



GOOD POWER

A Thematic
Study
Of the
Gospel
Of Mark

By Darren Cushman Wood

Lent 2021

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Introduction

John the Baptist referred to Jesus as “the stronger one” (1:7). The crowds were amazed by how Jesus taught with authority that commanded control over unclean spirits and illnesses. The disciples witnessed his power to control storms at sea and to feed thousands of people. Mark’s portrait of Jesus is a powerful Messiah who ushers in God’s new era (the kingdom of God) of life-giving, liberating power. It is a gospel of good power.

In this study we will explore different themes of good power in the Gospel of Mark. Each session will take a close look at how this good power transforms our lives today. Each session offers the reader a daily reading and reflection question, and a weekly spiritual practice based on the theme of the session.

Overview of The Gospel of Mark

Before we look at the themes, it is important to understand the background of Mark’s Gospel.

There have been various theories about the date and original location of the Gospel. The most widely accepted belief is that it was written between 60 and 70 c.e. for churches in Rome. The frequent references to hardship and persecution (e.g. 4:5-6, 16-17; 13:9-13) reflect a church experiencing persecution. In 64 c.e. Emperor Nero blamed the great fire of Rome on Christian arsonists. Another theory says that Mark was written in Palestine soon after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple during the First Jewish

War (66-73 c.e.). The original readers were believers who had escaped the destruction and were expecting Jesus's return in Galilee. Both theories read Mark as a response to collective trauma and the role of Christian faith.

Until the 19th century the other Gospels received more attention. Early church leaders such as Augustine believed Mark was based on Matthew. The first commentary was probably written in the 7th century by an Irish monk, and little else was written about Mark until much later.

With the advent of modern scholarship, the Gospel of Mark takes center stage. In the 19th century scholars came to see Mark as the earliest Gospel that was the outline for Matthew and Luke. They developed the "two source" hypothesis which claims that Matthew and Luke draw from Mark and another hypothetical source of Jesus's sayings that they call Q (for "quelle," the German word "source").

When Matthew and Luke tell the same stories found in Mark they make changes and additions that often expand upon Mark's briefer versions. They tend to soften the more realistic aspects of Mark's descriptions of Jesus with loftier characteristics, and they tend to minimize Mark's negative portrayals of the disciples. When reading Mark it is useful to compare and contrast how the different versions of a story are told in another Gospel.

Our approach to Mark will pay close attention to its literary features with an eye to its sociopolitical background. Mark is a master storyteller who uses several techniques. Watch for:

- **Vivid details** — Mark writes with a "you are there" flare. Often the verb tense is in the present, not past (e.g. in the original Greek, 16:4 reads "they see that the stone" is rolled away). There are graphic details in stories such as the healing

of the Gerasene demoniac and Jairus's daughter (5:1-24, 35-43). Jesus is portrayed with a full range of human emotions such as compassion (1:42), amazement at unbelief (6:6), anger (10:4), and love (10:21).

- **Rapid action** — Mark loves using "immediately" to describe the pace of the story. He uses it 42 times. (Matthew uses it seven times and Luke only once.)

- **Repetition** — We see this literary technical device several ways. Sometimes the author uses a key word to establish a thread throughout the Gospel, such as "authority" (1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28-33). Other times a phrase is repeated to call attention to important materials, such as "appointed the 12" in 3:14 and 16. We see repetitive descriptions like "the day of preparation, that is the day before the Sabbath" in 15:42.

- **Framing** — Large segments are often sandwiched by a similar location or event to highlight the unity of the stories in that segment. For example, the city of Capernaum is the starting and ending point for his ministry circuit that grows his popularity from 1:21 to 2:1. Two stories of healing blind men frame an important series of stories and sayings by Jesus that teach the disciples his identity and mission before they go to Jerusalem (8:22-26 and 10:46-52).

- **Patterns** — Mark likes patterns. One type of pattern is a chiasm (the words or phrases are put together in reverse order or a modified form) such as ABB'A' in 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath." Mark likes threefold patterns that progressively heighten the event: three calls of the disciples (1:16-20); three predictions of crucifixion (8:31, 9:1, 10:33-34); Jesus came to the disciples three times in the garden (14:32-42), and Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66-72).

- **Foreshadowing events** — Mark uses events to telegraph

what will happen, such as the “handing over” of John the Baptist (1:14, 6:14-29) and then Jesus (14:1-11).

• **Mounting tensions** — As the plot develops the conflicts increase between Jesus and his critics. In the first half of the Gospel, Jesus often prohibits people from talking about his miracles. This is known as the “messianic secret,” which is a unique feature of Mark (e.g. 1:44, 5:43, 7:36). Keeping his identity a secret heightens the question about his identity, which culminates with an answer by the centurion at the cross (15:39).

The fascinating literary features of Mark serve a spiritual purpose. The reader is drawn into the drama that reveals the true nature of Jesus as the Messiah, son of man and son of God. Understanding the way Mark was composed deepens our prayerful reception of the truth of the Gospel for our lives today.

We become a part of the story alongside the disciples. The word “disciple” (Greek, *mathētēs*, from the verb “to learn”) appears 46 times. The words “follow” and “sent out” (Greek, *apostellein*, from which we get the word “apostle”) are also descriptive of discipleship in Mark. Every major section begins with a story or saying about discipleship (see 1:16-21, 3:13-19, 8:27-9:1, 11:1-11 and 14:1-11). As we read and pray our way through Mark we learn how to become more faithful followers of Jesus.

Ash Wednesday

Feb. 17

“Lord, who throughout these 40 days for us didst fast and pray, teach us with thee to mourn our sins and close by thee to stay.”

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Lent is 40 days (not counting the Sundays) of preparation for the celebration of Easter. In the early church it was a period of fasting and penance for converts who were baptized during the Easter vigil. It has always been a season of repentance for all Christians.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a sign of mortality and repentance. Traditionally the palm branches of the previous Palm Sunday were burned to produce the ashes.

Repentance is a key part of Jesus’s first sermon in Mark’s Gospel, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news (1:15).”

On Ash Wednesday we repent of our sins. The Greek word originally meant “to change one’s thinking,” but it includes a total reorientation of one’s life. To repent means both to turn away from the old but also to embrace the new hope of the “kingdom of God.” Think of Ash Wednesday and our study of Mark as a process of reorienting our thinking and acting to the good power of Jesus.

Between Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent, read the entire Gospel. Read it like a novel so you can get a feel for the overall flow of the narration. Do not try to analyze it or get bogged down in one story. Begin your reading with this prayer for illumination:

*Spirit of truth, as I read the scriptures,
Revive my spirit,*

*reshape my mind,
and reform my habits,
with the life of Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen.*

If you are reading it in sections, follow this outline:

- 1:1-13—Beginnings;
- 1:14-8:21—Jesus’s ministry in Galilee;
- 8:22-10:52—Jesus prepares the disciples for his crucifixion;
- 11:1-13, 37—Jesus’s ministry in Jerusalem;
- 14:1-15, 47—The trial and crucifixion, and
- 16:1-20—The resurrection.

Watch for the literary features that are described in the introduction. Listen for the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the drama. What sticks out to you?

Lent Week One – The Power to Embrace Week of Feb. 21

INTRODUCTION

When I first came to faith in high school I quickly became the leader of a student fellowship group. It was not difficult to acquire the role because no one wanted to be associated with this group. The fellowship group was not the popular athletes or the valedictorian. It was the misfits of the school; no one wanted to be seen at their table in the lunchroom. To be honest, I was a bit embarrassed to be with them, given the normal social pressures of adolescents. But my new-found faith forced me to deal with my prejudices. If I was a true follower of Jesus, then how could I reject my brothers and sisters in Christ? It was a lesson that deeply shaped how I would see the church and how I live today. The church is misfits of the Messiah.

Jesus spent his time with the misfits of Palestine. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus enacted the realm of God with those that society had forgotten or scorned. He demonstrated the power of God’s love to embrace all of us.

We see it at Levi’s dinner table. Levi was a tax collector. In Jesus’s time a wide variety of taxes and tolls were imposed on residents and travelers. There were trade routes that ran through Capernaum from Damascus to Caesarea Maritima. Galilee, the territory west of the Sea of Galilee, was not under direct Roman control, and these taxes and tolls went to Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), the tetrarch who governed the region. The people were also subject to the half-shekel tax that went to the Temple in

Jerusalem, which was controlled by the high priests. Tax collectors were under Herod Antipas's supervision as minor employees of the royal court. In ancient literature they were often lumped together with robbers, murderers and sinners. "Sinners" were anyone who live outside the law.

We see it in Jesus's encounter with children. The children in chapter 10 were infants up to age 12. Disciples tried to reject them based on their lack of power and influence. Mark's point is that the children are persons of non-status in society. Jesus placed such a priority on embracing them that he got angry at the disciples for rejecting them. He took them in his arms (Greek, *enagkalizesthai*, means "to embrace" and is only used in 9:36), and his embrace included his blessing, which is a gesture of approval and the transfer of power to them.

We see it at the banquet before he enters the capital city, Jerusalem, which began the final phase of his ministry. The host is a former reject of society, Simon the Leper. The only person giving Jesus his due honor is another rejected person, a woman.

In all these ways he is redefining who is his true family with these acts of radical inclusion. The true family of God are those who follow his example.

Even Jesus was challenged to follow through to the logical conclusion of his practice of embracing others.

The Syrophenician mother expanded his practice of inclusion in a passage that has perplexed many readers.

Some background is helpful in understanding their encounter. Jesus has left the Jewish region of Galilee and is in the region of Tyre. Tyre was an ancient Phoenician city with a mixed population. According to the ancient writer Josephus, residents of Tyre were bitter enemies of the Jews, and at the outbreak of the Jewish War (66 c.e.), Tyrians killed

and imprisoned many Jews.

Jesus has entered a hostile territory and is speaking to a woman who is part of a hostile people. The Greek word for woman (*de gynē*) may indicate that she was a woman of high social status. Later in Christian tradition she is known as Justa, and her daughter is Berenice. She expressed faith in Jesus by bowing down at his feet and assuming that he had an abundance of power that could be used to heal a Gentile without taking anything away from his ministry to the Jews. She demonstrated that faith in Christ transcends the boundaries of geography, ethnicity, and status.

This week we explore the power to embrace one another in the name of Jesus.

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Read Mark 2:13-17

Why did Jesus eat dinner with sinners and tax collectors?

What is the difference between tolerance and affirmation? Is Jesus demonstrating tolerance or affirmation?

Monday—Read Mark 1:9-15

How is Jesus's baptism a symbol of his embrace of the human condition?

At this baptism, Jesus heard, "You are my Son, the beloved: with you I am well pleased." Since we are baptized in the name of Jesus, we are given God's affirmation too. What makes it difficult for you to receive that affirmation?

Tuesday—Mark 1:32-39

How did Jesus's ministry bring people together?

What do we have in common with our fellow church members?

Wednesday—Read Mark 3:31-35

Who is part of Jesus's family?

How can we make the church a spiritual family with Jesus at the center?

Thursday—Read Mark 7:24-30

How does the Syrophenician mother challenge and expand Jesus's understanding of God's mission?

What makes it hard to embrace other people?

Friday—Mark 9:33-7 and 10:13-16

What is the relationship between Jesus and children?

How should we treat vulnerable people?

Saturday—Mark 12:38-40

What are the differences between Jesus's relationships and the scribes' relationships with other people?

How is the integrity of faith leaders expressed in their

treatment of others?

This Week's Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

Throughout Lent we will be praying for the Umoja Partnership (UP), which is one of our key mission priorities at North Church. Beginning with a vision for outreach in 2006, Ellen Daniels-Howell and leaders of 10 congregations began the UP in 2007 to help children in Chulaimbo, Kenya who had lost one or both parents to stay in school. "Umoja" means unity in Kiswahili, and the UP is a collaboration of Americans and Kenyans working together to provide children with resources and relationships that will empower them to thrive.

This week we will pray for food security. The school lunch program is the cornerstone for primary school students to stay in school. The UP provides lunch for 3,600 children at 20 primary schools, including 120 child-headed households. In 2020 the food security program provided support to the entire family while schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This week as you pray, read the stories and learn the facts about the UP by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

Our Easter offering this year will go to support the UP. Please give generously.

Lent Week Two – The Power to Heal Week of Feb. 28

INTRODUCTION

Curiosity got the best of my friend Charlie and me when W.V. Grant came to town. Grant was a televangelist operating out of Ohio who held a series of faith-healing services in Indianapolis. We were rightly skeptical when we walked into the Convention Center hall and sat in the back corner. On the stage was Grant, two assistants, and a line of would-be infirmed believers. One by one he took them by the hand and listened to their diagnoses before healing them. He stuck his fingers in ears, rubbed shoulders and legs, and smacked quite a few foreheads as he shouted the demons of diseases out of them.

My favorite was the guy who claimed to have one leg shorter than the other. Grant took him by the foot and miraculously pulled it even with the longer leg.

After that came the offering, during which he claimed that the Lord told him that there were 20 people whom the Holy Spirit was calling to put a hundred dollars in the offering plate. Charlie and I agreed that he was not speaking about us and we promptly left.

When we read the healing stories in Mark, such charlatans immediately come to mind. This week we explore the different dimensions of Jesus's healing power. There are over 200 verses devoted to miracles in this Gospel, and they comprise nearly half of the Gospel before his ministry in Jerusalem. They demonstrate that Jesus is the stronger one that John foretold.

Four miracles are exorcisms (1:21-28, 5:1-20, 7:24-30 and 9:14-29) and nine are other kinds of healings (1:29-31; 1:40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-5; 5:21-24a, 35-43; 5:24b-34; 7:31-37; 8:22-26 and 10:46-52).

Sometimes the healing is a result of one's faith (the four friends in 2:5; the hemorrhaging woman in 5:34; Bartimaeus in 10:52; the father in 9:24, and it is implied in the Syrophenician woman's words and actions in 7:25, 27), but at other times faith plays no role in the story.

Sometimes Jesus makes a pronouncement (for example, the leper in 1:41), but other times the healing just happens (the Syrophenician's daughter in 7:29-30). Sometimes Jesus does something (spitting and making mud in 7:33; saliva in the eyes and laid hands on him in 8:23), but sometimes Jesus does not touch the person.

The common thread through all the stories is the demonstration of power.

Watch for the ways Jesus restores relationships and repairs the mind and the heart as well as the body. Keep in mind as you read that the Greek word "to heal" (sōzō) can also mean "to save."

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Mark 2:1-12

There are different kinds of healing: physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. Beyond physical restoration, what kinds of healing did this man experience?

When have you helped someone find healing?

Monday—Mark 3:1-6

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Why did the Pharisees and Herodians react to Jesus's miracle?

When have you seen Christianity used to harm people?

Tuesday—Mark 5:1-20

What does the unclean spirit call Jesus? What is the spirit called?

Go beyond a literal reading and consider what kinds of "unclean spirits" do we see today? What does it mean to be healed of them?

Wednesday—Mark 5:21-43

Why does Mark put these two stories together?

How is the woman an example of faith for you?

Thursday—Mark 7:31-37

Why does Jesus command them not to tell anyone about the healing?

Do you believe God heals people today?

Friday—Mark 8:22-26

In the healing of the blind man it takes two attempts for the healing to be successful. How is healing for us a process that takes time?

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How might the healing stories in Mark be misused in ways that could hurt persons with disabilities today?

Saturday—Mark 10:46-52

How does Bartimaeus express his faith? How does he expand our understanding of faith?

Why doesn't God heal all people who sincerely pray for it?

This Week's Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

This week's prayers for the Umoja Partnership (UP) focus on school services. In addition to the school lunch program, the UP provides other services to help retain and further students' advancement. Each year it provides tuition scholarships to over 150 high school students. It also provides school uniforms and school supplies for primary school students; sanitary towels for adolescent girls, which allows them to attend school regularly; blankets, and solar lamps so they can study after dark.

This week as you pray, read the stories and learn the facts about the UP by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

Our Easter offering this year will go to support the UP. Please give generously.

Lent Week Three— The Power to Grow Week of March 7

INTRODUCTION

I have invasive plants in my garden that are a nuisance. Our house was built in 1910 with an adjacent sun garden and reflection pool. But after 100-plus years, the sun garden was overgrown with euonymus (“winter creeper”). It had been used as a border, which over the years had overgrown the brick walkways. In fact, when we bought the house we did not know the brick walkways were even there.

A modern paraphrase of Jesus's parable would be this: “God's imperial reign is like invasive plants—wild honeysuckle, euonymus, kudzu—that start off on the edges very small, but soon take over everything and choke out all the other plants.” That's hardly “good news” to a gardener!

The power of Jesus's teachings is seen in their surprising and often offensive message that challenges us to grow in our faith. At the center of his teaching is the kingdom of God, which could be translated “reign of God,” “realm of God,” “God's imperial rule” or even “God's empire.” The kingdom of God grows in its influence in our lives, and in turn we are challenged to grow beyond our old ways of thinking and acting.

To feel the full impact of his authoritative teaching, we need to understand the context:

- His parables involved farming. There were two methods of sowing, both of which are suitable for the parable. Seed was first scattered and then plowed under, or they plowed first

but seed was cast broadly rather than in rows. Regardless, a 30-, 60- or 100-fold harvest was outrageously huge.

- The Pharisees began in second century b.c. They were a lay movement devoted to making the Torah applicable to everyday life through a strict observance of personal regulations based on oral and written law. They were popular among the people. Like Jesus and his followers, they believed in an afterlife and resurrection day. Unlike the scribes, they were not a profession. In Mark they were always in conflict with Jesus, but they do not appear in the Passion nor are they directly involved in his death.
- The scribes, on the other hand, were involved in his execution. The title was used to describe a wide range of tasks from composing documents to official administrative tasks.
- Winemaking was done with two pressings of grapes followed by a fermentation period. New wine was wine not yet fermented. Old wineskins had already lost their elasticity from previous fermentation processes, whereas new wine would expand during fermentation.

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Mark 4:26-32

What do we learn about God's vision of hope for the world from these parables?

In what ways do the parables challenge us to expand our understanding of how God is working in the world?

Monday—Mark 1:14-15

What are the three parts of Jesus's central message

in verse 15? Put verse 15 in your own words using contemporary and non-religious language.

Tuesday—Mark 2:18-22

Jesus describes his ministry as a new era that is like new wine or cloth that is incompatible with old materials. When have you seen God doing a new thing in one's life or in the life of a church, and it runs into conflict with old ways of thinking?

When has your faith been challenged to grow in new ways?

Wednesday—Mark 2:23-28

What was the flaw in the Pharisees' practice of their Jewish faith?

Jesus challenged the religious practices of Pharisees. When do religious traditions and practices malfunction?

Thursday—Mark 4:1-20

If verse 8 is the key to the parable, what is the main point of the parable?

Why do some people have faith in Christ and others do not?

Friday—Mark 7:14-23

How does Jesus redefine their understanding of rit-

ual and moral “uncleanliness?”

Of the list of vices in verses 21-22, which one(s) have you struggled with?

Saturday—Mark 12:28-34

In what ways do Jesus’s teachings reaffirm the teaching of the Old Testament?

How do these Old Testament commands help us be better followers of Jesus?

This Week’s Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

This week’s prayers for the Umoja Partnership (UP) focus on the GET UP program. GET UP stands for The Girls’ Empowerment Team. It connects girls with mentors and peer groups, adding stability for girls who may not have family role models, while teaching productive personal relationships and career options for women. These young women face enormous obstacles to complete school and secure stable employment. GET UP addresses girls’ needs through programs focusing on health education, positive relationships, life skills and girls’ rights. Community women and Umoja alumni are trained to serve as mentors, and professional women provide vocational guidance.

This week as you pray, read the stories and learn the facts about the UP by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

Our Easter offering this year will go to support the UP. Please give generously.

Lent Week Four – The Power to Serve Week of March 14

INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was the most unlikely candidate to start a religious movement. As a young woman she was a journalist for radical newspapers and she supported progressive causes which were often at odds with the Catholic Church, the tradition of her childhood. But in her autobiography, “The Long Loneliness,” she recounts her spiritual journey as a young mother and how she met Peter Maurin, with whom she founded the Catholic Worker Movement. At the heart of the movement are Catholic Worker houses in which dedicated believers live and work with the poor, offering acts of mercy and standing in solidarity in acts of social justice.

She was an example of this week’s theme, the power to serve. Echoing the words of Jesus, she talked about faithfulness: “Don’t worry about being effective. Just concentrate on being faithful to the truth.”

Like Jesus, she understood that the true mark of discipleship is our acts of compassion for the poor.

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Mark 6:30-44

What are the differences between the story of the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 (Mark 8:1-10)?

We hear the words of the sacrament in verse 41. What is the relationship between communion (and worship in general) and serving others?

Monday—Mark 1:16-20

Mark describes them as leaving everything immediately to follow Jesus. Why did they do that?

What does it mean for us to “fish for people?” Based on last week’s exploration of the parables, how is that task a part of the reign of God?

Tuesday—Mark 6:1-6a

Why couldn’t Jesus do more ministry in his hometown?

What are the limits of our ability to serve?

Wednesday—Mark 6:6b-13

What was the mission of the 12? What might be a modern version of it?

When Jesus sent the disciples they went in pairs. Who has been your partner in serving in the name of Jesus? Why is it essential that we serve together?

Thursday—Mark 9:38-41

When have you experienced a non-Christian who is like the exorcist John was complaining about?

How can mission and outreach projects serve as a bridge between the church and community organizations?

Friday—Mark 10:33-37

What is Jesus’s definition of success?

What makes it difficult for you to serve as Jesus served?

Saturday—Mark 12:41-44

What do we learn about generosity from the widow at the Temple?

How does our faith grow through sharing and service?

This Week’s Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

This week’s prayers for the Umoja Partnership (UP) focus on the Boys’ Empowerment Team (BET UP), which provides a safe environment for young men to learn positive personal relationship skills with other girls and boys under the mentorship of male role models. In 2018 the UP implemented the empowerment program for boys – BET UP – with similar goals to GET UP of improving academic performance and personal relationship skills.

This week as you pray, read the stories and learn the facts about the UP by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

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Lent Week Five – The Power to Surrender Week of March 21

INTRODUCTION

One of the churches in my first appointment had a dark wooden cross suspended above its altar. It was made of the same material as the beam that ran down the center of the ceiling. I had always assumed that it was heavy and wooden—until the day I hit my head on it.

I was looking for something beneath that altar and when I stood up I hit my head on the bottom of the cross, but my head did not hurt as it should have. The cross was not made of wood. It was made of Styrofoam. The beam and the cross were imitation, designed and colored to look like wood. We worshipped at a Styrofoam cross.

This week, Mark’s Gospel challenges us to put away our Styrofoam crosses and take up the real ones Christ has prepared for us. We will explore the different dimensions of sacrifice for Christ and how they are an essential part of the life of a disciple.

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Mark 8:27-9:1

What is your cross to bear?

When have you had to “lose your life to save it?”

Monday—Mark 6:45-52

The disciples were afraid of the storm at sea. What frightens you? What are the challenges of following Christ that make you timid?

In what areas of your life do you need to “take courage and do not be afraid?”

Tuesday—Mark 9:42-50

What do you need to get rid of in your life that is a stumbling block for you to trust Jesus more?

What do you need to get rid of that is a stumbling block making it harder for others to believe in Christ?

Wednesday—Mark 10:17-31

Reflect on how you spend your time and money. What does it say about your priorities? Is there any change that you need to make to be a more faithful follower of Jesus?

How does Jesus describe the relationship between wealth and faith? Between wealth and the kingdom of God? How can we practice this in our lives today?

Thursday—Mark 12:13-14

Which one is it for you: “My religious beliefs shape my political convictions,” or “My political convictions shape my religious beliefs?”

When should the church cooperate with the govern-

ment, and when should the church protest the actions and the policies of the government?

Friday—Mark 13:9-13

When have you been criticized or misunderstood for your religious convictions?

Have you ever experienced hardship for putting your faith into practice in your vocation?

Saturday—Mark 14:66-72

How might others recognize you as a follower of Jesus?

Have you ever been like Peter in the courtyard?

This Week’s Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

This week’s prayers for the Umoja Partnership (UP) focus on scholarship recipients. The UP provides tuition support for post-secondary colleges and universities. To date it has awarded scholarships to 110 students to further their education, and 55 student are currently in the process of getting their degrees. Among their alumni are nurses, nutritionists, electric and civil engineers, psychologists, teachers and a pharmacist.

This week as you pray, read the stories and learn the facts about the UP by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

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Palm Sunday And Holy Week – The Power to Die Week of March 28

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision was the power of the cross.

Through Gandhi's insights based on Jesus, King put the Gospel into practice that transformed our nation and the world.

"The most astounding fact about Christ's crucifixion," King wrote, "is that it...[is] the supreme revelation of God's love."

For King, the cross was the revelation of the power of God's love that overcomes evil.

Theologian James Cone said it best: "Martin Luther King Jr. lived the meaning of the cross, and thereby gave an even more profound interpretation of it with his life."

As we journey through Holy Week, let us meditate on the power of the cross. Its power is the opposite of the power dynamics we see in society. In the Passion story we see the corruption of religious leaders and the complicity of political authority, but we also see the quiet integrity of Jesus. As we come to the end of the week, may we say with the centurion, "Truly, this is the Son of God."

DAILY READINGS AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sunday—Mark 11:1-11

How did the way Jesus entered Jerusalem reveal his identity?

How did the crowd misunderstand him? How do we misunderstand Jesus's mission and identity?

Monday—Mark 11:15-19

How does his Temple protest defy our traditional portrayals of Jesus?

What lessons for our faith does this story give us?

Tuesday—Mark 12:1-12

Jesus explained why he told parables in Mark 4:10-12. In light of that explanation, why did Jesus tell this parable?

How do we welcome Jesus into our lives, and how are we not welcoming to him?

Wednesday—Mark 14:10-42

The Last Supper looks backwards and forwards. It looks back and remembers the Exodus, and it looks forward to the realization of the reign of God. How does our celebration of communion help us remember God's past acts of liberating love? How does it remind us of God's hope for the future?

The last command for the disciples was to pray with Jesus in the garden, but they failed. What makes it difficult

for you to pray?

Thursday—Mark 14:45-15:5

Jesus's trial was unfair. Can you think of examples of unjust trials?

What ironies do you see in his trial and crucifixion?

Friday—Mark 15:6-32

How does Pilate unwittingly reveal Jesus's identity?

When do we see the suffering of Christ in political prisoners and other prisoners of conscience today?

Saturday—Mark 15:33-47

The centurion's confession in 15:39 is the climax of the Gospel. In light of the crucifixion, what does it mean for Jesus to be the son of God? What does it mean for us to confess that Jesus is the son of God?

How is Jesus's suffering and death an expression of God's solidarity with human suffering?

What does the tearing of the sanctuary curtain symbolize?

This Week's Prayers for the Umoja Partnership

This week's prayers for the Umoja Partnership (UP) focus on its staff:

- Denise Soltis, executive director (U.S.);
- Leonard Otiende, project director (Kenya);
- Linda Olasya, project deputy director (Kenya);
- Jeremiah Owaka, project officer (Kenya), and
- Everlyne Ongete, project officer (Kenya).

Each day lift them up in prayer.

This week as you pray, read the UP's stories by visiting www.umojapartnership.org, or follow it on Facebook and Instagram at UmojaPartnership.

Our Easter offering this year will go to support the UP. Please give generously.

Easter - The Power to Live April 4

INTRODUCTION

From 1975 to 1977 Father Ernesto Cardenal served the remote villages of Solentiname, an archipelago on Lake Nicaragua. It was the height of the Somoza dictatorship and the eve of the Sandinista revolution. He recorded the conversations of the peasants as they discussed and reflected on the Gospel, which he published in four volumes, "The Gospel in Solentiname."

Here is part of the conversation on the night before Easter as they discussed the meaning of the resurrection:

William: "The important thing is that [Jesus is] alive wherever there is community."

Laureano: "What's important is for us to live the resurrection here, right now, and for us not to believe, as many have believed, that this world doesn't count, and that what counts is to go to heaven afterwards and all that nonsense."

In Mark's Gospel the messengers tell the women that they will find the risen Christ in Galilee, the place where it all began, their homeland and the site of Jesus's ministry. On Easter we celebrate that we meet the risen Christ in our ordinary affairs. Today, as we conclude our study of Mark, read the last chapter and give God thanks for the power of Christ's resurrection that gives us abundant and eternal life now.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Read Mark 16:1-20

They were told that the risen Christ will appear in Galilee, not Jerusalem. What is our “Galilee?” What does it mean for us to discover the presence of the resurrected Jesus in our Galilees?

Why would the women be afraid? What fears do we have, and how does the resurrection overcome our fears?

What does it mean for us to proclaim the good news to the whole creation?

