ReMARKable: Parables (Chapter 4) Memory Verse: Mark 4:22

February 2, 2025 Scripture Reading: Mark 4

**[SLIDE 1]**

 Today we are continuing to journey through the gospel of Mark. We are going to be taking it one chapter at a time until we get to Easter! I hope you are reading on your own as well and that you are coming to appreciate Mark as our first reporter of the gospel story. So far, I think it has been quite a whirlwind. Mark writes with urgency! He doesn’t linger on details or plot development. He reports the facts and moves on.

 I have mentioned before that, in many ways, I cannot do justice to Mark and his writing since we are addressing so much of the text at once, but on the other hand, it is nice to get a bit of a broader view. If we were to slow down and digest smaller portions, I don’t think we would be able to pick up on Mark’s frenetic pace. We would not see as clearly some of the main themes that he is highlighting. So, even though it is too fast, I think our chapter-by-chapter study is worth doing. So be sure to read up on chapter 5 for next week.

 With all our talk of Mark’s fast pace, chapter 4 does slow down long enough to share with us a batch of parables. **[SLIDE 2]** We have seen a few short ones so far from Jesus. Two of them described the same reality: a pair about new wine in old wineskins and a new patch in old cloth. The new kingdom Jesus is announcing does not fit well into the old forms of religion. Jesus is going to push us outside of what we have known thus far and, for the Jewish people, this meant an overhaul of the traditions and norms that they have held so dear. Another parable we have seen painted a picture of a strongman being tied up and having his house looted by a thief. In this story, Jesus is the thief who comes to tie up Satan, a strongman whose strength, in the end, can do him no good.

 Now in chapter 4 we see nothing surprising here, Jesus is teaching again to a large crowd. The crowd is so large that Jesus teaches from a boat that is just offshore. And Jesus speaks to the people about something of which they are all familiar, farming. **[SLIDE 3]** I myself am detached from this very necessary component of human life, many of us are. But in an agricultural society, like the one Jesus lived in, farming, crops, the weather, market prices, and the fate of sown seeds was likely the topic of discussion on everyone’s lips. Everyone would have been pre-occupied be how the farm was doing. So Jesus begins with a topic that speaks to everyone; farmer who goes out to sow seeds.

 Now, not too long ago, we did an entire series of sermons on Jesus’ parables. Some of what we are talking about today was addressed in that series called “To Tell a Tale”. You can look those up on our website or our YouTube channel. I do want to refer you to that series if you want to have a deeper focus on the individual parables. But for today, I want to look at this chapter as a whole.

 Jesus speaks to the crowds about a farmer going out to sow his seed in the field. Jesus notes that some seeds fall in different places and where they land seems to indicate the fruitfulness of that particular seed. **[SLIDE 4]** There are four examples: seeds fallen on the path get eaten by birds, seeds on rocky ground grow but are scorched by the sun, seeds that fall among the thorns grow but are choked out by the weeds. Now, we might surmise that everyone listening might have winced at the thought of seeds sown with no result. Many would have knowingly shaken their heads. They would have known first-hand what a fruitless seed feels like. Yet some seeds fell into good soil and produced a harvest: thirty, to sixty, up to even a hundred to one turnaround. Relief would have washed over the crowd, because they also know the joy of a good crop. But before the bounty of the harvest, there is tension. Will these seeds grow, or won’t they? And we see Mark picks up on Jesus’ famous words in verse 9, **[SLIDE 5]** “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!”

 Then in verse 10 we have a little scene change. Jesus is with a much smaller group that includes his disciples. And he is being asked about his parables. And Jesus says something in a very harsh way. He says, “God’s kingdom is a secret. It is being revealed to you, but to outsiders, they will have to do with parables.” Why? Verse 12; **[SLIDE 6]** Because, if they were able to understand the way God’s kingdom worked, then they would repent and they would be forgiven.

 I want to step in here and say, **[SLIDE 7]** “What? Wait a minute Jesus…isn’t that the whole point? Isn’t the goal for people to repent and be forgiven? Isn’t that why you came in the first place? Why divide people into insiders and outsiders? Why would you intentionally obscure this good news about God’s kingdom?” We are going to ask this question here, but we are going to struggle with it a little later. So let’s put a pin in it for now.

 And as I sit scratching my head trying to understand Jesus’ words, he speaks in verse 13, “Don’t you understand all the parables?” And just like that I realize, I am not as much of an insider as I thought. I don’t have much more understanding than anybody else. I have heard, but maybe I have not really listened. So Jesus explains: **[SLIDE 8]**

 The seeds are the word of God and the soil stands for those who hear that word. Mark is very adamant; hearing is the verb he is sticking to here. God’s word is heard; that is how it is planted. Maybe God’s word is heard in a sermon, maybe a radio broadcast, maybe a video online or in the conversation with a friend. Maybe God’s word is read…Paul affirms this process as well in Romans 10:13 **[SLIDE 9]** he quotes the prophet Joel when he says, “All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Then Paul addresses how that happens: “So how can they call on someone they don’t have faith in? And how can they have faith in someone they haven’t heard of? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” So we see this domino effect: Jesus sends someone then they go and preach then, people hear the message, then they have faith, then they are able to call upon the name of the Lord, then they can be saved! So Jesus has a group of disciples that he is sending and they are to preach, to sow seeds. And when they preach others will hear. As Paul concludes in verse 17; **[SLIDE 10]** “Faith comes from listening.” Now, we affirm that those who happen to be deaf or hard of hearing, they too can be saved even if they do not physically hear the good news. They can still “listen” to it in whichever way it might be presented to them.

 **[SLIDE 11]** The word is planted into our hearts by way of hearing. And the type of soil we display affects the fate of the sown seed. On the pathway, Satan is at work…he is out to try to steal away the word that was planted. Verse 17, seed in rocky soil can develop no root and fall away when distress or abuse comes along. Now the Greek words that Mark uses here are important. These words could be rendered as “distress” and “abuse” but the Greek words have a more pointed meaning, something like tribulation, **[SLIDE 12]** the root of which means “to squeeze” or to put under pressure. Secondly, persecution, **[SLIDE 13]** the root there means “to pursue”. Remember who Mark is writing to…many Christians in the church are being pursued, many live under pressure from an Emperor who is a loose cannon. If other Christians are being killed for their faith, and I am feeling the squeeze, maybe now is a good time to distance myself from this gospel of good news that I am hearing about. The roots of many of these Christians has not grown deeply and so these hearers do not have the ware-with-all to withstand the pressure or the pursuit of their enemies. Jesus’ words speak directly to them.

 **[SLIDE 14]** Seed could also fall among thorns and grow up only to be choked by the allure of wealth. If we do not resonate very much with the plight of the persecuted church, then I beg you, in this moment, hear this! The lure of wealth, **[SLIDE 15]** the desire for more, the cares of this word choke the life out of God’s word at work in our lives. I would assume this is a very slow process. The thorns sort of creep up unnoticed. They slowly coil around and over time they grow tighter and tighter. It happens because we need money to get by. We need to work. We need to plan and budget and get a good deal and save and spend and invest and purchase and purchase and purchase…and eventually the thorns win out. Who then can be saved? The disciples will ask this very question in chapter 10 but I’ll give you Jesus’ answer now, “It’s impossible with human beings,” he says, “but not with God”. **[SLIDE 16]** We can overcome our issues with money and the allure of more through the mercy and power of God.

 **[SIDE 17]** ((With God we can be good soil and bear fruit….a lot of fruit! Up to one hundred times what was sown! And with that kind of math, we can see that God’s success rate is far greater than the failures. One failed seed is one failed seed, but one successful seed that goes to fruit produces thirty, sixty, even a hundred new potential crops! Even though we might experience planting seeds as risky or potentially a waste of time…we experience tension because we are unsure how it will all turn out, but I think this parable shows us that the future harvest is bright and abundant. The crop will eventually be plentiful. Isaiah 55:11 comes to mind here: **[SLIDE 18]** “My word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend.” That is a wonderful promise we can take with us as we undergo this task of sowing seeds.))

 We can see as well that, even in the explanation, parables are multifaceted. In this case we can apply the parable in at least two ways, as those who go out to sow the seed of God’s word, and also as those who hear God’s word and reflect a certain type of soil.

 Jesus continues in verse 21 talking about a lamp. **[SLIDE 19]** A lamp is made to shine out light. Jesus asks a few rhetorical questions, “Who lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket?” The point being that light reveals what is hidden. Verse 22 here helps us understand better what Jesus said in verse 12. Remember our tough question from earlier: Why would Jesus want to obscure the truth of God’s kingdom? Parables allow people to see but not have insight, to hear but not to understand. There is a hiddenness to the truth of a parable. Why would Jesus want to hide the truth? But as the light shines, everything hidden will be revealed. Eventually we will come to understand. Eventually the truth will come to light. It is not a matter of God desiring that people be stuck in their sins, but it is a matter of timing. Light is illuminating, it drives the dark away. And according to Jesus in verse 22, there will come a time when all things will be revealed. The hidden nature of truth is only temporary.

 There is a sense in which we, as humans, need to be fed in small portions. God’s light is unapproachable. It is so bright that when we look, we go blind. We are like nocturnal creatures being ushered into daylight – we wince and shield ourselves from the sun’s rays. Parables are like a controlled portion, a bit that we can handle. If we eat too much, we might get sick. If we eat the wrong way, we could choke. Jesus is giving us what we can handle, and he allows us to decide if we come back for another taste. Jump ahead with me for a moment to verse 33 and we see this idea. Mark says, **[SLIDE 20]** “With many parables he continued to give them the word, as much as they were able to hear.” Eventually all things will be revealed and when the fullness of God’s light shines, will we be blinded or will we be ready?

 Two more parables: Verse 26, the kingdom of God sprouts and grows overnight.

**[SLIDE 21]** The farmer doesn’t understand how, he is not the one in charge. Jesus says in verse 28, “The earth produces crops all by itself.” The bottom line here is that the kingdom is God’s work, it is not a result of our efforts.

 Then after searching for another illustration Jesus arrives at the parable of the mustard seed. **[SLIDE 22]** The smallest of all seeds that grows into the largest of all vegetable plants. Again, it is by God’s hand that growth occurs.

 Mark concludes this section in verse 34: “He spoke to them only in parables, then explained everything to his disciples when he was alone with them.” So again, the disciples represent those who have ears to hear. They are privy to the secrets of the kingdom. They have seen the light. But there is work to be done if others are to see and believe in this light as well.

 Even though they have this privileged status, Mark turns now to an example of these disciples not being able to connect all the dots. It happened that evening. **[SLIDE 23]** Jesus and the disciples leave the crowd by boat to cross over the lake . Along the way, a huge storm struck. The wind and waves threaten to sink their boat. Everyone is panicked and convinced they are about to die. Everyone but Jesus. He is asleep, Mark tells us, on a pillow. “Teacher, don’t you care that we are drowning?”

 And, as a reporter interested in only the facts, Mark does not bother with excess description. His bare bones account in verse 39 reads: “He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, ‘Silence! Be still!’ The wind settled down and there was great calm.” That’s all we need to know about the incident. He got up. He spoke. It was calm. Then Jesus says, **[SLIDE 24]** “Why are you frightened? Don’t you have faith yet?”

 This rebuke sounds a lot like verse 13: “Don’t you understand the parables? Don’t you have any faith?” Jesus is pouring his heart and soul into these men trying to get them to comprehend the nature of the kingdom of God and they are still confused and still afraid. I can’t help but read these questions and apply them to myself. “Yes, Jesus I have faith, I believe, but the storms of life are very real. The possibility of pain and loss is very real. Yes, I believe, but yes, I guess I am afraid.” Is it possible to weather through the storm with no fear? Could we really trust in God so completely that we do not fear? The bible itself exhorts us nearly 150 times to not be afraid, yet one of those times is not in this story. The disciple’s lack of faith allowed fear to creep in. And we see why in the next verse. 41: “They were overcome with awe. They said to each other, ‘Who is this? **[SLIDE 25]** Even the wind and sea obey him.’” Now remember, authority had been a very prominent theme for Mark. He wants his readers to know beyond any doubt the kind of authority Jesus holds. We have seen him reign authoritatively over sickness, over demons, over the rules of God’s law, over the scribes and teachers. He has authority to forgive sin and now he even has authority to speak to nature itself and calm her fury.

 **[SLIDE 26]** Given all this data, given this unique and definitive display of power what do the disciples conclude? All they can come up with is “Who is this?” Jesus has his work cut out for him. He still has to walk with these men for a time before the light will dawn upon them. Full revelation is still to come. We here today, we can thank God that we have the accounts and witness testimonies and conclusions about Jesus all written down and thought through. We have the whole story. These disciples were living it. The dots they had to connect were not so simple. We benefit today from the confusion they experienced back then. They ask, “Who is this?” We can answer that question. We can simply look to the beginning of Mark, chapter 1 verse 1: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God’s Son”….That is who we are dealing with. And if I believe that, then even a storm at sea cannot give me a reason to fear. Even a traumatic experience, even terminal disease, even unforeseen tragedy, even in the shadow of death itself – I will not fear for Jesus Christ , God’s Son is with me. Amen.