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Sermon 10 October 2021

Title: Meet the Gospels 1 (Mark)

- Good morning church, and welcome again to LargsNaz online—we are delighted that you have joined us today, whether this is your first time visiting with us or if you're a regular worshipper, whether you're at the LargsNaz Sunday Brunch or you're joining us from your home, near or far, wherever you are, we're glad you're here
- Today is the first Sunday in our brand new sermon series called "Meet the Gospels," and I want to begin by telling you a little bit about the origin of the graphic that we're using for the series.
- In January of 1964, Capitol Records released a record album—a vinyl 33 rpm record album—we used to listen to those once upon a time—but Capitol Records released an album in the US featuring music by four lads from Liverpool. They were called the Beatles—John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and that's Ringo Starr down there at the bottom—and the album was called "Meet the Beatles." Another album with the same photograph on the cover was released here in the UK that was called "With the Beatles." But in the US the album was called "Meet the Beatles," and it contained several songs that have become classics in the almost 7 decades since its release—"I want to Hold Your Hand," and "All my Loving," "I saw her standing there," and others—and these four writers whose faces are on that album became undoubtedly the most

influential four musicians in the history of mid to late 20th century popular music—I mean nobody else even comes close

- But the influence of those 4 writers doesn't even begin to compare to the influence of the 4 writers and the 4 works that we are going to be considering over the next 4 weeks, as we meet the gospels—not John, Paul, George and Ringo, but John, Mark, Matthew, and Luke.
- You'll notice that John is down there by himself like Ringo was, because as you may know, John is quite a bit different from those other 3—we call them the synoptic gospels—we'll talk more about that when we look at John's gospel in a few weeks.
- But the way that this series is going to be structured will be pretty simple—each week we're going to look at one of the 4 gospels, and we're going to examine it and learn about it and allow God to speak to us by thinking about 3 things.
- First, for each of the gospels we'll consider its CONTEXT—that means we'll learn about things like when it was written and by whom and why—so we can understand how it came to be and how it has been approached and what its function is—and then secondly we'll consider the CONTENT of each gospel—what's in it, what does it say and how does it say it?
- And after we have considered the context and the content of each of the gospels, we'll take a look at a key passage that has been chosen because it, in one way or another, highlights the unique character of the gospel that it comes from. So CONTEXT, CONTENT, and KEY PASSAGE—that will be the structure of each of our sermons over the next 4 weeks.

- And we begin today at the beginning, with the Gospel of Mark.
- And I know already what some of you are thinking—Now Pastor, maybe you’ve got a different version of Bible than I do—maybe you’re reading from a different translation, because in the King James Bible, the New Testament starts with Matthew—and that is true—and it’s also true for the New International Version, and the Revised Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version and the Living Bible, and the Message, and the New American Standard—in all those translations of the Bible, Matthew comes first—everybody knows that—when you learned the books of the Bible as a child, you memorized “Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.” And it is true that as far as I know the New Testament in every version starts with Matthew, and so many of us just assume that chronologically, that’s the order they’re supposed to be in, the order that they were written in—I know that’s what I assumed for a very long time—I had no reason to think differently
- Let’s return to that record album by the Beatles for a moment. On the cover of that album, under the title, it says “The First Album by England’s Phenomenal Pop Combo.” Now I used to have that album in my record collection, back when I had a record collection, and for a very long time I just assumed that it had been the first album by the Beatles that was released in the US, but it turns out that another album, called “Introducing the Beatles” had been released by another record label just 10 days before “Meet the Beatles” was released by Capitol Records.

- Similarly, I also just assumed that because Matthew came first in my copy of the Bible that it must have been written first—but that wasn't necessarily the case—in fact, scholars are pretty unanimous in their opinion that Mark is the oldest gospel, and that both Matthew and Luke had access to and used the gospel of Mark when they were writing their gospels—we'll talk more about that next week.
- But Mark has been put in second place, between Matthew and Luke, since at least the 4th century, most likely because Matthew has such clear connections to the Old Testament, as we'll discuss next week—but the way that Mark has been put in second place even though it is the original gospel—the first, and the oldest—is just one example of the way that, it seems to me, the gospel of Mark has been underappreciated, and unappreciated, over the course of church history.
- And I'll tell you what I mean by that—if you study what scholars have to say about the Gospel of Mark it won't take you very long to realise that much of what is said about Mark's gospel is couched in negative terms—Mark is described in terms of what it doesn't contain, or it doesn't do—in fact Augustine thought that Mark was just an abbreviated version of Matthew's gospel--and so you'll read that Mark is the shortest gospel, that is, it doesn't use as many words as the others, that it doesn't contain a birth narrative or post-resurrection accounts, or even the Sermon on the Mount—you'll read that almost all of what's in Mark's gospel is found in the other 2 synoptics, and that that we don't really know who wrote it, it might have been John Mark who travelled with the Apostle Paul or

another Mark who wrote down what Peter preached about Jesus—you'll read that its language is rough and primitive, even awkward—some suggest that the author's mastery of the Greek language was lacking—you'll read that parts of the narrative—like when Jesus says he speaks in parables so that people don't understand and so that they don't repent—some parts are problematic and confusing—and critics have through the centuries loved to critique how abruptly the gospel of Mark begins and ends—and the gospel of Mark has been treated this way for a very long time—there are only a few fragments dating from before the 4th century because the gospel of Mark was seen as lacking and so wasn't as often transcribed and preserved as other gospels were—and it's also worth noting that no commentary was written on the gospel of Mark until the 6th century—when it had been around for 500 years

- But it seems to me that this tendency to view the gospel of Mark as being lacking or “less-than” the other gospels misses a very important point—because being the first gospel, composed just a short time after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Mark exhibits an urgency, a sense that time is of the essence, that we don't see in the other gospels—because Mark is not a carefully constructed biography about Jesus life and teachings and death and resurrection—it is a gospel—it is the first gospel—it is a report—the first report—of BIG NEWS--it is a cry of amazement at what has taken place in the life and ministry of Jesus—what has really happened—and what has happened—what the gospel of Mark is proclaiming, the story it has to tell, is that the world as we knew it has ended—that the apocalypse is at hand, that the Kingdom of God has come near—the

Messiah has arrived and the day of resurrection is upon us—and all of this, while overwhelming and awe-inspiring, is good news—to those who have ears to hear.

- So that's our CONTEXT—now how does that connect to the CONTENT of Mark's gospel?
- Well, the gospel of Mark begins by telling us that we are reading the beginning—the *archē*—of the good news-- *euangeliou*—that's literally good news, the gospel—the glad tidings—that proclamation that an evangelist brings—and Mark goes further so that there is no ambiguity—the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God—the Messiah. There's the message—the point—of this gospel, right there in the first verse—Mark wastes no time building up to it, nor is he interested in giving us an objective list of details so we can come to our own conclusions—no, he tells us the point behind this narrative right at the outset—and that is why this is no biography—it is a new kind of writing—it is a gospel—it is the good news that Jesus is the Son of God, that the Messiah has come and as we are told by Jesus Himself in verse 15 of chapter 1, the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news—notice that Jesus doesn't say "Repent and beg for mercy—repent and hope that God's wrath spares you—repent and pray that the divine and righteous anger of the Almighty doesn't cast you into eternal darkness—no, he says repent and believe the good news—because the gospel is good news—the gospel is not just guilt and condemnation and judgement and wrath—the gospel is good news—and if it ain't good news, it ain't the gospel--and Mark's gospel is the beginning of the

good news that the Kingdom of God—the apocalypse, the Day of resurrection-- is at hand

- That is news that is urgent—that is news that must be proclaimed in no uncertain terms, right away—there is no time to reflect or to gather a lot of additional details about the back story—and so Mark does not give us the details of Mary’s pregnancy or of the birth of John the Baptist or tell us about wise men or shepherds—there will be time for that elsewhere, but it is not Mark’s concern—Mark’s concern is to tell the story of Jesus’ arrival, his crucifixion and his resurrection as straightforwardly and as quickly as possible—because the world as we knew it has ended—and that’s big news—that’s GOOD NEWS
- And if we look just at what happens in a few verses in Chapter 1, we can get a sense of the kind of breakneck speed with which Mark is going to tell this story—we get a sense of the importance of letting his listener know what has occurred, because it is the most important occurrence in the history of the universe—what happens in these 16 chapters changes everything—and so Mark has no time to waste—and so in just the first chapter John the Baptist has appeared, Jesus has been baptized, the Father’s voice from Heaven has declared that Jesus is His Son, Jesus has driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, he’s proclaiming the gospel in Galilee, he’s called his first disciples, he’s casting out demons and healing the sick—he’s demonstrating his authority in Heaven and Earth--and he’s told the demons and a leper not to say anything about who He was, but we’re told that the leper proclaims it so freely that people began to

come to Jesus from all over, so much so that Jesus had to stay out in the country—and that's just chapter 1.

- So it's not surprising that one of Mark's favourite words—he uses it 41 times in his gospel—is *euthus*—it means immediately, just then, or next—Mark has little time for transitions or explanations but moves us immediately from scene to scene—Mark cuts to the chase, because time is of the essence
- and so for 8 chapters Mark tells us of Jesus' demonstrating his authority through his proclaiming the good news and performing one miracle after another after another—this and immediately this and just then this--deeds of healing and feeding multitudes and showing his power over the chaotic forces of the sea by walking on the waters, and even raising a girl from the dead
- And then 8 chapters in—in the center of the gospel—we reach the hinge—the point where we discover that Mark's point is not simply that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one with power and authority—not just that, but also that the **crucified and resurrected** Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—
- Now up to chapter 8 Mark has told us that Jesus tells those who knew who he was to keep silent—we've seen the disciples confused and bewildered and asking "who is this?" about Jesus—but in chapter 8 we find Peter confessing in no uncertain terms that Jesus is the Messiah—Jesus asks him, who do others say I am, and then puts the question to him "Who do YOU say that I am?" and Peter says "you are the Messiah—you are the Christ"
- And here's the hinge—here's the crux—Peter can acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, that Israel is about to be

restored to its rightful place among the nations—but Jesus tells Peter and those with him in chapter 8 verse 31 that the Messiah must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And Mark tells us that unlike those times when Jesus had said “say nothing to anyone,” He said all this quite openly.

- And Peter isn't having it—and Peter rebukes Jesus—rebukes him—tells him to stop talking like that—and we all know what Jesus says to Peter—Get thee behind me Satan—and he tells the crowd that if they want to be his followers they'll have to take up their own cross and lose their lives for his sake.
- And from here in chapter 8 until the end of his gospel, Mark moves us to the cross, to that place where Jesus is arrested and tortured, abandoned by his followers, where he even cries out to God “Why have you forsaken me?” And this is the other half of the task that Mark must complete in his gospel—telling his listener that not only is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, which is unbelievable enough, but that the Messiah is the one who suffers and is crucified—and that is a difficult pill for folks to swallow, just as it was for Peter—but that is the gospel that Mark must proclaim, and those who have ears to hear the good news will see victory and not tragedy in the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb.
- And that brings us to the key passage that I want to consider for just a moment, You heard Pastor Tasha read from chapter 16, verses 1-8. And we heard how Mark describes the women arriving at the tomb after Jesus is crucified, and finding that the stone had been rolled back, and a young man in a white robe inside the tomb. The young man tells them not to be alarmed, but that Jesus had

been raised from the dead and they should go tell Peter and the disciples they he would meet all of them in Galilee—and so the women are terrified and amazed, and flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone.

- And in the oldest manuscripts, that is where the gospel ends. Other authorities end the gospel with a shorter ending that reads: “And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”
- Other authorities add a few more words, and still others include verses 9-20.
- And I use this ending as the key passage today because throughout history folks have read that abrupt ending and found it lacking—and thought that surely the end must be missing--like the women at the tomb what they expected to find was not there—it was missing—and that’s alarming-- and so they add a bit more to wrap things up, to provide a sense of completion—they continued the story because they could not stay silent in the face of this news--
- And historically, we know that the women at the tomb didn’t stay silent either, that they did tell others about what they had seen and heard,
- And we know that they had good reason to be afraid and amazed, even terrified—because if Jesus had been raised, then the dead were being raised it was the end of the world as they knew it—the Kingdom of God was at hand, this was the apocalypse—the revelation, literally the “unveiling” of the Messiah and all that his arrival brought with it

- But folks have looked at that ending, and thought, that can't be the actual end of the story—that's too abrupt, it's harsh, -- scholars have supposed that maybe the real ending got lost, but I don't think so—and I'll tell you why.
- If we look back through the gospel of Mark we notice something interesting that accompanies those times when Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah—when his identity is unveiled
- It happens many times, beginning with Chapter 1—in verse 23 a man possessed by demons recognises Jesus and says “I know who you are--the holy one of God,” and what does Jesus tell him? BE QUIET—and news about him spreads quickly over the whole region of Galilee—a little bit later we read that Jesus would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.
- Just a few verses later, as we mentioned earlier, Jesus healed that man with leprosy and says 44 “See that you don't tell this to anyone. But Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news, so that Jesus couldn't even enter a town without being mobbed—and people came to him even out in the middle of nowhere.
- And just one more example—there are others we could look at as well—but this one is key—in chapter 7, Jesus heals a deaf man, and some people see him do it, and in verse 36 we read Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.
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- Have you ever heard anybody say that the best way to get people talking about something is to tell them it's a secret? Tell folks not to tell anybody else about the news you're sharing with them? I think the gospel of Mark demonstrates the power of telling somebody a secret.
- So let me ask you, what do you think would have been the effect on someone hearing or reading Mark's gospel for the first time, when they get to the end, and Jesus rises from the dead, Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the story ends with "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." And that's the end.
- I think they would have thought, "well that can't be the end" there's more to it than that, I need to add a little more to this—we need to respond to this—and do you know that's just what happened?
- A shorter ending to the gospel of Mark got added, and then a longer ending—and then Matthew said, I need to re-tell this story and let people know about Jesus' birth and his genealogy, and some other details, and Luke said I need to tell the gospel, the story of Jesus life AND the story of the early church, and John says I need to add theological and symbolic elements to this story, and even today, when we are confronted with this startling, alarming ending of Mark's gospel, we are driven to respond, to add our story to this story
- Like the women at the tomb, we are also called to go, to tell others, to add our own ending to the gospel, our own story
- Mark's gospel is brief and abrupt and rough and rugged and problematic and unrefined, but it has a sense of urgency about it that reminds us that the arrival

of Jesus, the son of God, the crucified and resurrected Messiah, is good news that changes everything—and if we have ears to hear then we too can testify that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, we can proclaim that the empty tomb signifies that life as we knew it has changed—that we will never be the same—that we have taken up also our cross and decided to follow Jesus, no turning back. The gospel of Mark reminds us this morning that we too are called to proclaim a life-changing, world-transforming gospel, and the same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave raises us to life abundant and everlasting—and that is just the beginning of the good news.

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