Looking the grumblers in the eye, he tells them that if they are so hot to trot about helping the poor, they can do so anytime they wish. But they won't have him around forever. 'This woman,' he says, turning his gaze back to her, 'has done all that she could for me. She has anointed me in advance of my burial. Surely wherever the Good News is preached, this story will be told. She will always be honored and remembered for her act of extravagant love.'

But then, suddenly, Mark drops the other shoe. Early in his Gospel, as he listed the names of the twelve, he had ominously identified Judas as 'the one who betrayed Jesus.'¹⁴⁶ While his readers therefore know it's coming, Mark has offered no signal yet of Judas' inclinations. Until now. Judas, it seems, is one of the scandalized, and the waste of perfume is just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus' earlier words about going to Jerusalem to be crucified had not set well with any of the disciples, but hearing Jesus announce his 'burial' is the final straw for Judas. Jesus is hardly living up to the standard Messianic expectation. Instead of winning the authorities to his side with dazzling displays of power, which Judas knows he is capable of doing, Jesus has provoked them at every turn. Instead of planning his attack on the Roman garrisons, he has spoken of his burial. Judas had not decided to follow Jesus to die alongside him on a cross. If he continues to follow Jesus, he will surely end up on one. Jesus isn't the king Judas thought he was. It is time to cut his losses. It is time to make a deal.

¹⁴⁶ Mark 3:19.

The Challenger

So off he goes to the same religious leaders who are waiting until after the festival to kill Jesus. He makes his deal and begins to look for his opportunity to seal it.

An unnamed woman. A named disciple. The first honored the King. The second betrayed him. It is a stunning contrast. The woman, though we do not know her name, is remembered to this day wherever men and women preach the Gospel of Jesus. She is honored and revered for her act of extravagant love and sacrifice. And Judas? His name is practically a curse.

And so it goes. Those who honor the Challenger are honored. Those who reject him, walk off with Judas into a darkness of their own creation.

Thought to ponder: why did the woman love Jesus so extravagantly? Why didn't Judas?

Mark 14:12-26

Worthy is the Slaughtered Lamb!

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover Lamb, Jesus' disciples asked, 'Where do you want us to go to prepare the Passover meal?' Jesus sent out two of his disciples with these instructions: 'Go into the city. A man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you. Follow him. Wherever he enters, tell the master of that house, 'The Teacher asks, 'where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover meal with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Get ready for us there.' His disciples left as instructed. They came to the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. They prepared the Passover meal. When evening came, Jesus arrived with the twelve. As they were reclining and eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me – the one who eats with me.' Deeply distressed, they asked him,

The Challenger

one after another, 'Surely not I?' Jesus answered them, 'It is one of the twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish. For the Son of Man goes just as it is written of him, but woe to the one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that one if he had never been born!' As they continued the meal, Jesus took bread. He blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'Take. Eat. This is my body.' Then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them to drink, and they did. He said to them, 'This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine again until the day when I drink the new wine in the Kingdom of God.' Then they sang a hymn and went out to the mount of Olives.

It was the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the day, Mark tells us, *when they sacrificed the Passover Lamb*. Mark once again juxtaposes the story of Jesus with the Exodus, thereby emphasizing that the death of Jesus, God's paschal lamb, is the event that marks the liberation of God's people. Just as Yahweh led his people out of the Egyptian empire, so now Jesus, in an unexpected way, liberates his people from the grip of empire forever.

The Challenger will liberate and rescue, but not in the short-sighted way his disciples and others expect. As Mark has made clear time and again in his Gospel, Jesus has not come merely to free Israel from the tyranny of Rome. He has come to create a new people who will live free from the tyranny of empire forever, even as they continue to live in its midst. He will do so, not by the sword, but by following the way of the Cross. In the ultimate expression of self-giving, servant, enemy love, he will show his followers a new way, a way that will set them free. This way will deliver them from enslavement to empire and free them to live as the liberated children of God.

The Challenger

This refusal to employ the means of empire (war, violence) to defeat empire is in itself subversive, and the scene Mark describes here speaks to this. Jesus instructs his disciples to enter the city and look for a man carrying a jug of water. This is very ‘cloak and dagger.’¹⁴⁷ Men did not typically carry water jugs at the time; procuring water was a woman’s job. This is a prearranged signal, a clandestine way of leading the disciples to the secret place where they will share their last meal with Jesus. They are to follow the man wherever he goes, and when he enters a building, surreptitiously do so themselves. Then, they are to ask the owner of the house, who is in on the plan, to take them to the upper room where preparations are to be made. There, they will find all they need. They follow orders and find things just as their Master said. Jesus, good host that he is, has secretly set it all up beforehand. They make the necessary preparations and wait for their Master to arrive.

When he does, they recline around the table and enjoy the meal. It isn’t long (or at least it doesn’t seem so in the pacing of Mark’s Gospel) before Jesus drops a bombshell. ‘One of you,’ he says, ‘will betray me.’ Mark has already told us who it is and doesn’t spend time talking about Judas here.¹⁴⁸ He sticks to the point that at this crucial moment, there is rebellion in the ranks. This too underscores the subversive way of the Challenger: he will weave even the work of the enemy into the tapestry of salvation. Those following the path of empire would have killed Judas on the spot. Jesus lets him live and prepares for a fateful kiss in the garden. He even serves his betrayer Communion.

Communion. Yes, it all builds up to that. Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, blesses it, and passes it to his disciples. ‘This is my body,’ he

¹⁴⁷ Not that Jesus ever encouraged the use of daggers. It’s just an expression.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew and John provide more details at this point of the story to highlight Judas’ betrayal. See, Matthew 26:25; John 13:21-30.

The Challenger

says.’ He takes the cup, depicts the wine within as a metaphor for his blood, explains the significance, and passes it along as well. In this, he gives to his disciples a memorial meal, one reenacted by Christians every Sunday around the world to this day. He gives to them the means to remember both who he is and what he came to do. It is a meal that exalts the sacrifice of God’s perfect Lamb, a meal that *celebrates* Jesus’ journey to the Cross.

Today, as we sit in our cushioned pews and chairs, eat our smidgen of white bread or wafer, and sip from the communion cup (whether it be a common one or one of many individual plastic shot glasses), we can easily miss the significance of what we are doing. Mark’s subversive Gospel, however, makes it plain. The taking of Communion is a subversive act, perhaps the most subversive of all. In it, we take bread and wine, representations of the body and blood of Jesus, into our very being. We proclaim to ourselves, one another, and the world at large that *this* is what we believe. *This* is who we follow. *This* is the one to whom we belong. We do not belong to the empire. The Lamb who was slain has delivered us from its grip. We celebrate the Lamb who rejected the ways and means of empire in favor of the cross. As those in empire’s grip march triumphantly through their lands, singing their songs, the disciples of Jesus gather around a common table and join the angel voices in the Song of the Lamb:

‘Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb!

To receive power and riches and wisdom and might

and honor and glory and blessing!

Wonderful are your works O Lord God, the Almighty!

Your ways are just and true, O King!

The Challenger

Who will not fear you, and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All kings and kingdoms will one day worship you,

*For your just ways have been revealed!*¹⁴⁹

This is what we do when we take communion. This is the hymn we sing as we, like the first disciples, rise from the table and head out to face our own Gethsemanes.

Thought to ponder: what does Communion mean to you?

Mark 14:27-31

Undeserved Love

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Everyone of you will fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' However, after I have risen, I will go before you into Galilee.' But Peter said, 'Even if everyone else falls away, I will not.' Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.' Peter answered emphatically, 'Even if I must die for you, I will not deny you!' The others all said the same.

God asked a lot of the prophet Hosea. He asked the prophet to go to the local red-light district and find a prostitute to marry. Hosea dutifully complied. His wife's name was Gomer, and predictably, she wasn't faithful.¹⁵⁰ After giving birth to two sons and one daughter, she went back to her old ways. You might have expected Hosea to let her go, but you

¹⁴⁹ Adapted from Revelation 5:12 and 15:3-4.

¹⁵⁰ You have to cut her some slack. Life couldn't have been easy for a girl named Gomer.

The Challenger

would be wrong. God commanded Hosea to go back to the brothel, where Gomer had sold herself into prostitution once more, and purchase her for fifteen shekels, five homers of barley, and a wineskin filled with wine.¹⁵¹ Hosea did so. One might imagine him doing it grudgingly, but that cannot be so, for the entire scenario was designed to tell a living parable of God's love for Israel, who, though loved by God, had given herself away repeatedly to false gods and false ways. Yet God, in his infinite love and mercy, continued to chase after her, crying out such words as 'How can I give you up? How can I hand you over?' and 'My heart is in turmoil, and my compassion abounds.'¹⁵² We must therefore imagine Hosea in tune with the heart of God, diligently searching the rough paths his wayward love had taken, breaking down the brothel door, demanding that Gomer's enslavers return her to him, and then, with love in his eyes, telling his wife there was nothing she could ever do to make him love her less. For that is the way God loves us. God is willing to do anything to rescue us, even when we don't deserve it.

I imagine Jesus feels something like Hosea did as he speaks his next words to his disciples. 'Tonight, you will all fall away from me. You will all become deserters.' There is such sorrow in the statement. The Challenger knows that he will have to face his final challenge alone. The ones he has shared his life with will all run away. Yet, as we shall see, they will run away with his heart and love.

The always impetuous Peter adamantly objects. He will not run away, even if the others do (a comment which surely earns some cross looks from his fellow disciples). The rock-headed fisherman doesn't know what he is saying. He had been rebuked earlier for challenging Jesus'

¹⁵¹ Hosea 3:2.

¹⁵² See, Hosea 11:8.

The Challenger

assertion that he would die in Jerusalem. In the wake of his master's reprimand, he learned that to be Jesus' disciple, he would have to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow. Now, with the possibility of a real cross on the horizon, Peter insists he has what it takes. Whether by way of a Roman cross or by some other means of death, he will die with Jesus if he must. And lest we make this all about Peter, Mark tells us that the others all said the same. They are all, so they say, ready to die with Jesus.

Before we get too hard on them, we should take a closer look at ourselves. It is easy to say we want to follow Jesus, to leave our old lives and safe spaces for the adventurous life he offers. But do we know what we are getting into? Do we understand the sort of life such a decision entails? Have we 'counted the cost' of what it means to be one of Jesus' disciples?¹⁵³ Sometimes we think so. We put on our big kid pants and prepare to go out and harvest a crop thirty, sixty, or one-hundred-fold for our King. But when the opposition mounts, even when it is far less than the prospect of persecution or death, how many of us run back to our old lives and comfort zones? Truth be told, we all bail on Jesus far more often than we would like to think.

We are all as bad as Peter and company. We are all a bunch of Gomers.

But notice something in the passage. None of this derails Jesus from his mission of love. Not for a moment. Jesus, knowing his friends will all run away, simply states that after he has been raised from the dead, in other words, after he has endured the hell of Calvary, slipped into the icy hand of death, and emerged victorious on the other side, he will meet them again in Galilee. Jesus, knowing what they will do, plans to go ahead with his mission anyway. He remains faithful to his disciples, even if they

¹⁵³ See, Luke 14:28.

The Challenger

are unfaithful to him. He is willing to do anything to rescue them, even when they don't deserve it.

Herein lies another challenge to those who would follow the path of the Challenger. Sometimes, we are called to walk hard paths, to do difficult things for the sake of others who may not deserve it. They don't support us. They may not give two licks whether we live or die. They may abandon us. They may even be among those who oppose us. When that happens, we will be tempted to go the other way. Traveling the path of sacrificial love for those we think deserve it is hard enough. Who wants to travel it for the undeserving?

Jesus sets the example. Part of the challenge of following the Challenger is that you must be willing to give yourself away, even for those who don't deserve it. To love the ones who break your heart. To let your broken heart bleed with divine compassion, even for those who desert or oppose you.

It is a hard path, this way of undeserved love. But just as God did not ask Hosea to do anything he wasn't already doing, Jesus does not ask us to do anything he hasn't already done.

Thought to ponder: how hard is it to show love to those who don't deserve it? Has God shown such love to you?

Mark 14:32-42

Behold Him Rise

They came to the place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He then took Peter, James, and John deeper into the garden. He was deeply distressed, and said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed by sorrow to the point of death. Remain here and stay

The Challenger

awake.’ He went a little further and fell to the ground, praying that if it were possible, he might escape the coming hour. He cried, ‘Abba, Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup from me! But not what I will. Your will be done.’ He returned to the three disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you sleeping? Do you lack the strength to stay awake one hour? Keep awake and pray, lest you fall into temptation. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.’ Again he went and prayed, repeating the same words. When he returned a second time, he found them sleeping again, for their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say. He returned to them a third time and said, ‘Sleep on. Take your rest. It is enough. The hour has come. Look! The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise! Let us be going. My betrayer draws near!’

The beautiful garden on the Mount of Olives has become the scene of the Challenger’s passion. Jesus and his disciples have visited this spot often in their travels to and from Jerusalem. On the other side of the mountain is Bethany, the home of Jesus’ friends: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.¹⁵⁴ Overlooking the Jerusalem skyline, it is a beautiful location to rest and pray. A quiet garden of comfort, beauty, and peace. But not tonight. Gethsemane, the garden known for its olive press, would live up to the meaning of its name: the crushing place. As Jesus feels the weight of all that lies ahead, his soul will be crushed to the point of death, a fact he shares with Peter, James, and John, the closest friends he has in the world.

After asking them to keep watch with him, to stand by him, if only from a distance, he staggers deeper into the garden, collapses to the ground, and begins to pray. ‘Abba!’ he cries. It is the cry of a small child

¹⁵⁴ See, Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1; 12:1-3.

The Challenger

for his or her Daddy. The cry every parent knows so well. The cry of a child who, from the depths of distress or pain, calls out for the one who can deliver and protect them. The strong man of broad shoulders and rippled muscles from his days as a craftsman, the scourger of demons, the rebel for justice who flipped over tables in the Temple and was not challenged as he did so, is now a child. ‘Daddy,’ he continues, ‘you can do anything. You can save me from what lies ahead. If there is any way, please, remove this cup from me! I don’t want to drink it!’ The cup he refers to is his cup of suffering. It contains a deep, dark, and deadly brew, and Jesus fears it.

He would not be human if he did not. The contents include the physical agony that lies before him. Jesus has lived in Israel long enough to know what a Roman crucifixion entails. There will be pain. Scourging. Nails. Asphyxiation. Worse still will be the spiritual agony Jesus will endure, as he becomes ‘the scapegoat,’ the one upon whom the totality of human sin is laid.¹⁵⁵ Jesus will feel the weight of every theft, every lie, every desecration of creation, every act of oppression, every adulterous rendezvous, every assault, every murder, every genocide. There are levels of pain involved here that we will never understand.

Three times, Jesus interrupts his prayers to return to his friends. All he wants is their support, but apparently that is too much to ask. Each time, he finds them sleeping. Though a brief time before, they bragged that they would never fail him, they cannot keep watch with him for as

¹⁵⁵ See Leviticus 16. Each year, on the Day of Atonement, the sins of the people would symbolically be laid upon the head of a goat who would be led into the wilderness to die. Jesus was the reality toward which this Old Testament practice had been pointing. Jesus, in dying for Israel’s (and the world’s) sins, will wipe the slate clean and give the people of God a new opportunity to live out their holy calling.

The Challenger

long as an hour. It is a grim reminder of what he already knows and has expressed: that when the hour comes, all of his disciples will desert him. Worse, they will cease to believe in him. They will see him arrested in this very garden, will see, or at least hear the news of, his crucifixion. They will believe he has died under a curse, that all their hopes for him were in vain. Jesus knows this. He knows they will abandon him. And worse still, he knows that as they do, it will feel as if his Abba has abandoned him as well. He must face his final hours alone.

Yet face it he does. The final part of Jesus' prayer is the most startling of all. All Jesus has to do to avoid the cup of suffering is run away. It would be so easy. Just scamper down the backside of the Mount of Olives, race through Bethany, and head into the wilderness. He has left Jerusalem under pressure before. Why not one more time? But no. Remembering his mission, he cries to his Abba, 'Not my will, but yours be done!' In other words, 'Abba, in my humanity I am weak. I am sorely tempted. I do not want to face this. I want to escape it. But I remember: this is your will for me. This is the plan. This is our way of challenging the world, of waking it up to the way we intend people to live. So now, Abba, in this dark moment, I turn to you in complete surrender and offer myself to save the world. I reject the way of the world and follow the way of the Cross. For that has always been your way. Our way. Not my will Abba, but yours be done.'

After the third round of prayer, the child, no longer a child, but again a strong man, *rises*. He rises as a man of courage. He rises as a man who has met his breaking point but is not broken. He rises as a man who is ready to deliver himself up to his enemies for the sake of the world. Yes, behold him rise, as he strides magnificently forth to meet his betrayer. As he rises to drink the cup down to the dregs. As he rises to challenge the

The Challenger

powers of religion, politics, death, and hell. As he rises to be (seemingly) defeated, only to rise again.

Behold, as well, my dear would-be Jesus follower, that as he does, he calls his disciples to rise as well.

Thought to ponder: does Jesus call us to go to dark Gethsemane as well?

Mark 14:43-52

The Nonviolent Revolutionary

Immediately, while Jesus was in the midst of his words, Judas, one of the twelve, came with a mob armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests, scribes, and religious leaders. Judas had given the mob a sign, saying, 'The one I kiss, that is Jesus. Arrest him and lead him away securely.' So, when he arrived, he went up to Jesus and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. The mob grabbed Jesus to put him under arrest. One of Jesus' disciples drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Jesus answered, 'Am I a violent revolutionary, that you should come to arrest me with swords and clubs? I was with you every day in the temple teaching, and you never arrested me? But this is happening so that the scriptures might be fulfilled.' Then they all left him and fled. A young man dressed in a linen sheet was following Jesus. The mob seized him, but he broke free. He left the linen sheet behind and ran away naked.

A small army comes to arrest Jesus. John's Gospel specifically identifies the presence of Temple guards and Roman soldiers.¹⁵⁶ Mark simply paints the army as a mob, a mindless and malevolent gathering bent on ruin, armed to the teeth in its quest to eliminate the Prince of Peace. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has challenged the powers of

¹⁵⁶ John 18:3.

The Challenger

empire, religion, and hell, and now, this unholy trinity concentrates their considerable temporal powers against a common foe. They come, although the religious ones would vehemently deny it, to make an end of God.

Judas leads them. The betrayer. One of the twelve, Mark is quick to point out. A friend come to betray a friend. He approaches Jesus and gives the prearranged sign: a kiss. Luke records Jesus' response, 'Friend, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?' Mark leaves Jesus silent. He lets Judas' cruel and duplicitous act speak for itself. It is the last tender touch Jesus will receive on his way to the cross, a cruel parody of the love Jesus offers the world.

The kiss is no sooner planted than all hell breaks loose. The mob grabs Jesus, and a disciple, identified in John's Gospel as Peter, draws his sword and strikes. A cry of pain from the high priest's servant. A general ruckus as swords are drawn, clubs are raised. The mob has come prepared for this, and they are more than ready to use their weapons to cover Gethsemane in blood.

Jesus will not allow it. He disarms his enemies by answering their violence with an assertion of his nonviolence. 'I am not a violent revolutionary,' he cries, 'you do not need your weapons.'¹⁵⁷ Other Gospel writers add details here that highlight Jesus' pacifism.¹⁵⁸ Mark apparently

¹⁵⁷ In Greek, the phrase 'violent revolutionary' is the single word *lestes*, sometimes translated as 'robber.' It refers to a criminal who employs violence, and is the same word used by John to describe Barabbas, a murderous insurrectionist (see, John 18:40).

¹⁵⁸ See, Matthew 26:52, where Jesus shouts, 'Drop your sword! Everyone who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.' Luke records him saying, 'Enough of this!' before healing the high priest's servant and then saying more or less the same words Mark records (see, Luke 22:51). Jesus, in word and action,

The Challenger

feels his record of events will be sufficient to get the point across. In the passages to come, we will see the contrast: both the mob and Peter *fight* their enemies. Jesus *dies* for them.

His willingness to do so should give us pause to parse out the meaning of Jesus' denial. He may not be a *violent* revolutionary, but he is a revolutionary, nonetheless. In rejecting violence, and in going the way of the cross to save his enemies and show the world another way, Jesus is launching a revolution. It will not be a revolution backed with swords and clubs. It will be a revolution empowered by love, mercy, faith, prayer, and hope. In a world where most follow the path of empire, this is indeed revolutionary. Which is, of course, why he will be killed. The world cannot bear to have someone deny its ways. To the powers of empire, religion, and hell, Jesus' way is the ultimate challenge, the ultimate insult, to their power-over violence. His is a revolution that must be stopped at all costs.

As this passage ends, two additional events happen. In the first, the disciples all run away, just as Jesus' predicted. Even Peter, who had been willing to fight, is not willing to follow Jesus on his path to the Cross. Jesus must face the rest of his story alone. In the second, we have the odd, almost out of place story of a young man who has apparently hastily followed Jesus to the garden, so hastily that all he had time to do was wrap himself in a linen sheet. Somehow, he became embroiled in the evening's melee, and when the mob grabbed him, he wriggled out of the sheet and ran away naked. Most commentators believe the young man to be none other than Mark, who, as he remembered the story, could not help but recall what must have been, on top of everything else, the most embarrassing night of his young life.

condemned the use of violence, even when intended to protect the most innocent person who ever lived, himself.

The Challenger

Mark's inclusion of his quirky story may seem out of place to some, but it fits one of the overall themes of his Gospel. Following the Challenger involves being ready to lose everything, even the shirt off your back. Mark, it seems, wants to remind us that when you run with Jesus, you just might.

Thought to ponder: why might the powers of the world today still consider Jesus dangerous?

Mark 14:53-65

Religion and Power

They led Jesus away to the home of the High Priest, where the chief priests, elders, and scribes had all gathered together. Peter followed from a distance. He entered the High Priest's courtyard and sat with the officers, warming himself by the fire. The Chief Priests and Council were seeking witnesses to build a case against Jesus so that they could put him to death but could not find the testimony they needed. Many testified falsely against Jesus, but their testimony was inconsistent. Some stood up and gave false testimony, saying, 'We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and rebuild one not made by human hands in three days.'" But their testimony did not agree. Finally, the High Priest stood up and took his place in their midst. 'Have you no answer to what they are saying against you?' But Jesus remained silent and would say nothing. Again the High Priest questioned him, asking 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Jesus answered, 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.' The High Priest tore his robes and said, 'What need do we have for witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What say you?' And they all condemned Jesus as being worthy of death. Some spit on him,

The Challenger

and covered his face, and beat him with their fists, saying, 'Prophecy!' And the officers in charge of Jesus struck him.'

Empire and religion, forces that have been fondling one another throughout Mark's narrative, officially join forces in the arrest of Jesus. By morning they will consummate their dark union as they unleash their collective rage against God and his Messiah. But for now, empire momentarily steps into the shadows. As Jesus is led to the home of Caiaphas, the High Priest, it will be religion that begins the world's case against Jesus.¹⁵⁹

Earlier, the religious leaders had been cautious, not wanting to arrest and kill Jesus during the Festival, when there was a greater chance for unrest.¹⁶⁰ But things have changed. Judas' offer to betray Jesus was too juicy an opportunity to pass by, and so they set the wheels in motion. Still, not all caution has been thrown to the wind. The trial is secret, in the dark of night, at the High Priest's private residence, offering no chance for anyone to intervene. Perhaps the plan is to convict Jesus and secretly hold him in the Temple Prison until the Festival ends. Then, when the crowds leave the city, they can enlist the aid of the Romans and put Jesus to death.

The religious leaders have been busy. As Judas led the mob to arrest Jesus, they have gathered witnesses who claim to have heard Jesus say incriminating things, or at least are willing to say so. But their efforts prove amateurish. Torah requires the testimony of two witnesses to convict a fellow Jew of an offense.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the leaders need Rome to carry out a death sentence (the Romans are jealous of their

¹⁵⁹ Mark does not name the High Priest; Matthew's parallel account makes the identification (Matthew 27:57).

¹⁶⁰ See, Mark 14:2.

¹⁶¹ Deuteronomy 19:15.

The Challenger

prerogatives in this regard), and since Rome generally isn't interested in the religious disputes of Jews, they need a rock-solid case. As the case proceeds, however, it becomes clear that none of the 'witnesses' have been sufficiently prepped; their lies prove to be inconsistent and contradictory. The case against Jesus is going badly, and the leaders find themselves floundering.

Caiaphas shakes his head. 'If you want something done right,' he thinks, 'you have to do it yourself.' He rises and takes center stage, decked out in priestly finery. Everyone is hushed into submission. All is silent but the swooshing of his robes and the 'clack' of his crosier upon the stones as he paces back and forth. This is his turf. His is the home field advantage. He allows the stillness to linger, believing the mounting tension, staged against the splendor of his presence, will weaken the defendant's resolve. In his arrogance, he is confident he will win the battle. He sits in the seat of power. Who can withstand the power of the High Priest? After all, he thinks, the one who wields it wields the power of God.

'Anything to say?' he asks Jesus. 'Have you nothing to offer in response?' Jesus remains silent, which is, of course, the prudent course of action. This is no time for self-incrimination. Anything Jesus says will be twisted and used against him. Caiaphas has no case, and the smart thing for Jesus to do, as any first-year law student would advise, is to keep his mouth shut. Jesus does, but not for this reason. He is biding his time for the right moment to speak.

You might suppose Caiaphas is sweating by now, wondering if the whole case might be going south. But remember: he's Caiaphas, the great High Priest. He believes he is in charge. So he keeps going. He's got one big card to play, and he plays it.

The Challenger

‘Are you the Messiah?’ he asks, ‘The Son of the Blessed One?’

Jesus looks up. The moment has come. For so long he has downplayed his true identity to all but the twelve. No more. The time has come to proclaim himself openly to the world. ‘I AM!’ Jesus says, invoking the very name of God that no observant Jew dared speak, ‘And you will see me sitting at the right hand of power, coming on the clouds of heaven!’

Caiaphas staggers. His head spins. He had hoped for a ‘yes’ to the Messiah question, but this? To invoke the divine name is bad enough, to use it as being in some way connected to Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, to suggest by implication that the Messiah and God are one and the same, is blasphemy of the highest order. But even that may not be what shocks him most. The latter portion of Jesus’ words derive from the Book of Daniel, wherein the old prophet, after speaking of the transient kingdoms of the world, referred to a Kingdom that would outlast them all, led by one (understood by everyone in the room that night to be the Messiah) who would, in power, come on the clouds of heaven and approach the very throne of God, where he would receive sovereignty over all things. His rule, the prophet explained, would never end; his kingdom would never be destroyed.¹⁶²

‘You shall see me sitting at the right hand of power.’ Caiaphas had thought he held the seat of power. Jesus says otherwise. Caiaphas and the Council have the power of religion, a power they believe gives them the power of God. ‘No.’ the Challenger explains, ‘You don’t. The power of God belongs to me.’

¹⁶² See, Daniel 7:13-14.

The Challenger

Jesus has taken whatever lesser power these men had away from them. They do not even get the satisfaction of successfully prosecuting their case. It is Jesus who makes it for them. It is Jesus who makes the decision to present the evidence that will send him to the cross. John records words of Jesus that would fit well here: 'no one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord.'¹⁶³

Caiaphas and the others cannot bear this challenge to their power. They fly into a rage. Robes are torn. There will be no waiting for the festival to end. Jesus must die now. 'Who needs witnesses?' Caiaphas shouts. He reels to face his colleagues and demands they pronounce sentence. 'He is guilty of blasphemy! He must die!' they cry. Whether they are more upset about his supposed blasphemy in uttering the divine name or his claiming the power of God in defiance of the Council, Mark doesn't bother to say. Given who we are talking about, he didn't need to.

What he does say is that the religious leaders become unhinged. These weakened men rush at Jesus, spit on him, strike him with fists, blindfold him and demand he prophesy about who struck which blow. They hand him over to the guards, who slap Jesus as they lead him away.

Jesus, the one with the power, lets it all happen.

It is astonishing that the first power to condemn Jesus is religion. If you haven't noticed by now, Jesus wasn't too into religion. The way of religion is a way that seeks power over people, a way that seeks to command them to do what the 'religious' want them to do. Jesus came to serve people, to use moral suasion and love to encourage them to do what the God who loves them wants them to do. The way of religion is to seek power. The way of Jesus, the way of God, is to lay down power for

¹⁶³ John 10:18.

The Challenger

the sake of others. Jesus exposed this difference, both on this night and throughout his ministry. It is no wonder that the religious leaders were incensed.

Just as its no wonder when, even today, religious people play power games in an effort to ‘take back the culture’ and force others to do things their way; or when they become particularly incensed whenever someone reminds them, no matter how gently, that the way of Jesus is to do otherwise.

Thought to ponder: where do you see religion seeking power today?

Mark 14:66-72

Peter’s Denial

Peter was in the courtyard below. One of the High Priest’s servants came and saw him warming himself by the fire. She looked at him intently and said, ‘You were with Jesus the Nazarene!’ But Peter denied it. He said, ‘I don’t know or understand what you are talking about.’ He went out into the entryway, and a rooster crowed. The servant girl, having seen him, began to tell the others who stood by, ‘This man is one of them.’ But Peter again denied it. After a little while, those who stood by said to him, ‘You must be one of them. You are a Galilean.’ Peter cursed and swore, ‘I do not know the man of whom you speak!’ Then the rooster crowed the second time, and Peter remembered what Jesus told him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ As the truth broke upon him, he broke down and wept.

Peter has been having a bad night. After bragging that he would remain faithful to Jesus even to the point of death, he fell asleep three times in the garden, employed violence to save the Prince of Peace, and

The Challenger

ran for the hills as his Master was taken into custody. So much for being faithful to the point of death.

But as this passage opens, we find Peter trying to redeem himself. At some point, as he had been running, he checked himself. Perhaps he remembered his earlier words. Or maybe he recalled how much he loved Jesus. ‘What am I doing?’ he thought, and turned around to follow the mob as it led Jesus away. True, he at first follows only from a distance, but then he goes straight into the High Priest’s courtyard, enemy occupied territory.¹⁶⁴ We should give credit where it is due. This is a risky move, and shows, at least on some level, that Peter wants to do the right thing.

But alas, it is as Jesus said in the garden, ‘the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’¹⁶⁵

A servant girl sees Peter. He is with the officers and guards, some of whom no doubt played a part in the arrest of Jesus. Peter, in his poor man’s garb, looks about as out of place as a mouse in a cat shelter. She observes him as he nervously rubs his hands before the fire. Suddenly, a dawn of recognition. Of course he is nervous, the girl thinks, this is one of Jesus’ followers! ‘You were with the Nazarene, weren’t you?’ she accuses. Peter feels the searing glances of the guards yet manages to keep his cool. He sloughs off the accusation. ‘Humph! I have no idea what you are talking about.’ Casually, as a rooster crows, he wanders a few steps from the courtyard to the entryway. Perhaps he hopes to hide his face by turning the other way.

The girl doesn’t let up. Turning to the guards, she continues, ‘He’s one of them. I know it.’ Peter denies it again. Mark doesn’t record his

¹⁶⁴ See, Mark 14:54.

¹⁶⁵ See, Mark 14:38.

The Challenger

exact words, but apparently, he says plenty of them, for they give the guards and officers enough to consider his Galilean accent. From this point on, they eye Peter suspiciously.

The trial of Jesus commences. Peter is simultaneously horrified that Jesus is on trial and relieved that the guards are now distracted by the proceedings. Peter watches as the witnesses fail to provide the evidence the Council needs. He watches as Caiaphas struts back and forth while questioning Jesus, as Jesus at first remains silent, only then to give himself over into the hands of his enemies with his truthful yet seemingly blasphemous proclamation about himself. Caiaphas tears his robes. The death sentence is pronounced. Council members strike Jesus. The guards are called over. Peter's heart is in his throat. His hand goes reflexively in the direction of his sword, but he realizes the futility of a fight, remembers Jesus' words in the garden, doesn't know what to do. All he knows is that the friend he swore he would die for is about to die, and he can do nothing. He cannot fight for Jesus. Jesus would not want him to. All he can do is die with him. His earlier boasts feel like talons piercing his brain.

A voice breaks the tension. 'You must be one of them.' It is one of the guards. Peter looks up and sees several still by the fire, watching him with evil intent, their hands on the hilts of their swords. His heart races, a cold sweat breaks upon his brow. He knows that if he is identified as having been in the garden with Jesus, it will be curtains for him. He will indeed take up a cross and follow his Master. 'You fool no one. You are obviously from Galilee,' the guard continues, 'we can tell by the way you speak.'

It all comes down to this moment, and the moment is too much for Peter. 'Damn it!' he cries, 'how many times must I say it. I swear to God that I do not know the man!'

The Challenger

And the rooster crows a second time.

As he recalls Jesus' words, the truth breaks over Peter like a tidal wave. He is not the man he thought himself to be. He thought he was rock-solid, that he could be counted on when the chips were down. He thought he could take up a cross and follow his Master all the way to death. But no. He is a coward. A failure. A traitor. Jesus had called him to follow. He had fallen asleep. Run away. And now, he runs away again, weeping bitter tears.

Mark will only mention Peter once more in his Gospel, and the mention will come on the lips of an angel. We will come to it at the proper time. For now, we only note a couple of lessons that flow from this sad and bitter tale.

The first is the reminder that denying Jesus only leads to sorrow. Let's face it, many of us have done the same as Peter, with far less at stake. But it is better, always, to stand with Jesus, no matter the stakes. It is better to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with Jesus, than to scramble away in the attempt to stand on the mountain heights without him. The latter may seem a better path, but it will only lead you into darkness.

The second is that we cannot redeem ourselves. Peter, in going to the home of the High Priest, no doubt believed he could make up for his earlier failures and sins. Turns out he cannot. Peter cannot make things right again, nor can he become on his own the man Jesus desires him to be.

But no matter. He doesn't have to. That's Jesus' job, and he's more than able to do it.

The Challenger

Thought to ponder: what does it mean to deny Jesus? What hope is there for those who do?

Mark 15:1-15

The Empire's Turn

First thing in the morning, the chief priests, elders, scribes, and the entire Council held a consultation. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'You have said so.' The chief priests made many accusations. Pilate interrogated him again, asking, 'Have you no answer? Just look at how many accusations they make against you?' But Jesus would not answer. This astonished Pilate. Now at the festival, Pilate had a custom of releasing to the people one prisoner, whomever they wanted. There was a man named Barabbas, held in custody along with his fellow insurrectionists, who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd began crying aloud, asking Pilate to fulfill his custom. Pilate answered them, 'Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?' For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead. Pilate asked again, 'What then should I do to the one you call the King of the Jews?' They cried out, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked, 'Why, what evil deed has he done?' But they only cried louder, 'Crucify him!' Pilate, wishing to please the crowd, released Barabbas. He had Jesus flogged, then handed him over to be crucified.

The pace quickens as the showdown presented in the first verse of Mark's Gospel comes to its climax. Jesus, the Messiah and true Son of God, is finally brought face to face with the empire he has come to supplant. Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, representative of Caesar himself, will now try the 'un-Caesar.' Mark's Gospel has set the stage well.

The Challenger

There exists the widest difference between the way of Caesar and the way of Jesus. Caesar chooses and prefers the company of the strong; Jesus chooses and prefers the company of the weak. Caesar seeks to control by force; Jesus serves with love. Caesar gathers armies to fight wars; Jesus plants flower beds and feeds the hungry. Caesar rides a war horse; Jesus a donkey. Caesar takes up the sword; Jesus takes up the cross. Everything that Caesar is, Jesus is not. Everything Caesar claims to be but is not, most particularly the Son of God, Jesus is.

The confrontation begins with the religious power handing him over to Pilate, a reminder, again, that the mix of religion and empire is a deadly cocktail. Pilate is told of the threat Jesus represents. He claims to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the one who will, according to Israel's prophets, outlast all kingdoms of the earth. He claims to be the King of the Jews who will supplant, or at least resist, Rome. Jesus is, the priests say, a threat to the empire's order.

Pilate, like Caiaphas before him, seems to hold all the cards, but he is in fact a frightened man. The word insurrection appears in this passage, and it is the one thing Pilate fears. History marks his governorship as bloody and brutal, not at all what Rome desired from one charged with maintaining civil order. Pilate knows his job, perhaps his neck, is on the line, and with a city full of pilgrims, this is no time for a breach of the peace. He must proceed carefully. He wonders, 'Are the people on the side of Jesus or the religious leaders?' As the passage unfolds, Pilate receives his answer. While he has no desire to please the religious leaders (Mark implies he sought to avoid doing so), killing Jesus will do him no harm. Refusing to kill him might. In the end, Pilate proves himself a coward, a man controlled by the whims of a mob. This is fitting, for what is an empire, but the power of mob violence projected onto the world stage?

The Challenger

Mark's account of Jesus' Roman trial is short and simplistic, not at all like the more detailed accounts of the other synoptic writers, and certainly not like the one in John's Gospel, wherein Jesus seems almost loquacious by comparison. In Mark's account, Jesus' only words acquiesce to the charge of being the 'King of the Jews.' Beyond that, he says nothing. It is as if Jesus owes the Romans no explanation. Almost certainly, this is Mark's point.

Perhaps the most chilling part of the trial involves the crowd's choice of Barabbas over Jesus. Earlier, at Jesus' arrest, he had made clear that he was not a violent revolutionary. Barabbas is a violent revolutionary. Mark describes him as one of many insurrectionists being held in Roman custody, one who has killed in the course of an insurrection. He is, no doubt, one of the Zealots, a man of violence, and in this he differs little from the empire he seeks to overthrow. The choice of the crowd represents the choice people of all times and places must make between the way of empire or Jesus, the way of the sword or the cross. That the crowd chooses empire and violence over Jesus and love is hardly surprising or unique; people have been making the same choice ever since. That the religious leaders stir up the crowd to make this choice isn't surprising either; throughout history, religion has played that role, working up the masses into a nationalistic fervor that claims both the authority and blessing of divine power. Religion and empire, from Jesus' day to our own, often wield the sword together in the quest to make a better world. But as Jesus will show, the only way to make a better world is with a cross.

The people's identification with the way of empire is cemented with the cry, 'Crucify him!' Crucifixion was a means of state terrorism; a political statement issued against both the enemies and would be enemies of Rome. 'See this man,' a crucifixion shouted to all passers-by,

The Challenger

‘this will be your fate too if you do not tow the Roman line!’ That Jesus is branded an enemy of the state, not just by Rome, but by his own people, reveals how deeply even they have fallen into the lurid embrace of empire. His death on the cross is a joint statement, issued by religion, empire, and the people, that in their eyes, Jesus is a dangerous subversive.

The passage ends with Jesus being flogged before he is turned over to be crucified. The flogging itself is no small matter. A Roman flogging involved a multi-tailed whip of leather thongs, each embedded with bits of glass, metal, or bone. Each fall of the lash would grip the victim’s skin on the down swing and rip it off on the upswing. There are accounts of Roman floggings that left a man’s organs exposed. Not everyone survived one. Yet a soldier skilled in the use of the *flagellum* could literally skin a victim alive and still leave him able to face whatever Rome next intended. Such is the cruelty that falls upon Jesus’ back. He is flogged to within an inch of his life, his blood loss is tremendous, and it will be as a God-awful looking bloody mess that Jesus will live out the final hours of his life.

So much of Mark’s Gospel comes together in this passage. Jesus is the Challenger; everyone else the challenged. Religion cannot bear the presence of Jesus. Empire cannot bear the presence of Jesus. The people of Jerusalem cannot bear the presence of Jesus. Jesus is threat to them all, and as such he must be both beaten into submission and crucified. This is the world’s reaction to the Challenger. It will always be the world’s reaction to anyone who threatens to subvert the established order, who dares call people to a grander vision. That this is so reveals precisely why Jesus challenged the world in the first place, and why we today who claim to be his disciples, must continue to do so, even at the cost of our lives.

Thought to ponder: how might Jesus’ followers continue to challenge empire today?

The Challenger

Mark 15:16-26

The Coronation of the King

The soldiers led Jesus into the palace courtyard, which is the Praetorium, and they called together the entire cohort. They clothed him in a purple robe, and twisted together a crown of thorns, which they placed upon his head. They saluted him, 'Hail! King of the Jews!' They repeatedly struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and bowed before him as if in homage. When they were finished, they took off the purple cloak and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him out to be crucified. They compelled a passerby, who had come from the country, to carry Jesus' cross. This was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. They brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means 'skull place.' They offered him wine mixed with myrrh to drink, but he refused to drink it. Then they crucified him. They divided his clothes among them, casting lots to determine what each should take. It was the third hour when they crucified him. An inscription of the cause was written over his head. It read, 'The King of the Jews.'

'Are you the King of the Jews?' Pilate had asked. 'You have said so,' was Jesus' reply, indicating that yes, he was indeed a king. Pilate, though frightened by the implications of such a claim made at Passover, surely laughed. What sort of king could Jesus possibly be? What would such a king's kingdom look like? In this passage, Mark paints the picture for us, and it turns out, just as Jesus has said, both his kingship and his kingdom look like a cross.

We have all seen movies, or read books, in which a king receives his crown. Often, the coronation ceremony begins with a procession into the palace. Officials are gathered, decked out in full imperial splendor. The king is clothed in purple, the standard color of royalty. A crown is placed

The Challenger

upon his head, and the assembly cries with one voice, 'Hail to the King!' Everyone kneels and remains in a posture of submission until signaled to rise, and then, the newly installed King is led out to address his people.

Mark's description of what happens to Jesus makes clear that, to him, something similar occurs as Jesus is led away to be crucified. The elements are all there. Jesus is led into the palace. The entire cohort assembles. He is clothed in purple. A crown is placed upon his head. The cry goes forth, 'Hail! King of the Jews!' The assembly bows in homage. But it is not done in honor. It is all caricature. The soldiers who lead Jesus into the courtyard have just flogged him to within an inch of his life. The purple robe is drenched in the blood they have drawn. The crown is made of thorns, some of which penetrate Jesus' skin, scraping his skull. The cry and the bow are derisive. Jesus is not led out to address his people in triumph. He is led out to be crucified.

Behold – the Coronation of the King!¹⁶⁶

As Jesus is led away, he even receives the assistance of a royal page. Normally, this would be a member of the court who trails behind the king, carrying the mantle of his cloak lest it become dirty. Jesus gets a peasant coming in from the countryside, compelled to carry his cross. Jesus has lost so much blood from the flogging that he cannot make it on his own. He is a pathetic sight for a king.

They arrive together, the King and his page, at the hill called Skull Place. Jesus is offered a drug, a singular gesture of mercy, to dull the pain

¹⁶⁶ Mark has already contrasted the coronation proceedings of the world with those of Jesus in his description of Jesus' baptism and subsequent trek into the wilderness (see, Mark 1:9-15, supra). Here, the comparison rises to new heights.

The Challenger

that is to come. He refuses. He will face what is to come head on, with an alert mind and heart.

And so it happens. Mark describes it with the meager words, ‘they crucified him.’ Books have been written on the subject of crucifixion. It is a ghastly way to die, complete with bolts of searing pain and the slow process of asphyxiation. This is the final act of Jesus’ so-called ‘triumphal entry.’ In a Roman triumph, the conquering hero presides over the execution of the prisoners of war.¹⁶⁷ In Christ’s triumph, the hero himself is executed, and in the most brutal way imaginable.

The cause of this execution is inscribed above Jesus’ head: ‘The King of the Jews.’ It is a warning to anyone who would dare challenge the authority of Rome. This is how the empire deals with those who defy it. In the eyes of the empire, and in those of everyone who looks on or passes by, it appears that once again, might is declared right. So sure of this are the representatives of empire that they play games as Jesus’ dies, casting lots for his clothes. It is just another day in the life of the empire. An upstart is defeated. The empire prevails. Violence triumphs over peace. The challenge of the Challenger is over.

But the perception is wrong. This is the Challenger’s greatest moment. This is the moment when he exposes the empire, and all the powers that sent him to the cross. Jesus, who refused the drug that would have dulled his senses, is the brave hero willing to pay the price to show the world another way. The forces arrayed against Jesus - empire, religion, and the demonic - are shown to be mere shadows, fearful cowards who kill anything they do not understand, anything that threatens their carefully constructed house of cards. Paul put the matter thusly: ‘he disarmed the powers of the world, made a public spectacle of

¹⁶⁷ See, Mark 11:1-11, supra.

The Challenger

them, and shamed them by triumphing over them at the cross.¹⁶⁸ The cross is Jesus' greatest and ongoing challenge to the powers of the world. From age to age, it continuously calls them out, exposing their violent, bullying ways, and calling anyone who will listen to follow another way, the way of love, peace, and sacrifice. The way that, as we shall see, always wins in the end.

The Coronation of Jesus may look like a bad joke. But it is a victory. It may appear to be pure foolishness, but it is in fact the power of God.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, as we who dare follow Jesus cast ourselves back to that fateful day and imagine the perceptions of those who thought it was the end of the Challenger's way, we do not join them, nor do we give up on the cross and throw our lot in with empire. Instead, we celebrate the Coronation of our King.

Crown him the Lord of Peace!

Whose power a scepter sways,

From pole to pole that wars may cease,

And all be prayer and praise.

His reign shall know no end,

And round his pierced feet,

Fair flowers of paradise extend

Their fragrance ever sweet.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Colossians 2:15.

¹⁶⁹ See, 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁷⁰ From the hymn, *Crown Him with Many Crowns*, by Matthew Bridges and Godfrey Thring.

The Challenger

Thought to ponder: how did Jesus shame the world's powers at the cross?

Mark 15:27-39

Mission Accomplished

With him they crucified two violent revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. This fulfilled the scripture which says, 'he was counted among the lawless.' Those who passed by spoke evil of him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! The one who would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! Save yourself and descend from the cross!' In similar fashion, the chief priests and scribes joked among themselves, 'He saved others. He is not able to save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may believe in him!' The ones crucified with him also insulted him. When the sixth hour arrived, darkness fell across the whole land and lasted until the ninth. At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Some standing nearby heard and said, 'Look, he's calling for Elijah!' One of these ran and filled a sponge with vinegar. He put it on a reed and offered it to Jesus to drink, saying, 'Let him be. Let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.' But Jesus, with a loud cry, breathed his last. The veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion who stood opposite Jesus saw the way he died, he said, 'Surely this man was God's Son.'

The way of the Challenger is mocked by the world. Passers by ridicule his apparent impotence. The chief priests and scribes, co-conspirators in Jesus' murder, make jokes about his inability to come down from the

The Challenger

cross. The violent revolutionaries to his left and right pick up the theme.¹⁷¹ The very fact that Jesus is crucified between them, that he is counted among the lawless, is itself an insult. But then again, Jesus is a bit lawless. He has lived with disregard for the authority of religion and empire. He has followed his own authority, and that of his Abba, and will to the bitter end.

As he hangs on the cross, his final temptation is to save himself. After his baptism, in the wilderness, Satan offered him a way to avoid the cross. Peter suggested more or less the same only moments after declaring Jesus to be the Messiah. In Gethsemane, the temptation to pursue his own will, rather than his Abba's, bore down upon him like hammer blows. Surely now, as the world scoffs and suggests he come down from the cross, the urge to call upon legions of angels to end his pain is overwhelming. The whole world - empire, religion, the violent revolutionaries, the demons of hell, Satan, even the acquiescent 'meh' crowd for whom the events of Jesus' life mean nothing - seems to be triumphing over him. How sweet it would be to come down from the cross and put them all in their place, or, to forget them all and wander off to live a quiet, normal life free of their nonsense. But no. That is what his enemies would do. It is not what the one who challenges them does. He will show them that love follows another way.

At noon, darkness falls across the land, and upon Jesus' heart. He cries with a loud voice, 'My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?' It is a harrowing cry that reflects a pain worse than the physical agony of the cross. Jesus, who has been one with his Abba for all eternity, now feels as if his Abba has utterly deserted him. He no longer feels the

¹⁷¹ The word translated here as 'violent revolutionary' is in Greek *lestes*, which refers to a criminal who employs violence. It is the same word used to describe Barabbas in John 18:40.

The Challenger

sunshine of his smile, only the absence of it. This is not because the father has, in fact, abandoned Jesus. Far from it. The Father shares fully in the pain of the Son. He has felt every lash, every nail, every gasp for breath, the torturous weight of the world's sin. Together, with the Spirit, the Father and Son endure this together. We who dwell outside the Godhead cannot even imagine the pain felt in the heart of God on the day the sun refused to shine.

As God suffers, as love endures, the people continue to mock. Jesus' cry only entices theological curiosity, as one of the onlookers tries to revive him with vinegar to keep him around long enough to see if Elijah will come to the rescue. The end, however, is near. With a loud cry, Jesus gives up his spirit. He breathes his final breath. The Challenger exits the world.

But he does so with a cry of triumph. The mission is accomplished. Jesus has been true to his call. He has challenged the authorities and powers of the world, who did everything to break him, but could not. He has remained true to his Abba, to his call. In the instant of Jesus' death, Mark tells us, the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. The veil was the curtain that separated the most holy place from the rest of the Temple. The most holy place, or the 'holy of holies,' was the place where only the High Priest was permitted to go, and that but once a year on the Day of Atonement, to offer sacrifice for the forgiveness of the people's sins. The veil's presence had represented the separation between God and sinful humanity; the separation between the Holy God of Love and the world that had rejected him in pursuit of power, envy, immorality, and violence. But now, the separation has ended. The world has been challenged and overcome, and the way to God is open for all to see. What is that way? It is the way of love, the way of the cross. It is the way of the Challenger.

The Challenger

In opening this way, in overcoming the powers of the world, Jesus has won the victory, a victory Mark highlights in his final words about the centurion. The centurion is the battle-hardened man who led the crucifixion detail, from the initial flogging to Jesus' last breath. He is the man charged with the execution of the empire's justice in the name of the emperor who, you will recall, proclaimed himself to be 'the Son of God.' He has, as the empire's representative on Golgotha, to use Mark's phrase, 'stood opposite' to Jesus in every way. But after watching the manner in which Jesus died, he has only one thing to say: 'Surely, this man, was God's Son.'

This man. Jesus. Not Caesar. This is how Mark punctuates the death of Jesus, with Rome itself, at least in this small way, acknowledging the grand truth that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. In so doing, he provides a foretaste of the glorious day when the knee of every centurion, every emperor, will bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.¹⁷²

Thought to ponder: what did Jesus accomplish on the cross, and what does it teach about the way we are to live?

Mark 15:40-41

Unlikely Heroes

There were also women watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the lesser and of Joses, and Salome. These women had become followers of Jesus when he was in Galilee, and had supported him by caring for his needs. These were among many women who had come up with Jesus to Jerusalem.

¹⁷² See, Philippians 2:10-11.

The Challenger

Having told the story of the cross, Mark adds a short word about the brave women who watched Jesus' death. This is not the mere tidying up of loose ends; it is meant to pack a theological and cultural punch. Even the witnesses present at Jesus' death evidence the challenging nature of his ministry.

Among the women who watched Jesus die are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James (one of the apostles), and Salome. We know next to nothing about the latter two; Mary Magdalene, however, is a household name. A lot of what people think of her is patently false, or at best speculation. There is no evidence in the Gospels that she was a prostitute or that she had romantic feelings for Jesus.¹⁷³ That is the stuff of fiction. Other Gospel writers give some information about Mary Magdalene, but Mark doesn't seem all that interested. He only mentions her for the first time at this point in the story, although she plays a significant role in the Gospel's denouement. Perhaps Mark didn't want us to focus so much on Mary that we miss the three most important things about her and the other women.

First, Mark tells us, these women were *followers* of Jesus. That is to say, they were disciples. This is astonishing. In a culture where it was considered better to burn a copy of the Torah than to teach it to a woman, Jesus had female students. Mark has already pointed to Jesus' egalitarianism. Here he makes it abundantly clear and shows yet another way Jesus challenged the practices of his day. No wonder so many women followed him to Jerusalem. He was likely the first person in their culture to treat them as equals.

¹⁷³ Or vice versa. It is conceivable that such feelings existed, but then again, Mary may have been old enough to be Jesus' mother. In any event, there is no evidence of a romantic relationship between the two.

The Challenger

Second, they *supported* Jesus. The Greek text uses the word *diakaneo*, which indicates service to others in a practical way. Considering Luke's observation that Jesus was financially supported by women, including Mary Magdalene, it becomes clear that these women provided financial backing for Jesus' ministry.¹⁷⁴ Jesus did not merely value women; he partnered with them and accepted their help as he fulfilled his mission.

Third, these women *loved* Jesus. Why else would they have traveled to Jerusalem with him, let alone watch as he died a horrible death? While it was perhaps safer for the women to be close to Jesus than it would have been for the men, given that the authorities likely didn't consider women a threat, being near the cross was risky business, nonetheless. Yet there they were. These women loved Jesus that much. Being as close to Jesus as possible was all that mattered.

The women came to be among the privileged few who beheld the glory of Jesus' Kingdom. Earlier in Mark's Gospel, Jesus had told his disciples of his way, the way of the cross, and remarked that there were some present who would live to see God's Kingdom come in power.¹⁷⁵ We wondered then what he meant. But now, after learning that the cross was Jesus' coronation, that it was, in fact, his victory over the power of the world, that it was indeed the revelation of the power of God, we know. Jesus was referring to his cross, and the ones who would live to see God's Kingdom come in power were perhaps none other than these women. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and the other women to whom Mark refers lived to see the revelation and power of the Cruciform God and his Kingdom.

¹⁷⁴ See, Luke 8:1-3.

¹⁷⁵ See entry for Mark 8:31-9:1, *supra*.

The Challenger

They did not, of course, recognize this at the time. But as we imagine them, standing, watching, and weeping, we can know that these women were both witnesses to glory and the unlikely heroes of Calvary. When all the man fled, the women stayed.

Once more, we are reminded that Jesus' most loyal followers are often the people we would least expect. But in the example of the women, we see that, perhaps, if we follow, support, and love Jesus as they did, we might become unlikely heroes too. We might even live to see the power and the glory of God.

Thought to ponder: why do you think the women stayed around when the men did not?

Mark 15:42-47

No Turning Back

When evening came, and because it was the day of preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council who was waiting for the Kingdom of God, gathered up his courage and went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead, so he summoned the centurion to ask whether he had died. Receiving confirmation, he granted Jesus' body to Joseph. Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Jesus' body down from the cross, wrapped him in the cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. He rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, saw the place where Jesus' body was laid.

It is another unlikely hero who performs the task of interring the body of Jesus: Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, the religious institution that condemned Jesus to death. Mark tells us little about him, other than that he was waiting for the Kingdom of God. Just

The Challenger

how he was waiting we don't know, but we get the impression that he was, at least secretly, on Jesus' side.¹⁷⁶ The odd thing is that he did nothing, at least not that is recorded, to stop the travesty of justice that led Jesus to the cross. There are plausible explanations for this. Perhaps Joseph simply wasn't there for the trial. While Mark indicates that all present voted to kill Jesus, the trial was hastily put together at night, and perhaps Joseph, who seems to have been of a more reasonable bend, wasn't invited. Luke informs us that Joseph did not consent to the plan to kill Jesus, so perhaps there is something to that theory.¹⁷⁷ Even so, Joseph had to have known their intentions, and Mark gives no indication that he ever did anything to refute them. Either Joseph was present at the trial and didn't speak up, or else he wasn't, but hadn't fought hard enough to derail his colleagues' wicked plans. He might have at least warned Jesus to get out of Dodge.

In any event, in the wake of Jesus' death, Joseph does something remarkably brave. He 'gathers up his courage' and goes to Pilate to ask for the body. Why does he do this? We can only speculate of course, but perhaps it is because of regret. Whatever efforts he may have undertaken on Jesus' behalf, he feels he hadn't done enough. Or maybe he realizes he has been playing for the wrong team. Seeing the hate, hypocrisy, and evil of his colleagues over the course of the past week may have provoked an existential crisis for Joseph, and he just cannot see himself as part of their group any longer. Maybe, like the centurion, he had been inspired by Jesus' courage. Or, maybe, just maybe, he realizes something no one else does. Joseph knows his Messianic prophecies, including the one that said, 'he was wounded for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities;

¹⁷⁶ John identifies Joseph as a secret disciple of Jesus. He was a believer. But he feared his colleagues on the Sanhedrin. See, John 19:38.

¹⁷⁷ See, Luke 23:51.

The Challenger

upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.¹⁷⁸ Perhaps Joseph knows that it was the Messiah's destiny to suffer and die, and so, having seen Jesus embrace that destiny, he knows that Jesus had been the real deal.

Who knows? All Mark says is that Joseph goes to Pilate to ask for the body, and anyway you slice it, that is a courageous act. Pilate might well decide to send Joseph to the cross as one of Jesus' co-conspirators (we know from other Gospels that the apostles were all in hiding for fear that such a thing might happen to them). Even if he escaped that fate, his career on the Sanhedrin is over. In identifying himself so intimately with Jesus, Joseph is committing career suicide. He is making an irrevocable decision in favor of Jesus, a decision from which there will be no turning back.

By the grace of God Pilate doesn't kill Joseph. After confirming with the centurion (yes, *that* centurion) that Jesus is dead, Pilate gives Joseph permission to take the body. Joseph is led, no doubt, by the centurion to Golgotha, where he lowers Jesus' body from the cross, drapes it in a linen cloth, and carries it to the tomb. Mark tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are there. There are no men recorded as present. Unless, and it is tempting to imagine this, the centurion himself helped Joseph carry the body.¹⁷⁹ Joseph finishes the work as best he can, given that it is the day of preparation and the Sabbath is about to begin, and rolls a stone in front of the tomb. You can almost hear the 'thud' as it closes into place. Perhaps Joseph and the others linger a bit, as people are apt to do at a

¹⁷⁸ Isaiah 53:5 (NRSV).

¹⁷⁹ It is possible that John, the beloved disciple, who was present at the cross, was also present at the tomb (see, John 19:26-27). But John's involvement is simply not part of Mark's story.

The Challenger

graveside, but the finality of the event doesn't allow for much, and so, eventually, everyone goes home.

That Joseph does this for Jesus speaks to his courage. That he does it in the shadow of the cross should make us stand up and cheer for him. We who live on the other side of the Resurrection (I'm not ruining the story; you all know it's coming!) would probably say we would have done the same as he. But would we? Joseph had no idea what the weekend would bring. He had no payoff in mind as he performed this service for Jesus. And yet, he gathered up his courage, strolled into the presence of the empire, and declared himself a friend of the Challenger. I guarantee you that heaven went wild. For there, in Joseph, was the first echo of a triumphant future, the first hint that there would be many who would pick up the baton of the cross and carry it forward into the world, even at the risk of their reputations and lives.

None of this, of course, changes how Joseph, the women, or anyone else felt that day. Jesus was dead, a point we must continue to reiterate, lest, as Charles Dickens said in *A Christmas Carol*, 'nothing wonderful can come of the story' that lies ahead. Mark's account of the burial serves as a final exclamation point to the fact: Jesus was dead. As far as everyone was concerned, the story was over. The dream had died. The challenge faded. The world would go on being the world, with no hope for change, ever. The powers of the world - empire, religion, the demonic - had and would have their way. What the world had been and was, it always would be.

But then again, a lot can happen in a weekend.

Thought to ponder: have you ever done anything courageous for Jesus?

The Challenger

Mark 16:1-7

The Revolution Begins

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to the tomb and anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. Along the way they had asked themselves, 'Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?' for it was massive. Looking up, they saw that the stone had already been rolled away. They entered the tomb, and saw a young man clothed in a brilliant white robe sitting on the right. They were filled with wonder. The young man said to them, 'Do not be afraid! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who has been crucified. He has risen! He is not here. Look at the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that he is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he has told you.'

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome rise early Sunday morning to undertake one final journey for the sake of Jesus. After waking up a shopkeeper and procuring spices, they set out in the half-light of predawn to visit the tomb where Jesus lay. Their intent is to anoint his body with the spices, a customary act Joseph had been prevented from performing in the rush to entomb Jesus before the Sabbath. It will be their final service to the one they followed, supported, and loved. So single-minded is their devotion that they have not considered how they will access the tomb. But love is never constrained by the practicalities that stand in the way, so they embark on their journey.

They walk with heavy hearts, their eyes red from weeping over the past two sleepless nights. A few days before, the world seemed a place of limitless possibilities. They had been following the Messiah, and though

The Challenger

they had perhaps understood more clearly than others that the standard messianic expectations were a little off, they nonetheless dreamed of a world where Israel was free, where peace would have no end, where justice would reign from north to south and from east to west. Just how it would happen they did not know. But they did know that Jesus would accomplish it. This they believed with all their heart. They had staked their lives on it.

But now, it feels like the end of all things. They have not only lost the one they love: they have lost hope. Imagine yourself in their shoes. Imagine if all your hopes for a better world turned out to be a farce. If the worst thing that ever happened to you would haunt you until the end of your life, and then, haunt the next generation, and the one after that, on and on until the end of time. If sorrow would forever have the last word. This is how the women feel. Their hopes and dreams for a better world are dashed. The world would continue as it always had. Death, violence, and cruelty would be the common lot of humanity for all time. The empire, together with the demonic powers that animated it, had won, and would keep on winning. So the three brave women of Israel weep. For the world is a bitter place and will remain bitter until it simply is no more.

If there is any consolation in this, it is that they will continue to live on familiar ground. Before Jesus, this was the world they knew. After Jesus, it will remain the same. It is a dark consolation, but it is all they have as they make their way to anoint Jesus' body as it decays and returns to dust, like bodies always have and always will.

The practical problems inherent in their quest hit them as they near their destination. They remember the stone, the struggle Joseph had in rolling it into place. 'Who will roll away the stone?' they ask one another, knowing that none of them can. It is a simple, sober question on its face,

The Challenger

but Mark infuses it with layers of meaning. Beneath the obvious meaning lie deeper questions, the kind asked by anyone who has ever stood at a graveside and said goodbye to someone they love. 'Who will make this right? Who will challenge and conquer death? Who will end the hopelessness and make the world new? Who will make a world where death holds no sway, where life never ends?' Had they thought of the hidden meaning of their question, and perhaps they did, the women might have broken down entirely, for they knew they could do none of these things. Even the mightiest human beings lack the power to roll away the stone of death.

They arrive at the tomb just as the sun rises on a new day to see that the stone has already been rolled away. A thousand thoughts rush through their minds as they enter the tomb to see what has happened. They are immediately struck by the presence of a 'young man,' read 'angel,' in a robe of dazzling white. The air is electric with the presence of heaven and the power of God. The women quake. 'Don't be afraid!' the angel says. 'You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one. Well, guess what? He isn't here. He is risen!'

The women nearly faint. They remember Jesus' words, 'the Son of Man will be betrayed. He will be condemned to death by the religious leaders. He will be handed over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and crucify him. But after three days, he will rise again!'

'Oh my Lord!' the women think, 'can it be? Can it possibly be that Jesus is alive?' Hope, that 'thing with feathers that perches in the soul,' begins to rise within them.¹⁸⁰ 'Could it possibly be that with the coming

¹⁸⁰ Quotation from "Hope' is the thing with feathers," by Emily Dickinson.

The Challenger

of the sunrise, there is also the coming of a whole new world? Could that be what this means?’

Yes, ladies, that is exactly what this means. The one who was crucified has conquered death. The stone has been rolled away by the resurrecting power of God. And with the defeat of death comes the realization that true power does not lie with the empire. It does not lie with those who claim God’s power in the name of religion. It does not belong to the denizens of hell. Neither does it belong to the powerbrokers, the generals, the presidents, or the prime ministers. It belongs to the slaughtered Lamb. To the King who chose to serve rather than be served. To the lover who loved in the face of hate. To the warrior who challenged and overcame the world, not by means of a sword, but by means of a cross.

He, and he alone, has challenged and conquered death, and by doing so, has proven that his way is the way. For those who would follow him, there can be no other.

The women, of course, cannot articulate any of this at the moment. Not with the stunning news so fresh upon them, and certainly not in the presence of an angel. But they listen as the angel delivers the rest of his message, ‘Go and tell the others! And make sure you tell Peter! Jesus is going before you all into Galilee, back where it all began. That is where you will find him!’

The beauty of the announcement is overwhelming. Tell the others, yes, the ones who ran away. The ones who swore they would stand by Jesus and then didn’t. Tell Peter, the one who cursed and swore and denied his Lord. Their faithlessness is already forgiven by the one who is forever faithful. Everyone is invited to the new world that is breaking

The Challenger

upon the old. No one is left out. Come to Galilee and become a part of what Jesus does next!

Of course it will be in Galilee that they will find them. Far from the seat of imperial power or religious power, in the fringes of the empire, among the simple and the poor. That is where the disciples will find Jesus.

That is where we will find him too. Because it is in such places that the new world flourishes. That is where Jesus' revolution began, and that will always be where Jesus' revolution continues.

So what are you waiting for? Start the revolution. Pack your bags for Galilee. Jesus will be waiting there for you.

Thought to ponder: where might I go to find the risen Jesus today?

Mark 16:8

We Can be Heroes

They went out of the tomb running, trembling and out of sorts. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

We come to the end. 'But wait,' you say, 'that can't be the end. My Bible contains both a shorter and longer ending to Mark's Gospel that both follow verse eight. That has always confused me, but I was hoping you might explain it. And anyway, Mark couldn't have meant to end the Gospel in this way, could he?'

Whether Mark intended to end things in verse eight is a question for the ages. It is possible that there was once an ending that was lost, but then again, maybe not. My money is on the latter theory, for reasons that will become clear in a moment. If you disagree you can ask Mark yourself someday when you meet him. One thing, however, seems certain: Mark

The Challenger

did not write either of those shorter or longer endings. The earliest manuscripts do not contain them, and seriously, just read them. They're just not Mark's style. Just get a load of this phrase in the shorter ending: 'the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.' Does that sound like Mark? Not at all. Way too flowery and religious. And the longer ending, geez. At one point Jesus sounds like an angry religious dude, and at another like a snake handler. No, these were never part of the original Gospel. They are the work of some religious order trying to smooth over what they considered a rough ending, one that wound up inserting its own religious proclivities into the text in the process.

Mark seems to have meant to end things in verse eight, with the women trembling, out of sorts, and full of fear. That may seem a strange way to end the greatest story ever told but think about it. In our last entry, I suggested that as the women made their way to the tomb with their shattered dreams, the only consolation they had was that things would remain the same. The world they would know after Jesus would be the same as the one they knew before him. It was, as I said, a dark consolation, but at least there was stability in it. The world, cruel as it was, could be counted on to be cruel. There is some comfort in knowing that things will always happen in a certain way. You can depend upon the stability and plan accordingly. We all get used to our routines, even our pathological ones.

But with Jesus alive, well, so much for stability. So much for routine. The world was suddenly new and different. The familiar, gone. Life will have to be lived in a whole new way: Jesus' way! And if that doesn't shake you, if that doesn't leave you trembling and out of sorts and afraid, then, quite frankly, you haven't been paying attention to the story Mark has been telling. Because in a new world, we are all challenged to live Jesus' way, challenged to face down all the obstacles and resistance he faced. In

The Challenger

a new world, we who would follow Jesus have become the challengers, and that, my friends, is a frightening thought.

For the empire is still there. It goes by names other than Rome, but wherever you look, there it is. Religion is still there, entangling itself with empire, falling prey to its seductive dance. Satan and his demons are still there, pulling the strings behind the scenes. None of these powers have been defeated fully yet, nor will they be until the day Jesus returns in glory. And so, it is now our turn to face down the powers, to issue the challenges, to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus. It is our turn to take our places at his left and right. It is our turn to follow him, all the way, if need be, to Calvary.

I believe Mark ended his Gospel as he did to emphasize this final challenge of the Challenger. He wanted us to marinate in the suggestion that this road we walk is filled with danger. He did not want us to become, as so many contemporary Christians have, so thrilled with the thought of life beyond the grave that we forget the cross we have been called to carry.

So remember: your call is to be a challenger, to pick up where Jesus left off, and to keep going.

At the same time, Mark does announce the Resurrection. Just because he doesn't tell all the stories the other Gospel writers include in their accounts doesn't change that fact. Mark has announced that Jesus is alive! 'He is risen,' the angel said. This we dare not forget. For it is this fact, the fact of Resurrection, that enables us to carry our crosses with hope. For the God who raises the dead will forever accompany those who follow in the footsteps of the Challenger.

The Challenger

Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is a story of unrequited love set against the backdrop of the French Revolution. It's unlikely hero is Sydney Carton, a man of immeasurable talents who has squandered his potential in a life of dissolution and drunkenness. Sydney falls in love with Lucy Manette, but alas, Lucy loves another, Charles Darnay. In a strange quirk of fate, Sydney and Charles look exactly alike; you would swear they had been separated at birth. The climax of the story comes as Charles is unjustly convicted by a Parisian mob and sentenced to death at the guillotine. It is the moment when Sydney shines. Out of his great love for Lucy, he takes Charles' place and goes to his death on the scaffold to save the life of the one Lucy loves.

Most of us know Sydney's last words, even if we never read the novel: 'It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known.' The scene wherein Sydney stands on the scaffold reciting those words is among the best known in literature; what is less known is Dickens' description of Sydney's actions the night before he spoke them. He had spent that night wandering the streets of Paris, gathering up his courage, repeating to himself, over and over, words from John 11:25: 'I am the Resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' Modern versions of the story often leave this out, but Dickens made no bones about the fact that it was Sydney's belief in the Resurrection that gave him the courage to carry out his plan. Dickens' point is simple: love, combined with Resurrection faith, can turn ordinary people into heroes.

This is the message of the Gospel. That we, armed with Resurrection faith, can follow in the footsteps of the Challenger. We too can be heroes. We live in a world where Jesus has won, where the powers have been defeated. And the story is only begun. Mark began his Gospel with the

The Challenger

words, 'This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God.' It is only the beginning. Jesus is alive. He is still working in the lives of his followers. He will continue to so work until the day he comes again, and when he does, the forces of evil will be banished forever. The Gospel of Mark is the earthshattering Good News that the King has come, the King has conquered, and that we, his subjects, have been empowered to live and love in the strength of his way until he comes again.

This is our proclamation: the world has a new King.

Those who believe must now proclaim His Kingdom.

The Challenger

Thank you for reading *The Challenger*. I hope it enhances your understanding of Jesus, his mission, and the call to discipleship. If you liked this book, check out other titles of mine, including *Grace at the Threshold*, *The Dawn from on High* (an Advent devotional), *Royal Mistakes*, and *Deleting Jesus*. All are downloadable free e-books on my blog, [Stars Above Me](#) or can be purchased on Amazon in both Kindle and print format. Happy reading and God bless!

The Challenger

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Most of all, thank you Jesus, for challenging me to live a better way. You will forever be my King.

The Challenger

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The Challenger

About the Author

Brent David Miller is Senior Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. Before going to seminary, Brent was an attorney and spent several years as a prosecutor. His goal in life is to share with as many people as possible the Good News that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and limitlessly, and that He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. Brent currently lives in Collingswood, New Jersey with his wife Megen, daughter Kaeleigh, and son Caleb. You can follow Brent's blog, *Stars Above Me* at www.thestarsaboveme.com.

If you ever find yourself in the Collingswood area, Brent is always ready to hang out in a local coffee shop and talk about Jesus.

The Challenger

Also by Brent David Miller

***Grace at the Threshold: Reflections on
Salvation, Hope and the Love of God***

The Bible teaches that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Many believe this means that if a person does not accept Christ before death, they are lost forever. Others believe there may be opportunities for repentance after death. Still others contend that, in the end, all will be saved. *Grace at the Threshold* explores these possibilities in a series of reflections on the means of salvation, the nature of the Christian hope and the relentless pursuit of a God who never gives up. The result is an outside the box take on the possibilities of grace that will lead you into a deeper understanding of both the love of God and the necessity for a relationship with Jesus. If you have ever wondered how far God is willing to go to save the lost, *Grace at the Threshold* is for you.

***The Dawn from on High: Advent through
the Eyes of Those Who Were There***

Advent is the story of God becoming human, the most mind-blowing event in the history of the universe. In *The Dawn from On High* you will hear the story from the perspective of eyewitnesses, specifically Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, a Shepherd, Simeon, Anna, Herod, and Gabriel. These dramatic pieces are ideal for personal reflection, meditation, or preaching. You will experience the Christmas story in a whole new way: through the eyes of those who were there.

The Challenger

Royal Mistakes: Life Lessons from Some Seriously Messed up Judean Kings

Explore the blunders of Biblical kings with stories that will leave you shaking your head at just how foolish people can be. This collection of Biblical tales offers both an illuminating Bible study and a profound warning. *Royal Mistakes* provides a treasure trove of learning to help you avoid behaviors and decisions that will only bring heartache to you and the ones you love. Sit back, settle in, and take a journey through an ancient time when kings ruled, and folly was the order of the day.

Deleting Jesus: Recovering Discipleship in the Wake of 2016

If you ask people what ‘Christian’ means, you may hear troublesome words like bigoted, fearful, and hypocritical. Too many have cultivated this image for too long. The situation was hardly improved by the 2016 Presidential Election, when many supposed Jesus followers made a Faustian bargain for power in exchange for their reputations and souls, a bargain that has, tragically, been kept. This has only exacerbated confusion regarding who Christians are and who Jesus is. *Deleting Jesus* contrasts the Christianity of the early Church with the counterfeit version so prevalent today and issues a call to follow the radical and loving way of Christ. Whether you are a believer stuck in the trenches of pop Christianity or a non-believer confused by the antics of Christians around you, prepare to have your perspective rocked. Prepare to discover the real Jesus.

All of Brent’s Books are available for free download at www.thestarsaboveme.com, or for purchase in Kindle or Print format on Amazon.