

Who Is This Guy?

Mark 1:21-45

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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When you meet somebody new, you want to get to know them, don't you? Until you get to know them, most people new to you are a kind of a threat. You want them to be a friend, because then they're not just NOT a threat, they're a plus. Think about a new boss. You REALLY want to know who this guy (or gal) is! So you and your fellow employees are watching the new boss like hawks, trying to figure out just who he – or she – is. If they open up and tell you some things, you'll take them to heart, right? And if you see some really good things going on, why, you'll feel even better about the new guy or gal who has your fate in their hands.

Makes you wonder how in the world the disciples got it wrong so often! They were with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry; lived with him, ate with him, slept with him. They were there for all of his miracles and healings and exorcisms; but more important, they were front-and-center for all the teachings. But at the end, you know what they were saying? "Go to the cross? Who would do such a crazy thing like that? Who is this guy?" Shouldn't they have known?

I contend that in the first part of his gospel, Mark was trying to tell us how badly it was going to go at the end, because from the very beginning they never figured out who this guy Jesus was. Just keep listening, and see if you agree.

Very little is said about this early part of Mark's Gospel. In fact, these verses appear in only one lectionary cycle, and they're chopped up and spread over four weeks. I'm convinced they should be read together, as we've done today.

So you don't get to consider these verses for what they really are: an attempt to show, early in the Gospel, how Jesus tried to tell people, tried to *show* people, who he was, and how people got hung up on the wrong things.

Yeah, I said it, people got hung up on the wrong things. Keep listening, and you'll believe it, too.

There are four "units" in this scripture for today. Three of them are about healing of one kind or another, though they might not start out to be. But one of them is Jesus

trying to straighten things out. Even here, at the very beginning, things are already going sideways!

Let me show you what I mean. The first “unit,” if you want to use those terms, is verses 21 through 28, Jesus exorcising a demon. Look at how the story starts out! It’s the *sabbath*; he’s in the *synagogue*, he’s *teaching*. And it must be going well, because we hear that they were “astounded” at his teaching, because he taught with authority – unlike their scribes. If you asked the question, “Who is this guy?” you’d get the answer, “A great teacher!” But the story takes a twist and turn. Here comes this demon-possessed guy. We won’t get into all the details of what he shrieks out when he’s exorcised, how the spirit in him recognized Jesus as a spirit, etc, though that is important. This thing is symbolic for what was going to happen to Jesus throughout the rest of his ministry. Jesus was teaching powerfully, giving folks the Good News. But what did they focus on? Just read verses 27 and 28:

“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

And then follow that up with verse 28:

“At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

They focused on the spectacular. They focused on the exorcism with all the sound and fury – and not on the teaching that we already know, from the description Mark had given, was powerful beyond their experience and imagination. The word Jesus was teaching got eclipsed by the dramatics of the demon exorcism.

Now of course, Jesus wasn’t going to shut down healings just to force the issue. That would be a pretty cruel thing to do to those poor possessed people, and we know our savior isn’t a cruel guy! He’s a loving guy. So, he went on ahead to Peter’s house, and for all we know, it might have been his first time there. Peter’s mother-in-law was sick, with a fever. Not a big deal to us, but in those days, quite serious. People who got

fevers could overheat, dehydrate, and die. It happened! They did live in the desert, remember. So of course they told him about her; and of course, he healed her. We don't hear a thing about any teaching! But she did get up and serve. We do know from later events that Jesus quite often taught in the homes he visited. This day, it looks like he didn't get the chance. "The whole city was gathered around the door" means they ran out of room inside. They brought "all" who were sick or said to have demons. ALL. And they all got healed. And once again: *Where was the teaching?* We don't hear a word about it, so it's a safe bet there wasn't any.

If you were trying to answer the question "Who is this guy?" and you were asking it about Jesus, you'd have to say, at this point, he was a healer. Wouldn't you? Yeah, I know he started out our little section teaching powerfully. But all the action has been healing. Exorcisms are healing, too. So I think Jesus needed to correct this belief about himself. That's why the very next thing we see is this section that begins in verse 35. Jesus withdraws for prayer. People are desperately looking for him; we assume, to get some more healing done. His disciples track him down. Now listen to what he says!

"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

Proclaim the message that is what I came out to do... In other words, Jesus is being quite plain: I came to be the bearer of the Good News, not simply to be a healer! The healings (and exorcisms) are supposed to be proofs that I'm telling the truth. The next verse, verse 39, virtually tells you that, that he went on throughout Galilee, first *teaching* in their synagogues, *and then* casting out demons.

It's as if Mark is saying, "Got it now? It's all about the Good News, just like we said back there at the beginning, back right after the baptism." But look at what happens next, and you get a sinking feeling. They weren't getting it, they were still hung up on the miracles.

Without a context, a leper comes up to him in verse 40 and begs to be made clean. Jesus has been wandering around Galilee in the synagogues in verse 39; now,

out of the blue, we have this leper. That tells you Mark doesn't care about anything except what this story contributes to the whole. It's a compact healing story: the man asks, Jesus says yes, and the healing is performed. But then there's this: Jesus teaches the man a little bit. "Go on to the priests and show yourself, then do the things the law commands," says our Lord. That's what you do both to show how God is at work, and also to show gratitude, because a sacrifice will be offered as thanks. So does the now-cleansed leper listen to the teaching? No! Instead, he does the one thing Jesus specifically tells him NOT to do: he *runs* throughout the countryside, telling everyone about *the healing*, and not about the teaching. You could predict the results. Now the crowds are so ridiculously large and uncontrollable, Jesus can't even go into towns to teach anymore. He has to stay out in the country. And *still* they bring people to be healed! *Nobody* seems to get that it's what Jesus *says* that's important, what he tries to *teach* them that matters, not these healings. From this point on, Jesus will heal by speaking, not touching; his words will be the cause of healing, with the exception of the blind man in chapter 7 and the possible exception of the deaf man in chapter 6, for obvious reasons. That emphasizes that it's his words that are his power. That emphasizes that this guy is a guy of The Word.

And still, all the way up until his resurrection, no one understands who he really is. They all get hung up on the flash, but miss the faith that is the point.

I'm afraid that it's that way for us 21st century folks. Most people think of Jesus in terms of miraculous stuff. Go ahead and watch any religious TV network, and I'm afraid the majority of the things you see on there will have to do with the miraculous. People who have had their cancer remitted by prayer; accident victims who were saved by some sort of divine intervention; same thing for people who made it through tornadoes, or hurricanes, or earthquakes. You even hear about miraculous financial interventions! These are touted as proof of "the Power of God." As if God needed us to prove anything! And it's all available if you pray. Or if you pray *right*. And of course if you have your life together, like a good little Christian is supposed to.

That means the answer to the question “Who is this guy? is this: “He’s the broker of the miracles we can access by living right and praying right.” In other words, he’s the guy we can control.

In other words, he’s not really God. And if that’s true, heaven help us.

I have another point of view.

You notice that twice in our section of Scripture, here early in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has to encounter demons. They believed that if a demon knew your name, he had control over you. Early in our passages a demon screams out to Jesus, “I know who you are! The Holy One of God.” Then Jesus silences him – *and throws him out*. The next time Jesus encounters demons, he silences them before they can speak, as the text reads, “because they knew him.” Jesus is more than a healer; Jesus is a spiritual being; Jesus is God’s Son, just as the first demon said. If Jesus can be in control of spiritual beings, do you really think we can control him?

You already know the answer to that one. Now you have to wonder if that leaves us powerless. What guarantee do we have that our prayers have any effect, then? Well – did you notice that every time someone asked Jesus to heal, he did it? That’s true throughout the rest of the Mark, and the other Gospels, too. That’s because he loved people. He still does. Even more important, he always has our best interests at heart. He loved us and had our interests at heart so much, he went ahead and let himself be crucified for us, so that we could have a place in heaven. That means that even if we didn’t get healed, we’d still have something powerful at his hand. We win no matter what because of him.

So who is this guy Jesus? He’s the guy who always has our best interests at heart, who has prepared a place for us in heaven.

And yet – ! Have you noticed how self-centered all of this is? It’s all about what each person gets out of Jesus. That’s always the human tendency. That was true back in the first century, and it’s true now. All those people chasing him around weren’t doing it for love of synagogue or religion! They wanted to be healed or to see a miracle. We want the same things. Are we missing the message as badly as those first century

people? If we confine our definition of who Jesus is to “the guy who always has our best interests at heart,” then I think we have.

It all goes back to teaching, to the Word, which is what Jesus was trying to do in the first place, and which is what we need in every place. The biggest thing Jesus can give us, indeed, *has* given us, is teachings that enable us to help each other, is his Word that gives us life. Our prayers shouldn't be, “Lord, heal me;” they should be “Lord, give me what I need to *heal someone else*.” What he gives us, above all, is teaching; along with that, he gives us the Holy Spirit. And that's all we need.

You can come up with your own answer to the question, “Who is this guy?” but I suggest a good starting place is this: “Jesus is the Son of God who teaches and heals the world.” What more can you say about this guy who makes all the difference?