

## **The Gospel according to Mark: the unfinished story**

When I was six years old, a movie came out that completely captured my imagination and attention. It was a story about a boy who discovers a book and begins reading it. But it isn't just an ordinary book, but a magical one. For as he reads the book, he begins to realize that the story includes him... he becomes a character within the story. And his role becomes vital to saving the magical land of Fantasia. The movie is essentially a story, within a story, that continues as long as the boy can imagine new stories. Hence the name is "The Never-ending Story."

What made the Never-ending Story so compelling to a young child, was that it opened the possibility of a different world, and not only that, but a world in which you could enter into and become a part of. This is the power of imagination – especially a child's imagination.

It also opened the possibility of a story that continues, that doesn't finish as long as you are involved. You are a part of that story, and it's a good story because there are interesting characters who can change and grow, there are problems to be resolved, and things that were once lost were restored.

In a similar manner, Mark's gospel compels us to read it like we are a part of that story about Jesus. I'm not saying that we'll be magically imported into another world, but this gospel was written in such a way that tells us that we are a continuation of what started in Judea over two thousand years ago. It's the opposite of the Never-ending Story in that we are not to read this gospel as a story within our story... but that our stories are within the greater story of God.

I want to propose to you that there is a larger narrative that is going on here, and we are not its authors. And what we experience in our day to day lives, is just one thread in a greater tapestry that's continually being woven. With the bible, we can know the beginning, but the end has yet to come.

It's my hope, that as we walk together through the gospel according to Mark, God's story becomes our own. And why is it so important to have God's story to inform ours? Because without it, our faith loses vitality and vision. We become swallowed up in meaningless entertainment and our significance becomes tied to the accumulation of wealth and possessions. We become desensitized, pessimistic, hopeless, and apathetic. We start believing a false narrative, a narrative which tells us we are worthy only if we own things, have higher education, look attractive, and have power. And so, we need God to tell us who really are and who we are meant to be.

But this requires some work. It requires us knowing how to listen. It requires us to learn how to read the bible, how to interpret, how to understand God's words for us today.

[Learning to read]

A lot of problems come up when we interpret the bible incorrectly. We see this when the bible was used to justify things like war, slavery, racism, or the subordination of women. Though we may never interpret it perfectly, and there are many different ways of interpretation, there are some rules or guidelines that can help us.

[Involves asking the right questions]

To simplify things for us, and for me, the key to understanding (taken from "How to read the bible for all its worth") is learning how to ask the right questions. And the one that we must always start with is "what was the original intent of the biblical text?"<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency to ask the bible questions that the authors never intended to answer, such as: Was there evolution? Or who do I marry? Instead, we have to start from the context and content. Why did the author write this? Why did they chose to tell these stories or teachings? What questions were the readers asking?

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1 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2003), 29.

Keep in mind that we must approach the text with humility and with an awareness of our biases. That's why biblical interpretation is done in community and with care. As I study the bible, I'm in consultation with other theologians – I need the help of those who have done extensive studies and research. I interpret the bible, knowing that I read through a certain lens: I'm a Protestant Chinese Canadian, and I'm also a woman. I come from a specific tradition and have particular life experiences. I'm also capable of being wrong – so I need the weight of tradition and church teachings to correct me and keep me accountable.

So does that mean that the bible must always be kept in the past? Of course not, part of its authority is that it has relevance for us today. But that is our task as biblical readers to discover how it is relevant; that's part of our work and responsibility.

[What about devotional reading?]

Devotional reading is personal, prayerful, and an attempt to encounter God through scripture.<sup>2</sup> The goal is not finding answers to life's problems in the text, but to seek the presence of God through the text. One does not extract doctrine or theological meaning of the text through devotional reading – but gain strength and assurance from the presence of God. In our home group gatherings, we'll be introducing the practice of lectio divina where we seek intimacy with God through slow and meditative reading of Scripture. Lectio Divina is a way to make ourselves available - our intellect, emotions, and memories – to transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Back to the gospel of Mark, what I'm trying to introduce here is an exegetical reading of Scripture that allows us to draw broader principals that can be applied to our whole community. Mark had an intent, a purpose for writing. For what Mark did as a writer is what we need to do: [Mark took the life of Jesus as remembered by his friends and wrote it in a way to encourage believers and pass on the faith.] And we'll get a better sense of this as we explore the context and content. So I'm going

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2 Dennis Bratcher, "Devotional and Exegetical Reading of Scripture", n.d., <http://www.crivoice.org/reading.html>.

to ask some starting questions:

- What is the genre?
- Who was the author?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What was going on at the time it was written?

Lets begin with the text:

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God<sup>3</sup> (Mk 1:1)

The first word: the beginning, or ἄρχη. We are at the start of something. Of what?

The good news, εὐαγγελίου, gospel. In this case, good news refer to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

[Genre]

There are four gospels that are recognized as authoritative; Mark's is widely held to be the first one written, and likely a source for Matthew's and Luke's. The gospels are a genre of its own: not a biography, and not just a bunch of stories strung together. But its content centers on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, as recorded and interpreted by others.

So why four gospels? Because different communities of Christians needed a book about Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Prior to these written accounts, teachings and stories were told orally, but the eye-witnesses: people who had first-hand experience of Jesus, were eventually dieing off. Like how there are fewer and fewer veterans of the second world war with each passing year, the need for a record became urgent.

But also, the story of Jesus was spreading. It was going out into all parts of the Roman empire, and was being carried into communities which had a different

<sup>3</sup> "UNO All Biblical references are taken from the New International Version", n.d.

<sup>4</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 129.

culture and background than Judea. That's why they're written in Greek, not Aramaic which was the language that Jesus spoke. That's why there are explanations of different terms. And that's why there are different emphasis with each gospel – even though it is about the same person.

The gospel of Mark then, is a particular type of work written by a particular person for a particular audience. It introduces the life and teachings of Jesus in written form, some label it as a “witness document.”

[Author]

Though anonymous, early church tradition heavily places Mark, was also known as John-Mark as its author. Mark was a Jewish-Christian, whose mother own a house in Jerusalem that became a center for Christian activity.<sup>5</sup> We read about Mark in the book of Acts. He was the cousin of Barnabas, and accompanied Barnabas and Paul on a missionary journey as their helper. A bitter dispute broke out between Paul and Barnabas over Mark. Paul refused to take him along in a second missionary trip because Mark had left them in the first one to return to Jerusalem. They parted ways.

We learn later in the letters of Paul, that they were eventually reconciled. Paul asks for Mark to minister to him while he was in prison in Rome. *[Edited] And while in Rome, Mark also assisted Peter, who affectionally calls him as his son (1 Peter 5:13).* In fact, it is from *Peter* that Mark draws his information. The earliest documented information about the Gospel of Mark comes from Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, as quoted by Eusebius:

And the Elder said this also: “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord, but not however in order.” For neither did he hear the Lord, nor

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5 Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*.

did he follow him, but afterwards, as I said, Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of his hearers, but not as though he were drawing up a connected account of the Lord's oracles...<sup>6</sup>

This and other quotations from early writings were meant to give credibility and authority to Mark's writings. This is important for later Christians who needed to know if this gospel was trustworthy.

It is believed that Mark wrote primarily for the Christians in Rome and Italy.<sup>7</sup> He likely wrote it within the decade of 60-70 CE, and after Peter's martyrdom in Rome.<sup>8</sup> Why is this significant? Because the Christians in Rome were undergoing tremendous persecution and suffering. The emperor at this time was Nero, a highly unfavored emperor. A great fire broke out in Rome in 64 CE, destroying nearly 3/4 of the city. Nero was away when the fire started, and rushed back to organize emergency assistance. However, he then built an extravagant palace in the space that the fire created. Along with rumours that Nero started the fire, this outraged the public, so he needed a scapegoat: the Christians.

[show video]

So the life situation of Mark's gospel was one of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom. Mark wrote to strengthen the Christians, by showing the similarity of the situation to the one faced by Jesus in Judea.<sup>9</sup> He was telling the Roman Christians that their experiences of suffering was known by a suffering Messiah.<sup>10</sup>

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*

[Mark: the beginning of an unfinished story]

Knowing now the historical context of the gospel, we can begin to hear the good news about Jesus, as it would have been heard by early Christians. Their families were being torn apart, they've gone into hiding, and were being killed for sport because they followed someone whom

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6 Ibid.  
7 Ibid.  
8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid.

they never seen: A poor Jewish man who proclaimed the kingdom of God, was tortured and killed, and then resurrected. They needed to know how the story began, and why this man was worth following unto death.

But what's interesting too, is how the gospel according to Mark ends. It's very abrupt, like somehow the parchment was cut off or Mark forgot to finish it.... or did he?

The earliest manuscripts end at chapter 16 vs 8, when the women discover the empty tomb. Some believed that Mark purposefully ended on a note of bewilderment and shock, for that characterizes the whole gospel. It leaves the reader breathless, amazed.. and afraid.

But the early readers of Mark knew that the story didn't really end there, because they themselves were living out the result of that empty tomb, that resurrection. They were living out the story of Jesus precisely because they had taken on the life and teachings of Jesus, the gospel, as their own.

So when we learn to read the gospel, we can re-tell the same story but in our setting – that's when God's story becomes our own. How do we understand the Kingdom of God within our lives? How do we understand things like healing, justice, and resurrection as we interact with our communities and workplaces? How do we understand our pain and brokenness, as connected to the suffering and passion of Jesus Christ?

It amazes me that we're part of this massive story of God. Life isn't just full of random, haphazard events. Nor is it strictly up to us to make our future. And we are part of something greater than just our individual houses, cars and bank accounts. What makes a story powerful, is that it gives meaning. God's story gives us a reason for being here and with each other.

Mark's gospel was a way to give meaning to what the early Christians were enduring at the hands of dark and evil forces. It was a way to pass on the faith, to call forth for discipleship and perseverance. And it was to remind its readers that the story of Jesus didn't end, but was just beginning....

and over two thousand years later, we're still living out the results of that beginning.

[Discussion]

Imagine for a moment – what would the kingdom of God look like for you?

- what would it look like
- who would that include?
- Global – Local -Personal

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