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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
21<sup>st</sup> June 2009  
Pentecost 3 (Proper 7B)  
Mark 4:35-41

Gracious Lord, lover of inquisitive minds, be with us as your son Mark the Evangelist guides us toward knowing ever more deeply the message of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here we are, in so-called "ordinary time." The vestments are green, and will be so, with few exceptions, through Thanksgiving. While through much of the church year we experience the miraculous – the annunciation of an angel to the Blessed Virgin, the Transfiguration of Our Lord as he appeared with Elijah and Moses, the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus – in the summer and autumn we slow down the pace. And in case you don't notice, we'll hear plenty of miracles.

But that is not to say that we won't be finding God also in the ordinary. As we begin the season we'll tell the story of Saul and of David and of Jonathan, a story of faith, bravery, love, and treachery. We'll hear from Paul, of course, as he writes to the churches in Corinth and Ephesus; we'll also

hear the letter of James, and the letter to the Hebrews, which teach much of what it is to be a priest-lower-case-p of the church.

But our gospel readings, except for a few short visits to John, will be primarily from St. Mark. And because there's so much of Mark to listen to over the next dozen weeks, I thought it might be a good idea to give you some background...some things to listen for...some signposts, or roadmarkers if you will, so that in reality, we'll all be doing a Bible study of Mark together.

Mark is a good gospel to read during "ordinary time." Mark doesn't have a birth narrative like Matthew and Luke – there are no angels, no shepherds, no wisemen coming from the east. There's no flight to Egypt – actually, no Joseph and Mary! Mark doesn't have the soaring mysticism of St John – he seems to be just a very ordinary guy telling a bunch of ordinary people an amazing story about this man Jesus. But there are certainly miracles present in Mark – there are healings, there's exorcisms of spirits, there is a feeding of

5,000 and a feeding of 4,000, and, as we heard today, Jesus miraculously quiets a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

And so, this ordinary writer writes really about things extraordinary.

And Mark doesn't waste a lot of time. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels – there's not much fluff, not much imaginative imagery, not a lot of wasted space; he just gets right to the point with the first sentence: ““The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ – as it is written in Isaiah the Prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger who shall prepare the way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...” and John the baptizer appeared, preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” See? Jesus is already around 30 years old -- no Bethlehem, no fluttery angels, no awestruck shepherds tending their flocks – we jump right in to the story, the gospel story about Jesus.

It is now held that Mark was the *first* gospel to be written, around the year 65 or 70. But it wasn't the first book of the

New Testament to be written – by the year 65 the writer, whom we will call Mark for convenience sake, could have read St Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, the Galatians, the Corinthians, the Philippians, the Romans, and the Colossians. It is quite likely that Mark, for whatever reason, felt compelled to pull together a lot of oral traditions – stories – about Jesus. To get them all written down in one place. To provide a bible, as it were, so that the gospel story could be spread abroad. It is likely that he was writing outside the area of Palestine where Jesus ministered – he explains Jewish words, he translates, quite possibly for a community of new Christians.

There are Greek influences in Mark – the story is presented very much like a Greek drama. Mark tells us right off that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and then goes on to weave a story in which the main characters are totally clueless. They just don’t get it, while we in the audience know exactly what is going on. Then at the end of the story, he pulls it all together, with the centurion saying, “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” There are whispers about this Son of God, but not by his disciples; no, the assertions that Jesus is more than

he appears are given by unclean spirits, by God in the baptism and transfiguration, by that centurion — Jesus is called Son of God by *others*; he, revealing his true humanity, calls himself the Son of Man, or the Son of Humankind, or, as one translation has it, the Son of Adam. And so, as if we were in an amphitheatre watching an unfolding drama, we, the audience, know what is going on — and that makes the ordinary miraculous, and makes the miraculous extraordinary.

By the time we've opened the pages to today's gospel, a lot of the story has already been told. John the Baptist has called the people to repent. Jesus has been baptized. The Spirit has driven him into the wilderness, which takes two verses, and Jesus has come into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." He's collected twelve disciples, to be "fishers of men." They've gone to Capernaum on the north shore, which will become something like a base camp. He's exorcised an unclean spirit from a man; he's healed Simon's mother-in-law, and

he healed all who were sick or possessed with demons.

That's just the first page! Busy, busy, *busy!*

Jesus has also begun to get himself in trouble with the religious authorities: they wonder, "With what authority does he command even the unclean spirits, and they obey him?" "This is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God?" He's eaten supper with tax collectors and other marginalized people. He has healed on the sabbath. The word is spreading – this man is dangerous. And Jesus keeps saying to those he heals, "don't tell anyone" – but who can resist?

And Jesus begins to move back and forth across the lake, that vast Sea of Galilee, where weather is unpredictable and storms arise seemingly out of nowhere. Perhaps all this activity has worn him out, for he's now dozing peacefully in the stern of the boat as the disciples move across the lake toward the other side. You'll hear a lot about the sea in the gospel of Mark, and I suspect it is Mark's way of telling us that the gospel needed to be spread – that Jesus' message was meant for everyone, not just one village or one group of people, but for *everyone*.

So here we have this group of men crossing the sea, and a huge storm comes up. The boat is being tossed about, waves are crashing over the sides and filling the boats with water, and these guys are *scared!* A couple of them race to the stern and shake Jesus awake: “Aren’t you frightened? don’t you realize we’re *doomed?*”

Jesus wipes the sleep from his eyes, not a care in the world. He quite possibly rolls his eyes – you know, like this: <eyesroll> and quiets the storm: “Peace! Be still!” And then he probably rolls his eyes again and says, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” And the guys still don’t get it: “Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

There’s a lot about fear, and faith, in the gospel of Mark. But Jesus has a way of banishing their fear: “Peace. Be still. Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid.” There’s something about Jesus that brings peace – perhaps it’s simply the presence of this man, fully human and fully divine, that inspires a sense of quiet, comfort, and courage in the face of their fear.

Certainly Jesus has been called upon down through the

centuries when people are troubled or frightened – and when Jesus is called, a sense of his presence alone may calm us down, give us hope when all seems dark.

That's one of the great gifts of God to humankind: the continuing presence of his Son, who will say "Peace. Do not be afraid, for I am with you always." The gift of God's only son, an expression of God's wild love affair with humanity – and God's great desire for the peace that only Jesus Christ can bring.

*Amen*