

STUDY QUESTIONS

The purpose of this guide is to present questions on the major themes of the book in order to enhance your study of the Gospel of Mark. Marcus Borg's analysis provides a wealth of material for personal reflection and group discussion. As you read each chapter, select the areas of most interest for further exploration. At the end of each session, reflect on what new insights you have discovered and what further questions have surfaced for you.

When our own story connects with "The Story" of scripture, our lives are transformed. Thus the study questions are designed to help integrate our own experience with that of Mark's gospel. Mark's story is our story as well.

Before you begin your study of Mark, read the entire gospel. If you are participating in a study group, read Mark aloud with all the members of the group taking turns reading. Listen as if you are hearing the story for the first time. Focus on the flow of the narrative, and imagine that you are a part of the story. What are the sights, sounds, and smells that you experience?

After your reading, reflect on the following questions:

- What surprised you or was unexpected?
- What particular images, events, and characters caught your attention and stand out most vividly for you?
- What is the picture of Jesus that emerges in Mark's telling of the story?
- How would you describe the world of first century Israel?

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- What preconceived notions about the gospel of Mark and the life of Jesus were either confirmed or called into question for you?
- What questions arose for you that you hope to explore further in this study?

The Collect for Proper 28 in the *Book of Common Prayer* (p. 236) provides a framework for the study of scripture. Begin each session by saying this prayer together:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so *to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them*, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, that you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.*

Introduction

In this opening chapter, Borg identifies the distinctive features of the Gospel of Mark as the earliest written record of the life of Jesus. He presents the historical-metaphorical approach as the framework for biblical interpretation in which the historical context is considered along with multiple layers of metaphorical meaning.

In the preface, Borg states his conviction about the importance of the integration of faith and reason. He writes that “Faith without reason can become fantasy and, at its extreme, fanaticism. Reason without faith can become arid and amoral.”

- How would you characterize the relationship between faith and reason—i.e., between what Borg describes as “head and heart, intellect, experience, and yearning”—in the Church and in the world today?
- What role does the integration of faith and reason play in your own faith journey?

Borg’s emphasis on faith and reason comprise the basis for the two perspectives that shape the way he views scripture: the first is his Christian faith. For Borg as a Christian, “Jesus is the decisive revelation of God.” Jesus shows us who God is.

- What does it mean for you to say that you are a Christian?
- What does the life of Jesus reveal to you about God?

The second perspective for Borg comes from mainstream biblical scholarship that is outside any particular religious orientation or belief. Along with Jesus, the Bible is the foundation of Christian understanding, and it is the way the Spirit of God continues to speak to us today. Furthermore, the Bible is understood as a collection of writings composed by ordinary mortals that is sacred in status and function but not in origin.

- What does it mean for your study of scripture when Borg writes that “the Bible is not to be interpreted literally, factually, and absolutely”?
- What influences have shaped your approach to scripture?
- How do you read and understand the Bible, and how has the Bible made a difference in your life?
- In what ways does God’s Spirit continue to speak to us through scripture?

Within the perspective of mainstream scholarship, Mark is the “product of a developing tradition” that reflects how the significance and understanding of Jesus’ life and teachings evolved after his historical life. Borg gives three examples of the development of such changes—Peter’s confession, teachings about divorce and remarriage, and Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

- How has your own understanding of Jesus evolved over time, and what has influenced your thinking?
- What are the issues that arise as we continue to adapt and apply biblical traditions about Jesus into our contemporary context?
- How do “Pre-Easter memory” and “Post-Easter interpretation” shape the gospel narrative and our understanding?

Borg also points out the importance of memory and metaphor in biblical narratives. He emphasizes that metaphorical language is not inferior to factual language but is actually more than literal because metaphor is about “the surplus of meaning.” A narrative does not need to be factually true in order to contain truth.

- Some metaphors are linked with memory—i.e., with an event that actually happened such as the exodus from Egypt, the Jewish exile in Babylon, or Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. What

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other factual events in scripture can you name that have taken on metaphorical meaning?

- What are some events or memories from contemporary culture as well your own life that have become metaphoric?
- Other metaphorical narratives are not linked with any particular memory or actual event such as the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Like all metaphors, their meaning has many layers but is not dependant upon the facts of what happened. Think of other examples of such metaphors in scripture and in contemporary secular culture.
- How does the use of metaphor contribute to our understanding of scripture?
- What are some metaphors that describe your own faith journey?

The historical-metaphorical approach to interpreting scripture also focuses on the context of life in the biblical era and how events have been shaped by a particular time and place. Borg outlines the historic context of the gospel of Mark in the concluding pages of the chapter.

- How does this information about the historic and cultural context of Mark contribute to your understanding of the overall narrative as well as the metaphorical implications of the text?
- How does what the events meant then, contribute to their meaning for us today?

In a similar manner, we can also look at the implications of the historical and cultural context of our own lives.

- What are the influences that have formed and informed your own life, especially your spiritual life? Consider where you live, current events, and the individuals who have had an impact on your thinking.

Chapter One: Overture and Beginning: Mark 1-3

Before you begin your discussion, read chapters 1-3 of Mark. These chapters relate the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and introduce the central themes of the gospel as a whole: the good news, following the way, and the kingdom of God.

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Borg compares Mark 1:1–20 to an orchestral overture that introduces the themes or motifs of the symphony that follows. The first verse tells us immediately what the main theme is: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

- How do you define the “good news”?
- Mark proclaims the *beginning* of the good news. How does this good news continue to unfold in our world and in our own lives today?
- Jesus is “Christ” and “Son of God”—the long-awaited Messiah. Borg explains that these titles had different connotations for different groups in the first-century world of Jesus and the early Christian movement. What were the expectations of the Messiah then, and what do we expect today?
- What does it mean for you that Jesus is “Christ” and “Son of God”?

The second theme, in verses 3–4, centers around the “the way” that Borg defines as a metaphor for the meaning of the gospel. He goes on to explain that the gospel as the way of Jesus is a “path and a person to be followed, and not primarily a set of beliefs to be believed.”

- What is the difference between following the way of Jesus as opposed to adhering to a set of beliefs?
- How are we to conduct our daily lives in order to follow the way of Jesus?
- What are the challenges we encounter as we attempt to follow the way?
- In verse 3 we read, “prepare the way of the Lord.” How are we called to prepare the way of the Lord in the world today?

Verses 4–8 introduce us to John the Baptist who is a compelling and pivotal figure in all four of the gospels. Borg calls John a “popular prophet” in the sense that he was of the people and attracted a wide following.

- What was the mission of John?
- What do you imagine it might have been like to see and hear John speak?
- What is the role of a prophet?

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- Who are the prophets of our own time, especially the popular prophets, and how is their message received?
- How does John's message continue to be relevant for us today?

The baptism of Jesus by John is described in verses 9–11. (Also see Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–22; and John 1:29–34).

- Why do you think Jesus came to John to be baptized, and what do you imagine the relationship between the two men might have been?
- This is the first event in the life of Jesus that is recorded by Mark. What was the significance of his baptism for Jesus himself and for John as well?
- What is the difference between John's baptism with water and Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit?
- Verses 10–11 describe the dramatic vision that came to Jesus as he came up out of the water. What is the significance of the vision, particularly the fact that the vision and the words "You are my Son, the Beloved" were revealed only to Jesus?
- What does it mean for the mission of Jesus that he is God's own beloved Son and that God is well pleased with him?
- When have you had a spiritual experience, or vision, in which you felt God's presence very clearly?
- Baptism is an actual as well as a metaphorical experience. What are the metaphorical implications of Jesus' baptism as well as baptism in general?
- Recall your own baptism, and reflect on what it means for you.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness in discernment about what it meant to be God's beloved son (verses 12–13).

- The text says that the "Spirit immediately *drove*" Jesus into the wilderness. What is the significance of this strong language here?
- Why was this time imperative for Jesus, and what do you imagine were the temptations that he might have faced? (Also refer to the accounts in Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13.)
- The "wilderness experience" is a familiar metaphor. What does the wilderness itself represent, and what are the implications of such experiences?

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- Reflect on your own wilderness experiences, and what these times have meant for you.

The first words spoken by Jesus in Mark's narrative are found in verse 15 as Jesus proclaims the central message of his ministry.

- In the text, Borg asks, "If you were to state the gospel, the heart of the Christian message, in a sentence or two, what would you say?" What is your response to this question, and how has your understanding evolved over time?

Jesus proclaims the "kingdom of God has come near."

- The kingdom of God is a metaphoric expression as well as a concrete reality. How would you define the kingdom of God, and how might our understanding today compare with that of Jesus' time?
- The kingdom of God calls for transformation of life in *this world*. What is our role in this transformation, and how have you been transformed by your life in Christ?
- Borg describes the primary features of the kingdom as peace and justice. What can we as individuals and the Church as a whole do to bring about peace and justice in our world?
- What evidence do you see of God's kingdom in the world today?

Jesus also calls us to "repent and believe."

- Borg writes that to repent is "to embark on the way of return to God by going beyond the mind that we have." What does this change of direction mean for our individual lives and our relationship with others, and how are we challenged to move outside of our normal comfort zones?
- To *believe* in the good news involves commitment to God and God's kingdom. What must we do to live out this commitment?

Mark's overture concludes with the call of the first four disciples (verses 16–20).

- What do you think compelled Simon, Andrew, James, and John to leave their families and livelihood as fishermen to follow Jesus?

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- What does the metaphor of fishing for people suggest?

Verses 21–45 of Mark’s first chapter describe the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry as he teaches, casts out demons, and heals the sick. He also finds time for private prayer. This pattern of ministry will be repeated through the remainder of the gospel.

- As you read these verses, what is the response of the people who witness the miracles performed by Jesus?
- In verse 38, Jesus 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.*” What does this tell us about what Jesus understood as the focus of his ministry?
- The importance of prayer in the life of Jesus is noted in verse 35 as Jesus went alone to a secluded place to pray. How and when do you make time in our own life for prayer?

As Jesus continues his ministry in chapters 2 and 3, he soon begins to encounter opposition from various groups as his fame continues to spread throughout the countryside.

- What are the issues that are raised against Jesus, and how do these issues relate to conflict among religious groups in our own time?
- Who are the groups that opposed Jesus, and why do you think they felt threatened by his ministry?
- Why does Jesus’ own family reject him (3:31–35)? What does his family and others not understand about him?

Jesus also appoints the twelve apostles “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (3:14–15).

- Why was it important for Jesus to have others involved in his ministry?
- How are we called to participate in Jesus’ ministry today?

As you reflect on these first three chapters, what is the image of Jesus and his ministry that Mark presents for us?

Chapter Two: Parables and Miracles: Mark 4–5

Jesus continues his ministry in Galilee as he teaches and performs miracles. Read chapters 4 and 5 before you begin your study.

Jesus often taught in parables, and chapter 4 includes three parables that Jesus told to the crowds who gathered to hear him speak. Mark 4:34 states that “he did not speak to them except in parables. . . .” Borg defines parables as made-up stories that are “invitations to see something that you might not otherwise see.” They are meant to be provocative and pull us in to the story for further reflection.

As you read the parables of the sower (4:3–20), the growing seed (4:26–29), and the mustard seed (4:30–32), put yourself into the stories and consider the following questions:

- What do you find in these stories that was unexpected or challenging?
- What do you think Jesus wanted his audience to know from these parables?
- The parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed are kingdom parables. What is the kingdom of God like in these stories?
- The parable of the sower is followed by an explanation (4:13–20) that was probably added later. What does this interpretation add (or detract) from your understanding of the parable?
- Parables have many layers of meaning. How do these stories continue to speak to us today?
- What are some modern-day parables that call into question accepted norms?

Verses 21–25 of chapter 4 contain a number of short sayings, or aphorisms, that were also common in Jesus’ teaching. How are these teachings relevant to our lives today?

The next section of Mark consists of four mighty works of Jesus beginning with the stilling of the storm (4:35–41). This is an example of a nature miracle that Borg describes as a metaphorical narrative or parabolic narrative. The point of such stories is not whether they happened exactly as told (or if they happened at all), but *what the stories mean*.

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- As you read about the stilling of the storm, imagine that you are one of the disciples in the boat as the storm begins. Describe your thoughts and feelings at the different points in the story. What is it like to be in this boat?
- How does the metaphorical meaning of “the sea” in Jesus’ time enhance our understanding of the story?
- What is the metaphorical meaning of the sea for us today, and how does our contemporary understanding compare with that of the ancient worldview?
- What other metaphorical elements do you identify in this story?
- After Jesus calms the storm, he says to the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (v. 40). What is the connection between faith and fear as seen in this event?
- What are the storms in your own life, and how has Jesus acted to calm your fears?

Chapter 5 begins with the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. In addition to being a teacher, Jesus was also well-known as an exorcist and healer. Jesus’ public ministry began with the exorcism of a man with an unclean spirit (1:21–28), and Jesus’ chosen apostles were given authority to cast out demons (3:15). Belief in demons and spirits that could take possession of individuals was widespread in the ancient world. As depicted in the New Testament, such spirits were opposed to God’s kingdom.

- In our contemporary Western culture, we are not accustomed to thinking of individuals as being possessed by demons. As you read the account of the Gerasene demoniac, what are the metaphoric elements that you identify in this story?
- What does the Gerasene man represent for us, and how was he transformed?
- What is the significance of the fact that the unclean spirits recognize Jesus as the “Son of the Most High God” (5:7) when even Jesus’ closest followers do not?
- There are many improbable and even fantastical elements in this incident that make it difficult to understand. However, paired with the previous miracle of the stilling of the storm, what do these two stories tell us about Jesus?

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Read the accounts of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage and the raising of the daughter of Jairus in 5:21–43.

- What is the effect of having these two stories intertwined in the narrative?
- How would you describe the main characters in each story, and what do they have in common? If these characters could meet, what do you imagine they would have to say to one another about Jesus?
- What do these two stories tell us about faith?
- How does the theme of faith as represented here relate to the elements of faith exemplified in the previous two stories of the stilling of the storm and the healing of the Gerasene demonic?
- After the exorcism of the Gerasene man, Jesus told him to tell his friends “how much the Lord has done for you” (5:19). Yet Jesus tells the friends of Jairus to tell no one about the healing of his daughter. How would you explain the difference?
- In both of these stories, the eyewitnesses to the events were amazed. What is our attitude about news of the seemingly miraculous events today and why?

As you reflect on the parables as well as the miracle stories in this chapter, what has been revealed to you about Jesus and his ministry that is meaningful for your own faith journey?

Chapter Three: Rejection, Miracles, and Conflict:

Mark 6:1–8:21

As Jesus continues his ministry in Galilee he confronts increasing opposition from the religious establishment. Along with healings and miracles, there are also rejection, conflict, and misunderstanding. Read Mark 6:1–8:21 in preparation for your discussion.

Mark 6:1–6 relates the rejection of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth.

- How do you imagine Jesus was formed by his experiences growing up in the small, rural village of Nazareth? How have your life and attitudes been influenced by the place where you grew up?
- Although the initial response of the inhabitants of Nazareth toward Jesus was positive, they soon “took offense at him”

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(6:3), and Jesus “could do no deed of power there” (6:5). How do you account for the attitude of the people of Nazareth and the fact that Jesus’ abilities were limited there?

- Jesus himself was “amazed at their unbelief” (6:6). What does this incident suggest about the connection between belief and healing?

Jesus says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (6:4).

- Give further examples of how this familiar saying continues to be true. Why do we reject those who are closest to us?
- How is the theme of the rejected prophet developed in Mark’s portrayal of Jesus?

In 6:7–13, Jesus sends the twelve apostles out two-by-two on a missionary journey to proclaim repentance, cast out demons, and cure the sick.

- Why do you think Jesus sent the apostles out on their own at this time?
- How do you think the apostles might have felt as Jesus sent them out and gave them authority over the unclean spirits?
- How is the sending out of the twelve a model for discipleship?

Sandwiched between the sending of the twelve and their return is the account of the death of John the Baptizer (6:14–29).

- What were the forces in play that brought about the death of John?
- How does the execution of John foreshadow the death of Jesus?

The feeding of the five thousand (6:30–44) is the second nature miracle in Mark. Mark and Matthew also record the feeding of four thousand.

- Because it is included in all four gospels, this story must have had great significance for the early Christian community. How do you think this story might have been understood at the time in comparison to how we view it today?

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- Read the accounts of this story as recorded in the other gospels (Matthew 14:13–21; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–21) as well as the feeding of the four thousand in Mark 8:1–10 and Matthew 15:32–39. What do the similarities and differences that you notice contribute to your understanding of the event?
- What does the setting of a deserted place in Mark contribute to the implications of the story?
- When the disciples called Jesus' attention to the need to provide food for the crowd, he told them, "You give them something to eat" (6:37). What is the role of the disciples here, and what does this suggest to us about our responsibilities as followers of Jesus today?
- In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Give us this day our daily bread." Borg notes that "real bread is central to the coming of the kingdom of God." What does this tell us about the kingdom of God, and the relationship between physical and spiritual needs?
- What does this story suggest about issues of scarcity and abundance?
- What Eucharistic themes are found in this story?
- Setting aside questions of factuality, this story has several layers of meaning and deep metaphorical implications. What is the significance of this familiar story for the Church and for you personally?

Mark 6:45–52 tells of a storm on the Sea of Galilee that is similar to a story told earlier in 4:35–41.

- Unlike the previous story, Jesus was not with the disciples when the storm arose, and they struggled to keep the boat under control in the strong winds. What does this suggest to us about the presence of Jesus in our lives?
- When Jesus got into the boat with the apostles, the wind ceased, and they were "utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:51–52). What did they not understand, and what got in the way of their ability to comprehend?
- Matthew's account of this event adds the scene of Peter's attempt to walk across the water to Jesus (Matthew 13:28–31). What do we learn about faith here?

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- What are the metaphorical elements of this event?
- Along with the loaves and fishes story, what is the picture of the apostles that emerges from this incident?

Mark 7:1–23 focuses on the debate between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem over purity issues. Here Jesus calls attention to the tension of knowing the difference between the commandment of God and human tradition.

- How does this distinction continue to be an issue in the church and in our personal lives today—i.e., how can we discern what is truly from God?
- How does Jesus expose the hypocrisy of the religious authorities in this situation?
- What is the hypocrisy that Jesus might call attention to in our faith communities today?
- In verse 15, Jesus declares that “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” How does this statement radically redefine purity issues, and what barriers are broken down here?
- Jesus further explains this statement to his disciples in 7:17–23. What is the relationship between external practice and our internal state?
- Purity issues are not a part of contemporary culture in the same way as in the ancient world, but what are the metaphorical implications for us now?

Jesus now moves outside Galilee into Gentile territory where he performs an exorcism for the daughter of a Gentile woman (7:24–30).

- At first Jesus refused to help the woman’s daughter. What caused Jesus to change his mind?
- What are the issues today that challenge us to change our thinking, and what gets in the way of our resolve to bring about change?
- How would you describe the Syrophenician woman, and what do we learn about faith from her?
- Reflect on this story in light of the previous controversies over purity laws. What further barriers does Jesus break down here,

and what are the barriers that we are called to confront in our world today?

This section ends as it began with those closest to Jesus not understanding him or his ministry. In 8:11–21, the Pharisees demand a sign in order to test Jesus, and Jesus questions why his disciples still do not understand.

- Jesus has performed many healing miracles as well as other deeds of power. What more do the religious establishment as well as the followers of Jesus expect from him? What are the signs we continue to ask for today?
- How do you explain the fact that the apostles, who were with Jesus daily, did not understand what was happening before their very eyes? What gets in the way of our understanding today?

As you reflect on the events presented in this chapter, what do we learn about Jesus himself and his ministry?

- What are the themes that Mark continues to develop?
- What is the picture that emerges of the apostles, and how would you describe their relationship with Jesus?

Chapter Four: From Galilee to Jerusalem:

Mark 8:22–10:52

This is a pivotal section in Mark's gospel as Jesus is revealed as the Messiah and begins his journey to Jerusalem. He speaks about his coming betrayal, death, and resurrection, and continues teaching his disciples about what it means to be a follower on "the way." Pay particular attention to the development of these themes as you read Mark 8:22–10:52.

The three Passion predictions in Mark's gospel follow a pattern of the prediction itself, followed by the misunderstanding of the apostles and a discourse on true discipleship.

The first prediction follows Peter's confession in 8:27–30 that Jesus is the Messiah.

Although the opening verse of Mark's gospel proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, Peter's declaration marks the first time a follower of Jesus affirms that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus himself does not make

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this claim in Mark. What implications does this have for our understanding of Jesus and his ministry?

- What do you think Peter and the other disciples expected the Messiah to be, and in comparison, how do we understand the role of the Messiah today?
- After this revelation, Jesus “*sternly* ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” On several occasions of healing miracles, Jesus also warned those involved not to tell anyone. What was the purpose and effect of this “messianic secret”?
- What is your response to Jesus’ question of “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter’s confession is followed by Jesus’ first declaration of his coming Passion (8:31), whereupon Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him (8:32).

- Why do you think Peter reacted so strongly to Jesus’ words?
- How do we respond today to the fact that Jesus had to die such a horrible death?
- In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter in front of the other disciples saying that Peter is focused on human rather than divine things (8:33). What can explain Jesus’ strong response to Peter—even calling him Satan?
- What were the divine things that Jesus wanted Peter to see, and what got in the way of Peter’s understanding?
- How can we discern in our own lives what is from God and what is not?
- How do you imagine Peter might have felt throughout this scene?

Following this exchange is the first discourse on discipleship (8:34–38).

- Jesus declares that those who would follow him must “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). Taking up the cross has become a familiar metaphor. What are some of the words and images that are associated with “the cross”?
- How is the meaning of the phrase “take up your cross” different for us today than in the context of Jesus’ world? What are your own crosses?

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- What does Jesus mean by the paradoxical saying that one must lose one's life in order to save it (8:35–37), and what does this have to do with our lives today?

The second Passion prediction and misunderstanding is found in 9:31–32. Here we read that the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

- Why do you think they were afraid to ask Jesus, and how do our own fears keep us from seeking the truth?

The teaching that follows this prediction (9:33–37) comes as the disciples argue over which one of them was the greatest. Jesus once again presents a paradox: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35).

- What words and images do you associate with servanthood, and how might our contemporary understanding be different than that of Jesus' time?
- How do servant and servanthood serve as metaphors?
- How is Jesus a model of servanthood, and how are we to follow this example in our own lives?
- Who has been a servant to you, and when have you been a servant to others?
- Jesus also put a little child among them saying that whoever welcomes a child in his name also welcomes “the one who sent me.” What does this further suggest about discipleship, and why do you think Jesus used a child as an example?

The final Passion prediction in 10:32–34 is the longest and most detailed.

- Why do you think Jesus continued to tell the disciples what was ahead, and why did they continue to ignore his words?
- Put yourself in Jesus' place and imagine what it might have been like for him to predict his own death and rising again.

The third teaching about discipleship comes as James and John come forward asking to sit beside Jesus when he comes into his glory (10:37). As you read Jesus' reply in 10:38–45 consider the following questions:

- How are baptism and the cup used here as metaphors for following the way of Jesus?

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- What does Jesus tell us about true greatness here?
- Who are some individuals who exemplify for you the qualities of greatness that Jesus describes?
- What do James and John still not understand?

As you reflect on all three of the discipleship discourses, how would you summarize what it means to follow Jesus on “the way”?

- What are the challenges of following Jesus?
- What changes are we called to make in our lives in order to follow these teachings of Jesus?
- What is revealed about the disciples in these passages, and in what ways do you identify with them?

This section of Mark also includes the Transfiguration (9:2–10)—a mysterious and mystical event that took place between the first and second Passion predictions. (This event is also found in Matthew 17:1–8 and Luke 9:28–36.)

- How is this event connected to the baptism of Jesus as well as with Jesus’ Passion predictions?
- What is the significance of the appearance of Elijah and Moses with Jesus? (Refer to Luke 9:31.)
- Our desire to erect memorials to commemorate important events is reflected in Peter’s suggestion to build three dwellings on the mountain. As you think about contemporary memorials, what do they say about what we value?
- The voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” (v. 7). What were Peter, James, and John to listen to, and what are we to listen for today as well?
- Afterward, Jesus reinforced the Messianic secret as “he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, *until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead*” (9:9). What does this tell us about the significance of this event at the time, and what does the Transfiguration mean for us today?

After Jesus and the apostles came down from the mountain, we read that the apostles did not understand what Jesus meant about rising from the dead (9:10). Their inability to understand is certainly reasonable since no one had ever risen from the dead before.

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- What questions do we continue to have today about the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus?
- Borg makes the case that Jesus' death is a means of liberation for others and is not a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. How are we liberated by the death of Jesus?

Chapter 10 of Mark includes teachings about wealth in the story of the rich man (10:17–22) and Jesus' further commentary on the right use of riches in 10:23–31.

- According to this story, what is essential in order to follow Jesus, particularly with regard to material wealth?
- What do you make of the fact that the text tells us that Jesus loved the man in 10:21?
- How do we view wealth and the wealthy in our own culture, and how do our attitudes contrast with those of Jesus' time?
- How are we called to use our financial and material resources to reflect the values of God's kingdom?

This section of Mark began with the healing of an unnamed blind man at Bethsaida (8:22–26) and ends with the restoration of sight to Bartimaeus (10:46–52).

- What do you notice as you compare the two accounts?
- On a metaphorical level, what do these stories suggest about our own blind spots with regard to our understanding of Jesus and his call to us—how do our eyes need to be opened?
- After he was healed, Bartimaeus immediately followed Jesus on the way. In light of Jesus' teachings on discipleship and his Passion predictions, what did it mean for Bartimaeus to follow on "the way"?

In this section of Mark, Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem where he will face suffering and death and will rise again.

- What is the significance of Jerusalem on both a literal and metaphorical level for Jesus then and for us today?
- What else have you learned about Jesus from these readings?

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Chapter Five: Jerusalem, Execution, and Resurrection: Mark 11–16

The last six chapters of Mark's gospel record the events of Jesus' final week as he entered Jerusalem where he faced opposition, betrayal, and finally death and resurrection.

Chapters 11–13 tell of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem while chapters 14–16 relate his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and the discovery of the empty tomb.

- As you read chapters 11–16, put yourself into the events as they unfold in this drama and pay close attention to the specific words and actions of Jesus himself. What do we learn about Jesus and how he understood his ministry in these final days?
- What are the metaphorical meanings that are related with the events?
- Reflect on how we observe these events through our worship. How does our liturgy contribute to our understanding of the events?
- This is the most sacred week of the Christian year. What symbols, etc., are most meaningful for you?

Jesus' final week began with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (11:1–11). Imagine that you are among the crowd that cried "Hosanna!" as Jesus passed by.

- Borg describes this event as a pre-planned public demonstration. In light of the political context of the Roman occupation of Israel, what do you think the people who welcomed Jesus expected of him at this time?
- As a symbolic act, what did Jesus intend, particularly in light of his teachings about the kingdom of God?
- How do we understand this event today?

The next day Jesus returned to Jerusalem and went to the temple where he cast out the moneychangers (11:15–19).

- This so-called cleansing of the temple was also a premeditated, deliberate act on the part of Jesus. What were the issues that Jesus was protesting, and how are they still relevant today?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Throughout his ministry Jesus called attention to injustice and hypocrisy. What are the areas of injustice that we are called to act against today?
- Considered together, what were the intentions and effects of the entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple?
- The cleansing of the temple is sandwiched between the incident of the cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14; 11:20–24) which further emphasizes the intent of Jesus' actions in the temple. Borg explains that on a metaphorical level the tree symbolizes the barrenness of the temple and all that it represents. What are fruits that we are called to produce as individuals and in our faith communities today?

Mark 11:27–13:2 presents a series of conflicts in which Jesus is questioned by members of the religious establishment as they attempt to discredit him. As you read this section notice how Jesus skillfully turns questions around so that his detractors incriminate themselves while the crowd looks on with amazement and delight. What is revealed in these confrontations about Jesus, his ministry and the forces that conspired against him?

- How is the authority of the religious establishment called into question in 11:27–33?
- The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (12:1–12) describes a business arrangement that was common in Jesus' time as the owner of a vineyard leased his property to tenants who would not pay the required rents. How is the murder of the vineyard owner's son turned against the religious authorities?
- The Herodians and Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (12:13–17). What did the Herodians and Pharisees hope to accomplish with this question, and how did Jesus entrap them?
- The Sadducees present Jesus with a convoluted situation about the afterlife (12:18–27). How does Jesus expose the ridiculousness of the Sadducees' question, and what does he reveal about God and life after death here?
- In contrast to those who were trying to entrap Jesus, the scribe in 12:28–34 was impressed with Jesus and asked what was the

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greatest commandment. When the scribe affirmed Jesus' response about loving God and loving neighbor, Jesus replied, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." What does this reveal about the kingdom of God?

- How does the riddle about the Messiah and the Son of David further delight the crowd?
- In 12:38–40, Jesus strongly criticizes the scribes who put on pious airs in public yet take advantage of the poor. How is the hypocrisy of the scribes further indicted by the actions of the poor widow in 12:41–44?
- As you reflect on these confrontations, what are the issues that are raised, and how do they continue to be present in the world today?

Following Jesus' warning of the destruction of the temple (13:1–2), the sayings in 13:3–37 are known as the "little apocalypse" in which Jesus reveals signs that the end times are near.

- As you read Jesus' words, what is the world like here, and how are the events described a reflection of the political situation of Jesus' own time?
- What is the relevance of these words for us today, especially the parable about the need to be watchful in 13:32–37?

On Jesus' fourth day in Jerusalem, the plot to betray him is put into action as Judas conspires with the chief priests (14:1–2, 10–11), and an unnamed woman anoints Jesus.

- What do you think motivated Judas to betray Jesus?
- When the woman anointed Jesus with costly ointment, Jesus praised her actions saying, "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9). What did this woman understand about the ministry of Jesus that Judas and the other disciples did not? What are the qualities of discipleship taught by Jesus that the woman exemplifies, and how is she a model for us today?

In 14:12–25, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples. At this time, Jesus institutes what we have come to know as the Eucharist (14:22–25).

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the nature of the covenant that is sealed with this meal?
- What did this meal signify for Jesus himself?
- What is the significance of this sacrament for you personally?
- What are some of the metaphorical meanings of the last supper?

After the meal, Jesus and the disciples go to the Mount of Olives where Jesus foretells the denial of Peter and the other apostles (14:26–31). He prays at Gethsemane as the disciples with him fall asleep (14:32–42).

- How would you characterize Jesus' prayers at this time?
- What is the "cup" that Jesus asks God to remove? (Also refer back to 10:38–39.)
- What is the significance of the fact that the disciples are unable to remain awake with him?

As you read the betrayal and arrest of Jesus (14:43–52) as well as his trial before the high priest (14:53–65) and appearance before Pilate (15:1–20), contrast Jesus' behavior and demeanor with that of his accusers.

- What were the forces that collaborated to bring about the trial and execution of Jesus, and how are these same influences still at work in the world today?
- How does Jesus respond to his accusers, and how would you describe his actions throughout his ordeal?
- What is revealed about Jesus through these events? How does he assert his authority?
- What is the significance of the release of Barabbas in the context of the political climate of the time?
- How would you describe Pilate and his role in the proceedings, and why was Pilate "amazed" by Jesus?

In 14:66–72, we read the account of Peter's betrayal as foretold by Jesus. Put yourself in Peter's place and imagine how he must have felt.

- How do you think his denial of Jesus shaped the rest of his life and ministry?
- How do we deny Jesus in our own lives today?

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The crucifixion and burial of Jesus are told in 15:21–47.

- As you notice the details of these events, such as the darkness at mid-day, identify some of the metaphoric elements and the meaning those details have for us now.
- The only words that Jesus says on the cross in Mark’s gospel echo Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). What is the effect of these words as we read them today?
- As Jesus dies, the Roman centurion who was present declares, “Truly this man was God’s son” (15:39). What do you think prompted a Gentile soldier to make this proclamation? What is the irony here?

Mark’s resurrection story is the shortest of all the Gospel accounts (16:1–8). Once again the women who were present at the scene of the crucifixion play the major role.

- What is surprising and unexpected in Mark’s account?
- What is the effect of the final verse in which the women flee from the tomb seized with “terror and amazement”? How does this story continue to inspire fear and amazement?
- What is the meaning of the empty tomb for you?
- If the metaphorical aspects of Jesus’ death and resurrection are considered, how do we participate in Jesus dying and rising again—i.e., what needs to die and be reborn into a new way in your own life? How is Jesus’ teaching that we must lose our lives in order to save them reflected here?
- How has the world been changed by what happened on that long ago Sunday morning?

As you reflect on the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, what stands out most vividly for you? What new insights do you have?

In Conclusion

Now that you have completed your study of the gospel of Mark, reflect on the following questions.

- In the first chapter of the book, Borg notes the distinctive characteristics of Mark. What was most distinctive or memorable about this gospel for you?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What new insights do you have about Jesus and his ministry—who is Jesus for you now?
- A major portion of Mark is devoted to the discourses on discipleship. What have you learned about following on “the way,” and how have you been called to follow Jesus?
- In addition to following on “the way,” Borg developed the themes of the good news and the kingdom of God. What new insights do you have about these themes as well?
- Borg also emphasized the importance of metaphorical meaning in scripture. What metaphor(s) describe your own experience of this study of Mark?
- Mark’s story is ultimately our story as well. How have you felt your own experience connecting with that of the Gospel, and what difference has this made on your faith journey?