***Recapturing the Big Picture* – Bible Conference 2015**

**“The First Gospel & the Second Advent: *Salvation*”**

Devotional presentation – first session

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Introduction

Some of their religious leaders were saying: – this is it! These are the last days.

Others tried to keep them calm… but that was difficult with so many terrorist activities going on around them…kidnappings and hostages-taken, cold-blooded murdering of the innocent, even beheadings.

Many found themselves asking: Where is Jesus? Why the delay? Why hasn’t he returned?

How many more “wars on terror” must we experience?

How many more acts of violence must we witness?

How many more funerals must we attend?

Where are you, Jesus, when we suffer?

Why haven’t you returned yet?

Sound familiar?

Those who first heard Mark’s gospel knew what it was like to ask such questions.

Most likely Mark was the first gospel written and written during the Jewish War with Rome (66-70 A.D. – a little over 30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection); a war that would end with Roman victory and a destroyed temple in the holy but now devastated city of Jerusalem.

This gospel was written during a time of struggle to survive both for the Jewish people and for Christians living in Roman Palestine… in both communities people were considering ways to “recapture the big picture” of their faith…so it seems appropriate that as *we* consider ways to “recapture the big picture” of Adventism, that we should begin each morning looking together at a gospel written for people …

* …who wondered why Jesus hadn’t come back…
* …who wondered what to do in a world of random violence…
* …who wanted to know if these days really were the last days…
* …who wondered where God was in all of it…

Prayer:

Mark 1:1 – “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ”

Before the word “gospel” was used by Christians to refer to Jesus, “gospel” was associated with military language… during a battle, messenger-runners would be sent from the front lines to those in more secure locations. When those waiting to hear would see the runner coming, they would strain their ears to hear… if the runner’s first word was “gospel!” they could breathe again… because that word meant: “Good news!” “Gospel!” “The battle is going our way!”

Mark begins with: “Gospel! Good news: Jesus Christ!”

The battle is going our way! Good news indeed!

But it *was* a battle. Mark is clear about that.

This gospel portrays Jesus’ life as a battle…

* A battle between demonic forces and angelic forces (a cosmic, apocalyptic battle)
* It is a battle with Satan himself (a war with all evil powers);
* It is a battle with oppressive systems where people are commodities for production;
* It is a battle with despair in the midst of so much suffering;
* It is a battle between differing views of Scripture;
* between different interpretations of the traditions;
* between different views of the church and its God-given mission;
* between differing views of salvation itself.

Rather than discuss salvation like Paul does in his letter to the Romans, Mark uses the form of a story.

While he occasionally discusses forgiveness of an individual’s sins, Mark’s gospel typically places a different emphasis on salvation.

In Mark, “salvation” most often means freedom from bondage.

This might not initially connect with 21st century readers… I doubt many, if any of us, has been in bondage, that is, slavery. Even the poorest among us is not owned by someone else.

But in Mark’s day that was a very real possibility.

In Mark’s day many people lived in bondage…

* the majority of the people in the crowds we meet in Mark provided cheap labor for the fields owned by Roman conquerors and the Jewish elite;
* most in the crowds following Jesus lived as tenants on the lands of absentee landlords whose ever-increasing rent perpetuated debt and dependency and bondage;
* Rome’s taxes and temple tithes also kept the peasants in economic bondage;
* The presence of Roman soldiers in the villages reminded people of their conquered status;
* Sick people were doubly-enslaved… to the pain and suffering of their illness and then due to purity laws, forced isolation, separated from their families and villages, unable to go where they wished;
* The status of children and women at this time, especially among the poor, was one of bondage—no rights, no voice, no options but what the patriarch of the family decided;

The shunned were silent.

The cheap labor and their children kept their hunger and despair to themselves.

The peasants trapped by taxes and tithes and never-ending toil took it without complaint.

And then there was a new Exodus!

Then, like in the days of Moses in Egypt, a voice coming from the wilderness dared to say “no!”

Dared to say: something is wrong – this is not Yahweh’s way.

Mark presents his gospel as a new Exodus… a freedom from slavery; from all kinds of bondage!

This time, instead of God using Moses to free the Jews from slavery in Egypt, God was with Jesus freeing people from all that kept them oppressed.

This gospel begins with a voice crying out and God hears people’s cries.

* Whether the cries of slaves in Egypt
* or the cries of the oppressed in Jesus’ day
* or the cries of prophets like John who long for a better day for the people
* or the cries of people in bondage in Mark’s day
  + let my people go!
  + Prepare the way of the Lord!
  + A more powerful one is coming!

God hears people’s cries.

And the children of cheap labor are free at last!

In Mark’s gospel, salvation means freedom from bondage… from all that oppresses.

In this gospel, wherever Jesus goes, people are freed.

* A man with an unclean spirit enters into the synagogue and Jesus releases him from the demon’s bondage. It’s Jesus’ first miracle in Mark, and there are many more to come!
* A mother-in-law has a fever that keeps her in bed, and Jesus releases her from the bondage of sickness, raises her up in anticipation of the resurrection and she begins “serving” that is, being a disciple (that’s what Jesus says disciples are supposed to do…to serve others); she’s Mark’s first disciple!
* All kinds of sick people and demon-possessed people come to Jesus and he releases all of them from bondage to sickness and Satan!
* A leper comes to Jesus begging for release from a disease which kept him from family. Making him clean, Jesus restores him to community, releasing him from the bondage of isolation.
* All this and Mark has just finished chapter one of his Gospel—Good News! The battle is going our way!

Jesus is the New Exodus!

Mark tells his readers: remember the Exodus! For the memory of Exodus makes repentance and resistance possible…

* To underscore the point, Mark’s first chapter portrays Jesus going into the Jordan River as the children of Israel did after the Exodus as they prepared to enter the promise land!
* Later in this gospel, a huge multitude in the wilderness will be fed by “bread from heaven” … it’s “manna” again, only this time, provided by Jesus, with more than enough for sharing;
* Also Jesus will frequently go “up a mountain” like Moses did… teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God that has come;

Mark’s gospel presents Jesus’ life as an embodiment of the Exodus…

People are freed from bondage.

People experience salvation.

Suddenly the silence is broken. And the broken find their voices:

* Crowds proclaim: “we have never seen anything like this!” (2:12)
* Fishermen ask; “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41)
* A trembling, but healed woman tells Jesus the whole truth of her long illness and her decision to reach out and touch the hem of his robe (5:33);
* A Syrophoenician mother responds back: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (7:28);
* Gentiles who witness a miracle exclaim: “He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak” (7:37);
* A blind man says: “I can see people – they look like trees” (8:24);
* A worried father confesses: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:24);
* A beggar at the side of the road yells out: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (10:47,48);
* A centurion overseeing Jesus’ crucifixion proclaims: “Truly this man was God’s son!” (15:39);

The silence is broken. And the broken find their voices.

This was Mark’s way of “recapturing the big picture.”

It had been over 30 years since Jesus was on earth in human form.

A war was waging. People were being oppressed. They wondered where God was… didn’t God hear their cries?

They needed another Exodus. Deliverance. Redemption. Freedom. Salvation.

And Mark stirs their memories…

Mark, with his “readiness to confront absence” shares his conviction that God has heard their cries. God had come down.

In Jesus God had been with them… and still was!

But Mark was competing with other theological answers to the chaos and the oppression and the violence (others who were trying to “recapture the big picture”):

There were those in Judaism who believed in end-of-the-first-century “last generation” theology.

Theirs was a holiness movement. These Jews—Pharisees—believed that all Jews should take God’s law seriously, including the cleanliness laws. There should be “purity” exhibited by God’s holy people. That was the answer to these “last days”…to the war and chaos and confusion.

* While Mark’s Jesus also believes in taking God’s law seriously, Jesus will challenge the law when it is used to bind people, to keep them in slavery because they are deemed “dirty.” To Jesus, no one is dirty, so that every time he touches a leper or sick person or dead person, Jesus is directly challenging that part of their holiness movement. Purity laws are not the answer; instead, follow Jesus.

In Mark’s day, there were those in Judaism who believed that things weren’t all that bad, that change was the scary prospect, so that all efforts should be made to maintain the status quo. Keep Rome happy, keep the taxes and tithes flowing in, nip-in-the-bud any hint of rebellion. After all, one does what one must to survive…and thrive… The Jewish elite, who were also the priests—Sadducees—worked with Rome to maintain order. That way, the sacrifices and temple services would be allowed to continue.

* Mark’s Jesus directly challenged the priests when he cleansed the temple; it’s a dramatic challenge to a system that used religion to make money off the broken backs of the poor. Jesus aggressively challenges the priests of Jerusalem;

Another group within Judaism, later called “zealots” to underscore their “zeal” before God, used language to incite a sense of rebellion against those they saw as their oppressors—Romans and the Jewish elite who collaborated with them. They interpreted their sacred traditions to justify violence against Roman soldiers, tax collectors and priest-compromisers (this group would have cheered when Jesus overturned the money-changers’ tables).

* While Jesus, too, was angry at injustice, Jesus refused to use violence. Violence used against violence meant that those with “righteous indignation” became just like what they hated. Jesus knew that only self-sacrificing love can win the day. And Mark was convinced. Jesus’ way is not the way of the Zealots.

Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots … three groups within Judaism who had particular perspectives on how to “recapture the big picture” during a time of crisis; what most saw as “the last days.” Mark’s gospel suggests another way to “recapture the big picture”… that to follow Jesus is to walk with the most vulnerable, those others call “dirty” but not carrying a sword, to walk with others carrying a cross…

The oldest in our family, Andrew, works just around the corner from Martin Place in Sydney. While he quickly let us know he was o.k. by sending a text, you can imagine how eager we were to learn information following the tragedy at the Lindt Café on December 15. I was very moved to hear a report that when word got out that some Muslims wearing traditional clothing were threatened or made to feel uncomfortable using public transportation, thousands of Australians immediately responded to #illridewithyou, offering to ride next to Muslim fellow citizens in order to give them a sense of security. One report I read said that 115,000 Australians responded to the invitation within the first 24 hours. One Muslim woman tells the story of going home from work the night of the tragedy and the taxi driver refused to drive her into a particular neighborhood, saying it was out of his jurisdiction. That’s when the two women riding in the taxi with her offered to take her the rest of the way home…

Jesus said to the most vulnerable in Roman Palestine – I’ll ride with you.

I’ll act in solidarity with you.

I’m here to free you from all that keeps people in bondage, including hatred and prejudice.

Only you don’t pick up a gun to join my side of this cosmic battle … you pick up a cross.

It was his radical alternative to the crisis all around them.

Jesus offers a freedom from oppression that is costly.

Take up a cross – the most extreme image possible; identification with the crucified person—the least and last of all;

#illridewithyou.

#illdienexttoyou

Mark’s depiction of salvation as a new Exodus… redeeming people from oppression… restoring their wholeness and their voices…

Mark’s depiction of salvation … is costly.

Slave owners don’t just stand by as their free labor is freed.

Mark identifies Satan as the ultimate slave owner… and he must be bound before the slaves can be free.

There’s a price to pay.

After Jesus tells his disciples that he is headed to a cross, not to earthly kingship, the disciples just do not understand.

* Peter rebukes Jesus;
* The 12 argue about who is the greatest among them;
* James and John want places of honor—next to Jesus, on his right and on his left…

Clearly the disciples are not listening to Jesus…they aren’t understanding the cost of freedom.

But, not giving up on them (never giving up on them), Jesus says: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:45).

A ransom – this is liberation language!

This is setting-free from bondage language!

A ransom *for many*…

A giving up of his life…He is headed to a cross… James and John, those on Jesus’ right and left will be on crosses… “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and takes up their cross and follow me” (8:34).

Jesus will be arrested by the Jewish elite – chief priests, scribes and elders…

In his trial before Pilate, various groups will be present, in addition to Roman authorities (15:6-26) …

* The chief priests (Sadducees) will be there, having handed Jesus over to Pilate
* The crowd is there;
* Even rebels are there, one named Barabbas mentioned in particular…

Pilate and the priests and rebels … join together. It is politically shocking. It is less of a threat to let Barabbas go than Jesus…

…with his apocalyptic vision of a world without slavery!

…his vision of a just world ushered in by God nonviolently…

…freeing slaves from bondage…

…being a servant to all…

…giving his life as a ransom for many…

We can’t let him live! He’s a threat to us all—a threat to Rome, the temple system of oppression, and even a threat to those attacking Rome and the temple system!

I was writing this presentation the week of the massacre in Paris of the staff members at the satirical newspaper “Charlie Hebdo.”

I don’t know if you saw on t.v. any of the candlelight vigils or the cartoons or the marches… but I found it powerful to see the way people used pencils and pens… holding them in the air…

Cartoons contrasting Kalashnikov assault rifles with pencils…

Who will win that war? The side with assault rifles or the side with pencils?

I see Mark and his Christian community facing a choice during the war…

* On one side are the Jewish rebels who have taken up the sword, killed many of the priests, retaken the temple and prepared to fight Rome…
* On the other side are the Romans who have lots of swords, the best swords, the Kalashnikovs of the first century…

On both sides people are calling Mark and his community to be loyal… to join up!

* collaborate with the Romans and the Jewish ruling class and live!…
* join the rebel recruiters and fight for freedom!…

In Mark’s day, there were many people vying for the heart of Adventism…that is, claiming to best understand what the Advent of God meant and the actions it called for…

* A holiness movement…
* An approach that collaborates with the most powerful…
* A violent takeover…

Mark quietly…bravely… takes up his pen; holds up his gospel.

And it is in the form of a cross.

Here is another way… he proclaims.

Here is a way that remembers the Exodus!

Here is a way that brings freedom to slaves…justice for the weak…protection for the most vulnerable!

The way of Jesus proclaims that the demons have been defeated! We cannot use violence, for it is the way of the demonic world…

Instead, we will pick up our crosses and follow Jesus – proclaiming the good news.

Note: in preparation for the three presentations for this Bible Conference, I was grateful to read reflections on Mark’s gospel by the following scholars:

Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom* (Liturgical Press)

Ben Witherington, *Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans)

Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Orbis)

Mitzi Minor, *The Spirituality of Mark: Responding to God* (Westminster/John Knox Press)