

# Chapter Two

## Part One: The Parable of Jesus

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
Mark 1.1

The angel said to the women at the tomb: “Don’t be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone.  
Mark 16.6-8

### An Experiment

In 2008, I quietly started an experiment.

Recently back from a summer in Malawi, Africa, nothing felt right. My preaching tasted stale in my mouth. I considered exploring a different style of preaching; I pondered looking for a new voice. In the end, I took a much more modest step. I put aside the Revised Common Lectionary and began the discipline of “*lectio continua*.”

Although not a bold leap, the modest step truly changed my life. *Lectio continua* is the practice of preaching through a book, gospel, letter, prophet from beginning to end. I started with Matthew 1. It took me three and a half years to reach Matthew 28.

*Lectio continua* began as a quiet experiment as I told no one what I was doing. Each Sunday, though, I would say the same thing just before the sermon: today’s second lesson comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Three years into the experiment I offered a concern. We were heading into the “passion,” the events in the gospel between Palm Sunday and Easter. These are some dark passages. There is the cursing of the fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, the warning of persecutions to come, the betrayal, arrest, beating, and trial of Jesus. Preaching through this

piece by piece was a six-month journey. My concern I expressed to the congregation was simple: this may get way too dark. Six months of sermons about beatings and scourgings?

The response of the congregation was very interesting. Many, many people said, “I had no idea you were doing this.” A part of me liked the fact that my quiet experiment hadn’t felt imposed upon them. They didn’t even know it was happening. The other common response was: we have to finish this. There were people in the congregation who had begun the journey and were hooked.

I too was hooked. Preaching through the gospel of Matthew changed not only my preaching, it also changed me. I truly felt born anew. As we walked through the passion and its darkness, the journey continued and the darkness didn’t prevail. Many people came to me during those months and said, “I had no idea this was part of the Bible. They too were feeling awakened to new possibilities and new insights.

When the experiment reached its conclusion, I emerged with a couple of key insights. The first was that the Revised Common Lectionary was the important work of the Roman Catholic Church to aid congregants in the receiving of the host in the Holy Eucharist of the Mass. It was developed in the 1960s as part of Vatican II. The Revised Common Lectionary was adopted for voluntary use by Mainline Protestant denominations as a means of building solidarity and momentum for a new ecumenical church. The first key insight was that the Revised Common Lectionary was not designed or adopted for preaching the gospel in a Protestant congregation.

The second key insight was this: with the way the Revised Common Lectionary broke up the teachings of the four gospels, there is no coherent voice of any one gospel in preaching. Not only does the Revised Common Lectionary have little in the way of narrative flow (beginning to end), but there is also no way to truly appreciate how the different parts of each gospel impact a particular teaching.

In Seminary I was given the good advice of “looking around” a preaching passage in the Revised Common Lectionary. This is good advice. What comes before and after a particular text is revealing. But I can tell as I finish a decade of *lectio continua* that “looking around” a passage in a gospel is nothing compared to preaching the dozen pieces, the twenty pieces, the fifty pieces, the hundred piece that precede it. Truly, this is the great gift of preaching through a gospel. You begin to see the intricate, delicate fabric the evangelist has woven to form a gospel. The Revised Common Lectionary tries to make a patchwork quilt out of tapestry.

As I write this chapter, my quiet experiment is nearing a conclusion. What began in 2008 is now nearly complete. In December of 2019, I will have preached Matthew, Luke, and Mark in that order. Although there was one year in this decade where I preached through 1Corinthians, all other sermons were from the synoptic gospels. There is a bit of trepidation as I write this. What will the three of them look like in the end of 10 years of devotion? Yet, my trepidation is buoyed by a great promise: begin again.

## Synoptic Means to See Together

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic” gospels. Synoptic is from the Greek words syn (with) and optic (see). The tradition is that they are so common, they share so much similarity, that they can be seen as three variations of a similar theme. You can also think of it as the way different authors have interpreted a similar story, the way a play has different directors or productions. Yet, the best way to see them together is to see a common pattern. The pattern is this:

1. Baptism/Temptation of Jesus
2. Ministry in Galilee and the Northern Region
3. The transfiguration
4. A journey south to Judea for passover
5. The last supper, the garden prayer, the arrest, the trial and crucifixion of Jesus
6. The resurrection

Although John has many pieces in this pattern, he has a pattern that is unique to him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow these steps. True, they are variations inside each of the six parts, but there are no omissions, and each keeps to this order.

As we begin the next phase of our project and turn from the cosmic gospel of Paul that leaps from birth to death, we can see a profound change even in this basic outline of what the gospels convey. Where Paul never mentions the ministry and events of Jesus’ life, except for the last three days of his life, Matthew, Mark and Luke will describe three years. Where Paul spoke almost entirely about Jesus, the synoptic gospel will offer the life and teachings of Jesus.

There is another significant pattern in the synoptics. Indeed they each describe the three years of Jesus’ ministry, but the three years are not equally described. Each of the synoptics has a description of Jesus’ life and ministry from baptism until he reaches Jericho in the southern region of Judea. In the three years there are many parables recorded, many stories of healings, miracles, and controversies. Jesus and the disciples walk through the region of Galilee and in the adjacent regions. And then, each of the synoptics goes into a day by day account of the last week of Jesus life.

Maybe this will help.

- Mark 1-19 covers the three years in Galilee; 11-16 is a description of the passion week.
- Matthew 3-21 covers the years in Galilee; 21-28 is passion week.
- Luke 3-9 covers the years of Galilee; 19-24- passion week.

There is a lot of description of one week when compared to three years. As I mentioned above, many congregants expressed surprise over the passages in the passion week. The reason for this, and one of the chief benefits of lectio continua, is that Revised Common Lectionary brings these passages as a preaching option in Holy Week. In essence you are supposed to read the

chapters in each synoptic gospel every year, during one week, in the services very few people attend. In essence what the gospels writers thought was the most important in terms of describing the life and death of Jesus is essentially omitted from preaching.

### The Synoptics as Seen Apart

Having spent a number of years with each of the three synoptic gospels, preaching them piece by piece, I am very aware of their commonalities, but I am truly inspired by their differences.

In coming chapters we will explore each one in depth, but here is a quick snapshot of what makes each of them unique.

Matthew is gospel told through a sermon. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is retold, recast, revealed in the stories of Jesus's life. Each piece of Matthew begins and ends in the sermon. The basis for this unique quality is the rabbinic tradition of verifying a teaching. A teacher gives a lesson, but the verification of that lesson is found in the teacher's life.

Luke embodies the Greek tradition of the walking teacher. Jesus is always on the move in Luke. His gospel is built around a long walk through Samaria (Luke 9-19) where Jesus is walking through spiritual and religious "no-man's land". Even the end of Luke describes Jesus walking (Emmaus).

Mark is often described as walking up a mountain (Mt. Tabor in chapter 9) where the transfiguration happens and then walking down that mountain to the crucifixion and resurrection. The transfiguration is a true middle where all is drawn to and then moved away from.

While each of the synoptic gospels share many, many stories in common, even identical in their wording, they each have singular stories and omissions. Jesus doesn't walk on the water in Luke; Matthew and Mark have Jesus shout, "my God, my God why have you abandoned me" from the cross, where Luke depicts Jesus as comforting others from the cross.

Perhaps the most significant difference is in the parables. Mark contains four parables of Jesus. Combined Matthew and Luke have more than thirty. This is a big difference. This imbalance of parables though is the key to understanding Mark's gospel to which we will now turn for the remainder of the chapter.

### Indirect Communication

In 2001 I was completing my doctoral studies. My area of inquiry was all things death and dying for three years. I read far and wide- from Hiedegger to Tolstoy with a whole lot in between. My work moved from the broad "flood light" of death to the highly focused "candle light" of eulogies in Presbyterian funerals.

At this point in my research I needed people to talk to me about funerals. What happened to you in the funeral of your father? What was a comfort in the funeral of your daughter? People were happy to talk to me even if the topic was not a happy one. Folks trusted me and were obviously a source of profound insights from the experiences of loss. Yet, the direct questions fell completely flat. "It was good; the funeral was a comfort." This was the extent of most responses. I spoke to many people and struck out big time.

Needing much more than this, I decided to take an indirect approach. I wrote a novella about a son, Peter, who is called in to help his dying father. The story explored issues like caregiving for people who don't always care for you; there was a theme of being immersed in brokenness and not being able to escape. Each chapter was a description of the path that many children walk with a parent as he or she dies.

Each week I gave a new chapter to an adult Sunday School class. Before I serialized the novella, I spent a few weeks going over different theories of grief and loss. We explored the development of burial practices as well as the philosophical and biblical views of death. In the weeks before the novella, there was stilted and halting conversation. Somehow speaking directly about death was as difficult as speaking directly about funerals.

On the first week we discussed the novella this completely changed. I could not get people to stop talking. They spoke over each other, raised their hands to get a turn to speak, waxed long and poetic about their experience or the experience of a spouse or child. What was amazing was that this freedom persisted. Week after week they talked and wept and laughed.

The novella's question was simple: is it important for the deceased to be known, to be remembered authentically in a funeral? When I asked this question directly before the novella, I received affirmative responses. But generally there were caveats like: pastors can't always know the people they bury; sometimes people outlive all their friends. With the novella, though, there was not only affirmation, there was also a clear reason for authenticity. The deceased is present in the funeral if a eulogy is given that is true and compassionate. For weeks this explanation grew and grew. Having done funerals for quite some time after my studies were completed, I can affirm that the basic theory is still true and yields a particular healing. Presence of the deceased in a eulogy eases the weight of loss in the bereaved.

Imbedded in this experience about death and dying was a great lesson about communication. There is a type of power and use and practical limitation to direct communication ("tell me about the funeral?") and there is a type of power and use and practical limitation to indirect communication ("Peter wept when his father died. He was surprised by the relief of tears.")

There are times when direct communication is not only more appropriate, it is a matter of life and death. A surgeon in an emergency room operating on a gunshot victim does not speak in riddles about what sort of scalpel is needed next. Such is not a moment for a story or a parable or cryptic sayings about fig trees or barns.

From my experience, though, what happens to you in a funeral is not best explored with direct questions. Here is the time for parables and stories and anecdotes. In this context comedy and tragedy provide the leverage to open the heart, to hear the soul, to lower the defenses guarding painful memories. In a story there is room to move, to speak in whispers, to be as ambiguous as the characters unfolding a tale.

Our working theory for this project is very close to what I experienced with the Sunday School class. Our theory is that the letters of Paul represent one way of speaking about Jesus. This manner of speaking was very cosmic; it focused almost entirely on the death and resurrection of Jesus and left aside any description of his life. At the end of Paul's generation, another way of speaking came to the fore: the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

If you take a letter like Paul's theological tour de force offered to the Romans, if you put this next to the Sermon on the Mount as found in the Gospel of Matthew, then the difference should leap out. In Romans, Paul is communicating with a direct address. Paul is talking about Jesus Christ directly to the church at Rome. He is speaking bluntly and forcefully. Mostly, though, he is speaking without poetry or story.

In other letters Paul does offer brief accounts that can be considered stories. For example, he offers a brief autobiography that served as a resume. Yet, his letters have no parables, no accounts from the life of Jesus. He speaks a great deal about the cross, but he doesn't really describe the crucifixion. Paul never describes the dialogue of the criminals who hung beside Jesus; it was as if Jesus were the only one being crucified.

This is not meant as a critique of Paul. I do not consider his direct speech and lack of narrative as a weakness. Paul is much like the surgeon trying to save someone's life and calling out, "scalpel." There is a great urgency to his letters and his ministry. A slow ponderous description of Jesus walking around Samaria such as Luke offers would have been completely inconsistent with his "calling."

In the two quotes above we have Mark's nod to the Apostle's creed. Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus was crucified but he was raised. This the beginning and end of his gospel. These two pieces in Paul's letters are the extent of the life of Jesus. Yet, in Mark these two pieces are just the frame. The gospel Mark offers is framed by these words, but the substance comes in between. These two pieces have more than 90 in between them. What Paul leaps over, Mark enters.

One way to look at the transition from the first generation of the bible to the second is that Mark fills in the leap of Paul from birth to death with stories, controversies, friendships, betrayal, parables, healings, feedings, cures, and much, much more. His gospel is what is missing in the ellipsis: Born . . . crucified.

One of the greatest questions of biblical scholarship is: why did Mark fill in the leap? If we follow Paul's lead and no longer consider Jesus from a human standpoint, Mark's work is not really necessary or helpful even. It would be as if a teacher said, we are no longer going to write poetry and then handed out a book of poems for everyone to read. Mark not only presents Jesus from a human standpoint, he does so almost too much.

What is more, his presentation, how he describes Jesus and his ministry, is indirect. He doesn't talk about Jesus so much as he presents a narrative (story) of Jesus. Paul writes down bits and pieces from his life, he refers to people in the Old Testament (Adam, Abraham, David), yet, his writing is not of them, but about them. Paul uses them as examples or makes his argument with a point about someone. Mark's point is not as clear as Paul's. Why does Jesus only explain one parable in the Gospel of Mark? Why does he tell the demons to be quiet when they call him "Holy One?" All of Paul's letters are an explanation; all of his letters are an identification of Jesus as the Son of God. Mark says so as a title, but then not so much.

To say that Mark tells a story (indirect communication) where Paul makes an argument (direct communication) is helpful if we were taking a course on literary form, but what does it mean if you want to understand your faith? How does this help us understand the truth of the Bible and does this understanding help us live a life born anew in Jesus Christ?

### Parables and the Parabolic Life

In this chapter I am proposing a bit of a novel answer to the question just posed. The novel proposition is this: Jesus taught in parables to proclaim the kingdom of God and teach meekness; in Mark, Jesus's life and the life of Peter become parables. The gospel is the good news Jesus gave to the people. The gospel is not a literary form like a poem or an essay or a novel. Mark's gospel (his good news about Jesus) is in two parts. The first is the life of Jesus from his baptism to his transfiguration as he reveals himself to his disciples. The second is the life of Jesus from the transfiguration to the resurrection scene and how his disciples understand this revelation. The climax of the first part is the transfiguration; the climax of the second part is the denial of Peter.

Scholars have long divided Mark up into two parts (before and after the transfiguration). My proposition is that we not only follow suit with this division, but we recognize that the first part can be read as a long parable about Jesus and the second one can be read as a long parable about Peter.

A parable is a saying or story wherein we find a truth to live by. A parable is not a riddle, nor is it witty saying. The parables of Jesus are roughly 32 depending upon how you count them. Mark records four parables of Jesus; Matthew has 18; and Luke has 20. There are three parables they all record: the parables of the sower, the mustard seed, and the wicked tenants. There are a series of parables that Matthew and Luke both record as there are parables that are unique to each gospel.

Jesus taught “only in parables.” In a latter chapter we will explore the parables Jesus taught. There we will look to them as a whole and how they have a single message. You may abide in the kingdom of God if you abide in humility. Here, though, we are looking to the possibility that the way Mark gathered the stories of Jesus has a parabolic quality. The healings, the miracles the teachings the controversies: each of them has a meaning and a lesson. Yet, how Mark put them together, pieced them together, has a meaning and a lesson as well. More importantly, understanding what Mark offered to us will change how we read his gospel.

## The Parable of Jesus

The Gospel of Mark has long been identified with the “messianic secret.” Jesus is identified by a demon as “the Holy One” and Jesus tells the demon to be silent. After Jesus is transfigured, he tells his disciples to “tell no one.” There a number of other instances where Jesus is identified as powerful, as the messiah, as the one who casts out demons and each time he says, “tell no one.”

The most dramatic instance is the healing of the daughter of a synagogue leader, Jarius. Listen to the end of the story where Jesus brings the girl back to life.

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, ‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. Mark 5

“No one should know this.” This is the “messianic secret” at its heart. Jesus does an amazing thing and people are not supposed to talk about, let alone identify him as the one who brings such miracles to the hurting.

There are different theories regarding the secret. The most common is that if people really knew who Jesus was, then he would have had no ability to teach. He would have become a miracle machine. Well, that happened anyway and yet he persisted in the demand for secrecy. The other common explanation is that the true proof of him being the Messiah was yet to

come. The cross and the resurrection would be the true witness of his identity and being. All he did and lived could be reimagined in the light of Easter.

These are very practical theories. Yet, neither of them come close to the basic question we are raising here: why did Mark write his gospel? Here is my theory. By the time of Mark the claims about Jesus had reached rather lofty heights. The cosmic gospel of Paul reigned supreme (and still does). Mark brings this down. He does not deny Jesus is “Christ”, nor does he omit the transfiguration where we see a very cosmic Jesus. Yet where Paul was “proclaiming” the lordship and power of Jesus Christ, Mark records Jesus as saying, keep this on the down low.

Listen to the story of the transfiguration:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. Mark 9

This is a very cosmic moment. Yet, Jesus will instruct the three, “tell no one until after the Son of man had risen from the dead.” Again, this is a passage that usually gives credence to the theory that the resurrection would clear up the secrets. I would argue his instruction is part of the parabolic quality of Mark’s gospel. If Paul was rushing from birth to death, Jesus is instructing his disciples to make no proclamations until they had finished the journey of his life. In other words, the truth of this event, transfiguration, is found after you have walked his life. Read the gospel through; don’t jump over the life of Jesus.

Jesus’ demand for silence could have been a practical need for freedom. It could have been a theological necessity: only the resurrection could cast light on Jesus as the Son of God. Both are plausible, but what if Mark wrote his gospel to say, “wait, all the cosmic claims about Jesus may not be the point of his life.” What if Mark’s second generation effort was to say, “we need to abide with the life of Jesus before we make any more claims about the death of Jesus.”

It is in this way that Mark becomes a parable of sorts. It is as if his gospel was written to challenge the confidence of the cosmic Jesus by reintroducing the church to the Jesus of Galilee. In Mark Jesus is testy, short, angry, frustrated. In Mark he cries out as one abandoned; he says, “how much longer will I have to put up with this generation.” These are not the type of images Paul used to describe Jesus Christ.

A parable is moment to find the humility to learn truth anew and cast aside a false understanding. A parable is a confrontation; usually there is a confrontation of a false

confidence. What if the very way in which Mark ordered and put forth his gospel was to challenge the confidence “about Jesus” with the life and teachings “of Jesus?”

In the next part of this chapter we will go through the significant moments where the disciples, especially Peter, had false confidence. Throughout the gospel of Mark, the disciples are very prone to mistakes. Nowhere is this clearer than in the denial of Peter.