



# After the Altar Call

Confirming Your Faith

## Scripture Workbook

**A Resource of the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church**

**Week One:**

**Read Mark 1:1-45.**

Our reading this week is the first full chapter in the Gospel of Mark. The first verse in Mark’s Gospel introduces us to what is ahead: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.” It seems that the first verse serves not only as an introduction to Mark’s Gospel, but particularly the first chapter. But before you dive in, perhaps you should put on a helmet and buckle your seatbelt, because in the course of 45 verses, Jesus is baptized, is tempted by Satan for forty days, begins his ministry of preaching, calls disciples, drives out demons, and begins healing the sick. In essence, Jesus’ ministry gets off to a very good start as the long awaited kingdom of God begins to unfold on earth. The beginning of Jesus’ ministry is certainly filled with good news.

As you begin the journey of confirmation, perhaps this is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” in your life. Maybe you have grown up in the church, or maybe Christianity is a whole new thing in your life. Either way, as you continue reading, we pray that you will encounter Jesus in a powerful way, and recognize him as one who loves you and calls you into a lifetime of discipleship.

**Questions for Week One:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- How do you feel about reading through the Gospel of Mark?
- What did you read that may have challenged you in some way?

**Personal Reflections:**

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## Week Two:

### Read Mark 2:1-3:34.

In our reading this week, it seems that a lot of new things are happening that might be called *unconventional*. The first story is about a group of people who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus. When they discover that the house where Jesus is teaching is packed, they begin to remove the roof. Yes—that’s right—it’s not a typo. These radical guys start taking the house apart to get their friend to Jesus. Is there a lesson here—I think so! It makes me wonder, what are we willing to do to get our friends to Jesus? What is our church willing to do to bring people to Christ? We might have to do something new—we might have to do something *unconventional*! But the craziest part of the story is that the roof being removed really isn’t the biggest concern of the religious people. They are more concerned about what Jesus says. Jesus has the audacity to tell the man who has been healed, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” But the religious leaders believe that only God can forgive sin. Who does Jesus think he is?

And as we continue to read the passage, we discover that Jesus continually exercises this new form of authority. He calls a tax collector to be his disciple (what?!) and then afterwards goes to his home to eat with sinners (gasp!). Jesus reframes the Law of Moses concerning sacred matters such as fasting and Sabbath keeping—and as he is in conversation with the religious leaders he tells them a parable about what happens when *new* wine is poured into old wineskins (you will have to read about it...it doesn’t work out very well).

In chapter 3 Jesus keeps doing new stuff. He heals a man on the Sabbath day which was a “no-no” in ancient Israel. Then Jesus chooses 12 disciples to follow him. It seems possible that the 12 disciples represent the 12 tribes of Israel—almost as if Jesus is trying to do something...wait for it...*new*! Finally, Jesus’ mother and brothers begin looking for him. Rumors have started that Jesus is going crazy (that’s what happens when people try to do new things) and they want to get him home. But Jesus establishes *new* rules for what it means to be family. Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (NRSV).

### Questions for Week Two:

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?

- How do you think God might be calling you to do something new?
- How do you think God might be calling your church to do something new?
- If we read the passage closely, it doesn't seem that Jesus is doing something new just to make changes—it seems that Jesus was making actual improvements from the social norms. Can you see and explain the difference?

**Personal Reflections:**

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## **Week Three:**

### **Read Mark 4:1-5:43.**

Mark chapter 4 is one of the most important sections in Mark's Gospel. It provides a window into the rest of Mark's story. The parable Jesus tells foreshadows everything else that follows. In the parable, Jesus tells of a farmer who sows seed upon various types of soil. In 4:13-20, Jesus interprets the parable for his disciples, explaining that the seed represents the word of God, and the various kinds of soil represent the different responses people might have to God's word. According to Jesus' teaching, a faithful disciple will be one who hears the word of God and responds in faithfulness.

Perhaps if we read the story immediately following Jesus' parable in 4:35-41, we might feel prompted to ask what kind of soil Jesus' disciples represent. In the story, a great storm arises as Jesus and his disciples are out on a boat. The disciples begin to panic, while ironically, Jesus is asleep. The disciples wake him, asking, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" In light of Jesus' parable in 4:1-34, what should we make of the disciples' response to the storm? Are the disciples like the seed that is scorched by the sun because they have no roots? Are they like the seed that grows up but is eventually choked by the thorns? Or are they like the seed that falls upon good, fertile ground? As we continue to read Mark's Gospel, it seems that we repeatedly face the same questions: How are the disciples responding to the word of God? What kind of soil do they represent?

### **Questions for Week Three:**

- What other stories in chapter 5 do you think might relate back to Jesus' parable of the sower and the seeds?
- Which types of soil do you identify with the most?
- Can you think of a time where your faith was challenged by life circumstances? How did you respond?
- How is God speaking into your life right now? How can you respond faithfully?

**Personal Reflections:**

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## **Week Four:**

### **Read Mark 6:1-56.**

The first half of our reading for the week is filled with disappointment and rejection. After beginning a successful ministry in the region of Galilee, Jesus returns to his hometown in Nazareth, where he is not taken very seriously as a prophet of God. In fact, their faith and confidence in Jesus is so weak that Jesus is unable to do any “deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them...” Afterwards, Jesus sends his disciples out to carry on the mission of God’s kingdom; and as they leave, he prepares them for the possible (perhaps even probable) rejection they will face in some of the towns they will visit. And finally, in Mark 6:14-29, we are told of the ultimate rejection of John the Baptist, as he is beheaded by King Herod.

In the second half of our reading for the week (Mark 6:32-56), there is great success for Jesus and his companions. Jesus feeds a multitude with just five loaves of bread and two fish (6:32-44); Jesus walks on water (6:45-52); and a multitude of people are healed just by touching Jesus’ cloak (6:53-56).

Perhaps Mark chapter 6 serves as a good reminder that there are days when being a disciple of Jesus is encouraging, and there are days when being a disciple is discouraging. Either way, we are called to give our very best; even when it might mean that we are personally rejected because of our faith. Sometimes it is difficult to give our very best when we know that we might be facing failure—but it is important to remember that success in the kingdom of God is not based upon the response of others, but it is based on whether we are faithful to what God has called us to do.

### **Questions for Week Four:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- Can you think of a time when you were blessed because of your service for Christ?
- Can you think of a time when you were rejected because of your service for Christ?

- What are some ways we can prepare ourselves each day for whatever may come our way?

**Personal Reflection:**

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## Week Five:

### Read Mark 7:1-8:38.

This week's reading reminds us once again that neither the disciples nor the religious leaders truly understand Jesus' identity as the Messiah. It is very interesting that the religious leaders challenge Jesus' teaching, and the disciples do not understand Jesus' teaching; yet, the ordinary people that Jesus encounters on a daily basis embrace him and his ministry.

In 7:1-23 the religious leaders challenge Jesus because he does not observe the Jewish tradition of cleansing before a meal. It is important to note that Jesus is not just ignoring basic hygiene of washing his hands before he eats! Rather, the Pharisees and other religious leaders of Jesus' day went through a thorough ceremonial cleansing that is not commanded in Scripture. After the religious leaders criticize Jesus for not keeping their traditions, Jesus responds by reminding them that they have not kept the commandments of God's word. Furthermore, Jesus tells his disciples that it is not what is on the outside of the cup that needs to be clean, but what is on the inside of the cup. Jesus' point is that we can get so focused on appearing to be religious that we fail to realize that having a transformed heart and life is what is really of most importance.

In the story that follows, Jesus encounters a gentile woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter. At first, Jesus is quite reluctant because she is a gentile. (It was a common expectation that the Messiah would come primarily to serve the nation of Israel). Therefore, when Jesus heals the woman's daughter, we witness a pivotal moment in Mark's story. Jesus' compassion towards the gentile woman and her daughter shapes his identity as a Messiah who has come for more than just a select group of people. The same sort of scenario is repeated in 7:31-37 with the healing of the blind man who is also most likely a gentile.

Chapter 8 is closely linked to chapter 7 because it further emphasizes the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus' identity. In Mark 8:27 we get a glimpse of hope as Jesus begins asking his disciples who others say he is. After they answer, Jesus asks his disciples who *they* say he is. Peter correctly responds, "You are the Messiah." Ding! Ding! Ding! That is the correct response! However, in SO many ways Peter is SO wrong. Yes, I know—this is all a bit confusing. Peter is correct that Jesus is the Messiah—but he is wrong because his idea of what it means to be the Messiah is inconsistent with Jesus' life and ministry. Peter's

misunderstanding becomes clear in 8:31-33 when Jesus and Peter get into a heated conversation. We are not told exactly what Peter and the disciples believe the Messiah would be like, but they almost certainly did not believe the Messiah would suffer at the hands of the gentiles. In fact, they most likely believed that the Messiah would come and destroy their enemies (i.e. the gentiles).

The power of our Scripture reading this week is that it reminds us that we, like Peter, can be followers of Jesus and yet we can completely misunderstand his mission. We tend to make Jesus safe, and we tend to make Jesus predictable; but neither Jesus nor his mission are safe or predictable. Also, we have a tendency of making Jesus' mission revolve around us and our personal wish list—but Jesus makes it clear that he has come for everyone—for those who are like us, and for those who are not like us.

**Questions for Week Five:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- How does this passage of Scripture help shape your understanding of Jesus' mission?
- How are you following Jesus in his mission?
- How is your church following Jesus in his mission?
- What risks might you as an individual need to take to be a faithful follower of Jesus? What risks might your church need to take to faithfully follow Christ?

**Personal Reflection:**

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## **Week Six:**

### **Read Mark 9:1-50.**

Chapter 8 marks a turning point in Mark's Gospel. Mark's focus in chapters 1-8 is Jesus' public ministry of preaching and healing in Galilee. But after Jesus predicts his death and resurrection (Mark 8:31-33), his focus shifts to Jerusalem where he and his disciples will celebrate the Passover, and ultimately, where he will be executed.

The journey towards Jerusalem begins a new theme in Mark's Gospel known as "the way." In a literal sense it is "the way" to Jerusalem, but in a theological sense it is the way of discipleship—the way of the cross. However, it seems that the disciples continue to be in a fog and have a completely different understanding of "the way." The disciples seem to think that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem with his squad to set up his kingdom—a kingdom that will conquer by force. However, Jesus continues to remind his disciples that God's kingdom operates on a different kind of power—the power of prayer (9:29), the power to be "the least" instead of being the greatest (9:37), the power of hospitality (9:41), and the power of looking after and showing honor to the marginalized (9:42).

### **Questions for Week Six:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- How do you think you misunderstand the power of God's kingdom sometimes?
- How do you think your church might understand the power of God's kingdom sometimes?
- What are some ways you and your church can live out the power of God's kingdom in a positive way?

**Personal Reflection:**

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## Week Seven:

### Read Mark 10:1-11:33.

In Mark 10:17-52, there is an interesting relationship between the rich man that Jesus encounters on “the way,” and Bartimaeus, a blind man who sits beside the road in Jericho. The rich man asks Jesus what he must do to “inherit eternal life,” and Jesus ultimately tells him that he needs to sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and come and follow him (on the way). However, in 10:22 Mark says, “When he [the rich man] heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” On the other hand, Bartimaeus is a blind beggar—he has nothing but a cloak. When Jesus calls Bartimaeus to come to him, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and jumps up on his feet to find Jesus.

The contrast between the rich man and Bartimaeus is interesting. The rich man is unwilling to give up everything to follow Jesus on “the way,” but Bartimaeus doesn’t hesitate to give up everything to follow Jesus. In fact, Mark tells us in 9:52b “...immediately he regained his sight and followed him *on the way*.” It’s interesting that the story begins with Bartimaeus beside “the way,” and ends with him on “the way.” In other words, in Mark’s Gospel, out of all of the people that Jesus encounters “on the way,” Bartimaeus offers us an image of the ideal disciple: one who is willing to give up everything and follow Jesus to the cross.

### Questions for Week Seven:

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- Are you willing to give up everything to follow Jesus?
- What are some things that might come between you and Jesus?
- Are there things that could come between a church and Jesus? If so, what might a church need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

**Personal Reflection:**

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## **Week Eight:**

### **Read Mark 12:1-13:37.**

Our reading this week includes the most complex passages in Mark's Gospel, so we will keep it short and sweet in our breakdown. Chapter 12 has a few different scenarios that show that the nation of Israel, particularly the religious leaders, have rejected Jesus as God's Messiah and plan to kill him. Although chapter 13 seems like it is a completely different animal, it is connected to chapter 12 in some important ways. Chapter 13 has a lot of apocalyptic images (i.e. end of the world kind of stuff), and we could get bogged down in the details, but 13:32-37 neatly summarizes the essence of what Mark is attempting to communicate. In 13:32-37, Jesus simply explains that no one knows when the Son will return, but that each of us are supposed to live each day as if Jesus could return at any moment. Each of us should live with the kind of diligence and urgency that Jesus might return. It seems that chapter 12 and 13 are connected by the fact that the religious leaders failed to recognize God's Messiah during his first advent, and Jesus is instructing his disciples not to be so blind when he returns in the future.

Mark 13 serves an important reminder that we can be so set in our own ways that we start to believe that God cannot operate outside of our personal framework or preferences. But God did when Jesus was born, and God still does, and most likely God will continue to be revealed in the most unlikely ways. The warning of Mark 13 is what should allow every day to be guided by the fact that this could be the day; therefore, "Keep your eyes open! Be ready!"

### **Questions for Week Eight:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- What do you think of Jesus' parable in 12:1-12? Can you explain what you think it means?
- What are some questions you have about Mark 13?
- How can you be ready? How can you live with urgency and diligence that Jesus might return any day and any hour?

**Personal Reflection:**

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## Week Nine:

### Read Mark 14:1-16:8.

Our Scripture reading for the week leads us to the end of Mark's Gospel. But the end of Mark's Gospel leads us into a whole new world. Perhaps one of the most unique features of Mark's Gospel is that unlike Matthew, Luke, and John, there are no resurrection appearances; which means we do not encounter a resurrected Christ. In fact, the last recorded words spoken by Jesus in Mark's Gospel are from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" However, on Easter morning, Mark leaves us with no doubt about whether Jesus has been raised from the dead.

A few women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, and when they do, the stone is rolled away, Jesus' body is missing, and a young man is standing at the tomb announcing that Christ is risen. Like the other Gospels, none of the male disciples journey to the tomb that Easter morning, even though Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection on four separate occasions (Mark 8:31; 9:22, 9:31 & 10:34). To make matters worse, not only had Jesus predicted his death and resurrection on four separate occasions, he also gave instructions to his disciples about what to do after his resurrection: "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Mark 14:28).

As we have seen on our journey through Mark's Gospel, the disciples have repeatedly misunderstood Jesus' mission and identity, and it has come to a climax in chapter 16. If the disciples' failure isn't immediately obvious, the young man at the tomb makes their absence glaring: "But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, *just as he told you*" (Mark 16:7). Here we can either place the emphasis upon the fact that Jesus had told his disciples to meet him in Galilee after his death and resurrection, or we can place the emphasis upon the fact that Jesus wants to include the one who had denied him three times. Perhaps the thought behind specifically naming Peter is that when hearing that Jesus is risen, and hearing the instructions for the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee, Peter might wonder whether Jesus still wants him to be a disciple. Isn't that a question that most of us have asked at one point in time or another? *After what I have done, Jesus still want me to be a disciple?* The answer is "yes"!

Ultimately, Mark’s story is a story of grace. Perhaps Mark ends with a cliffhanger so that we can put ourselves into the narrative. Each of us have misunderstood Jesus and his identity—each of us at one time or another have failed to be faithful disciples (good soil, chapter 4!); but Jesus still calls us each by name and invites us to continue to follow him. That is good news!

**Questions for Week Nine:**

- Did anything in this passage jump out at you for the first time?
- How do you identify with the story on resurrection morning?
- What can you take away from your reading of Mark’s Gospel?
- What book of the Bible will you choose to read next?

**Personal Reflection:**

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