

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week One

Throughout Leap of Faith, we will walk together through the entire story of the ministry of Jesus, at least as it is told by Mark. Mark is one of the early followers of Jesus. He may or may not have known Jesus himself, but he was probably a traveling companion of the apostle Simon Peter. Simon Peter never wrote a history of Jesus himself, but John Mark collected and wrote down Simon Peter's story. I'm sure that as you read you'll see that Peter's perspective comes out strongly, and that it's a really valuable perspective to have. Mark's gospel (which means 'good news') was the first one written, about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Incidentally, it's also the shortest. That means that, when we read it over 40 days, each day's passage should be of a quite manageable size. The size does vary a bit, as I've sectioned it in such a way as to make good sense of the stories, rather than just dividing it into equal-sized bits.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** For your convenience, we've included the text of the story in the *New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996). As I've worked on this guide, I've found this translation to be in fresh, modern language that has really helped me to do what I most want to do: enter into the story myself. As you read the passage, try to read it from the perspective of the disciples and the other people who interact with Jesus. Really get inside the story. What is it like to go through this experience with Jesus?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions addressed, and gives suggestions of ways to look at the story and what it might mean for us.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply to you, to your six, and to our church.

February 17

Mark 1: 1-13

Here begins the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

² In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God said,

“Look, I am sending my messenger before you,
and he will prepare your way.

³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness:

‘Prepare a pathway for the Lord’s coming!
Make a straight road for him!’ ”

⁴ This messenger was John the Baptist. He lived in the wilderness and was preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵ People from Jerusalem and from all over Judea traveled out into the wilderness to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶ His clothes were woven from camel hair, and he wore a leather belt; his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He announced: “Someone is coming soon who is far greater than I am—so much greater that I am not even worthy to be his slave. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” ⁹ One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ And when Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens split open and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.” ¹² Immediately the Holy Spirit compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness. ¹³ He was there for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

Points of Interest:

- ‘Here begins the good news . . .’—in these first several verses, Mark is connecting the new story he is about to tell with the stories of God's relationship with his people in the Old Testament. These 13 verses are packed with references to the old stories. More than anything, what Mark is trying to communicate is that the stories that have been told for so long, that seemed lost in a golden past, are coming alive right in front of their eyes.

- ‘traveled out into the wilderness to hear John’—I’ve often wondered why so many people would listen to John the Baptist. Imagine it: respectable people from all over Judea are taking the trip out to the desert to hear a crazy, bug-eating guy whose message is, ‘Turn from your sins’—not highly original nor usually very popular. But the people come out in droves! Mark seems to say that the people listened to John because they recognized that his arrival was prophesied. The quote ascribed to Isaiah is actually a combination of two prophecies, the first half from Malachi 3 and the second from Isaiah 40. People saw in John the voice shouting in the wilderness. But how did they know that he was the voice in the wilderness? It might have something to do with Mark’s little fashion report in verse 7. The history of the kings of Israel (II Kings 1:7-8) describes the prophet Elijah as, “a hairy man, and he wore a leather belt around his waist.” John is imitating Elijah in his dress. Elijah is another desert prophet of a thousand years earlier, one of Israel’s most famous prophets. And Malachi prophesied, in the very last two verses of the Hebrew scriptures, that Elijah would come again, to prepare people for “the great and terrible day of the Lord.” When the people hear of John, dressed like Elijah, calling out in the desert, they recognize that after hundreds of years of waiting, this prophecy is coming true. Elijah is here, and the Lord is coming. When he comes, they want it to be more great than terrible.
- ‘he was baptized by John’—Why was Jesus baptized by John? John’s baptism is a sign that you have turned from your sins. Did Jesus have sins from which he needed to turn? It seems clear that that’s not the case: whereas everyone else confesses their sins as they are baptized, God himself says of Jesus, “I am fully pleased with you”—in other words, “you don’t have to confess.” Far from a confession, Jesus’ baptism serves as a coronation. Tomorrow, we will see that Jesus’ first message is “The Kingdom of God is near.” Every kingdom needs a king. In Israel’s tradition, new kings were anointed by prophets. In I Samuel 16: 13, the prophet Samuel’s anoints King David this way: “Samuel took the olive oil he had brought and poured it on David’s head. And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him from that day on.” Just like David is anointed by a prophet with oil and by God with the Spirit, Jesus is anointed by a prophet with water and by God with the Spirit. When God says, “You are my Son,” he is actually making a reference to Psalm 2 (one of today’s assigned psalms). Psalm 2 is a royal coronation psalm: during the coronation ceremony, a priest would sing over Judah’s kings the words, “You are my Son; today I have become your father.” Basically, God the Father adopted each of the kings of Judah upon their coronation. At Jesus’ baptism, God the Father himself makes the same declaration over Jesus. The part about ‘becoming your father,’ he leaves out, because Jesus has always been his son. The baptism is a ceremony marking Jesus as a very special king.
- ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’—John the Baptist is a pretty important person: the first prophet to come from God in hundreds of years; a sequel to the famous prophet Elijah; the most exciting thing happening in Israel. But this is what he says about himself: “I am nothing compared to the one who is coming.” Their baptisms bear out the comparison. John baptizes people in water. He promises that Jesus will baptize people in the Spirit of God. However much greater the Holy Spirit is than common water, that is how much greater Jesus is than John. As exciting as John’s arrival is, it is nothing compared to Jesus. John is saying to us that Jesus has the ability to immerse us in the very Spirit of God. Something that had been very rare before Jesus’ coming—a direct connection with God—will be so plentiful when Jesus arrives that you can take a bath in it.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* When John tells the people that the Lord is on the way, they get ready, like straightening the house and putting on nice clothes to prepare for the arrival of a guest. Confessing their sins and turning from them are the ways they prepare for a smooth arrival. We are all hoping for Jesus to visit us in a special way throughout this Leap of Faith. But our sin is often a barrier to us really being able to receive what Jesus has for us. The way John describes it is that the Lord is coming with very good gifts for us, but our sins, the ways we wrong God and others, create something of an obstacle course, making it difficult for him to get to us. In order to clear a good path for Jesus’ arrival, spend a few moments confessing the ways you’ve wronged others or wronged God recently.
- *For your six:* John creates a sense of anticipation in the people who listen to him. He raises their expectation of Jesus’ arrival. Is there anything you can do for any of your six to point to Jesus and raise expectation? One way John heightened expectation is by tapping into the strong yearning of the people for the day of the Lord. What do your friends really long for? How would Jesus satisfy that yearning?
- *For our church:* John promised that Jesus would immerse us in the Holy Spirit when he came. Pray for us, that we would have just such a baptism in the Holy Spirit during this Leap of Faith.

February 18

Mark 1: 14-28—Jesus begins his ministry

Later on, after John was arrested by Herod Antipas, Jesus went to Galilee to preach God’s Good News. ¹⁵ “At last the time has come!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Turn from your sins and believe this Good News!” ¹⁶ One day as Jesus was walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother, Andrew, fishing with a net, for they were commercial fishermen. ¹⁷ Jesus called out to them, “Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!” ¹⁸ And they left their nets at once and went with

him.¹⁹ A little farther up the shore Jesus saw Zebedee's sons, James and John, in a boat mending their nets.²⁰ He called them, too, and immediately they left their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired men and went with him.²¹ Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum, and every Sabbath day he went into the synagogue and taught the people.²² They were amazed at his teaching, for he taught as one who had real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.²³ A man possessed by an evil spirit was in the synagogue,²⁴ and he began shouting, "Why are you bothering us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One sent from God!"²⁵ Jesus cut him short. "Be silent! Come out of the man."²⁶ At that, the evil spirit screamed and threw the man into a convulsion, but then he left him.²⁷ Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. "What sort of new teaching is this?" they asked excitedly. "It has such authority! Even evil spirits obey his orders!"²⁸ The news of what he had done spread quickly through that entire area of Galilee.

Points of Interest:

- "At last the time has come!"—John the Baptist's message was, "Wait! Something great is coming soon." He's pointing to something beyond him. Jesus unabashedly points to himself. His very first sermon is basically, "Now is the moment you've been waiting for—I have finally arrived." When Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is near!" he is not saying that it is coming soon; he's saying it is here now. A more precise translation would be "The Kingdom of God is within grasp." Now that Jesus has arrived, you can reach out and grab the Kingdom of God, because you can reach out and touch him. That's what's so incredibly good about the news that Jesus is here.
- "Turn from your sins and believe this Good News"—Jesus announces that you have to turn and believe. Then, he calls four men to follow him. Both pairs leave something and go with him. Mark is giving us a picture of turning and believing. Jesus is not talking about simply changing their minds; he is calling for action. What each of them leaves behind is what most identifies them: Simon and Andrew, the fishermen, leave behind their nets; James and John, the sons of Zebedee, leave their father in the net. While our translation says, "Turn from your sins," the things that these 4 men leave are not really sinful. Yet, Jesus calls them to leave. It seems that Jesus is concerned that nothing, not even other good things, are a prior allegiance. Becoming a citizen of his kingdom takes that kingdom coming first. If we are going to be followers of Jesus, we too will have to leave something and go. Jesus is asking for big commitment from us: are you willing to drop whatever is most significant to you to come with me? At this point, he doesn't even tell them where their going. He does, however, promise that he's taking them somewhere better, and somewhere that has something to do with who they already are. With Andrew and Simon, for instance, he unabashedly calls them away from their identity as fishermen, but he also affirms it. He promises to transform them from being fishermen to being fishers of men—he calls them higher. With us too, Jesus has a call for us that will take dropping other things that identify us in order to be given even better versions of those same things.
- "Even evil spirits obey his orders"—earlier we hear that Jesus had been tempted by Satan, but we don't know how it went. Here, we see that Jesus must have been victorious over Satan; he comes from the wilderness with authority over Satan's demons.
- The demon in the synagogue—We see here that the arrival of Jesus' kingdom is a re-conquest. There's a rival kingdom which has gained possession of a lot of ground. You'd think that if anywhere would have already belonged to the Kingdom of God, it would be a synagogue; but when Jesus goes to the synagogue he finds it occupied by a demon. Jesus is here to take back territory from the devil, and he starts with this one person in this one synagogue. By Jesus' authority, the Kingdom of God is displacing the rule of evil spirits.
- 'He taught as one who had real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law'—the message Jesus has is not just nice words. He actually has the power to bring the kingdom of God into a person's life. He can make what he preaches happen. That is great news for us. Jesus is not just a teacher who tells us how we ought to behave or even how things ought to be. He is effective: he can make it happen. He has the authority to make our lives better. He especially likes to use that authority to free us from evil ones who keep our lives from being what it ought to be.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, 'I will show you how to fish for people.' But in order to get that promise, they need to leave behind what they already know. They're fishermen, and perhaps their biggest dream for their lives is to become better, more successful fishermen. Jesus gives them a bigger dream, but it takes dropping the one they had. What is your version of Simon and Andrew's nets—the things that represent your identity, apart from God? What would it look like to drop them? How would you feel about doing it? It's hard to drop those things without having something else to pick up. Ask Jesus if he has a call for you like his call to Andrew and Simon to become 'fishers for people.'
- *For your six:* Jesus has real authority to change the lives of your six. In the synagogue, Jesus teaches, not with words, but with his power. In your prayer for your six today, ask Jesus to free your six from the clutches of any evil spirits who are ruining their lives. On Jesus' behalf, use his authority to tell these evil spirits, "Come out."
- *For our church:* Pray that more and more, what we have to say will come with authority. We don't just want to talk about the Kingdom of God; we want to bring the kingdom of God into people's lives.

February 19

Mark 1: 29- 45—The healing of many in Galilee

²⁹ After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they went over to Simon and Andrew's home, and James and John were with them. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. They told Jesus about her right away. ³¹ He went to her bedside, and as he took her by the hand and helped her to sit up, the fever suddenly left, and she got up and prepared a meal for them.

³² That evening at sunset, many sick and demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. ³³ And a huge crowd of people from all over Capernaum gathered outside the door to watch. ³⁴ So Jesus healed great numbers of sick people who had many different kinds of diseases, and he ordered many demons to come out of their victims. But because they knew who he was, he refused to allow the demons to speak.

³⁵ The next morning Jesus awoke long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray. ³⁶ Later Simon and the others went out to find him. ³⁷ They said, "Everyone is asking for you."

³⁸ But he replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too, because that is why I came." ³⁹ So he traveled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and expelling demons from many people.

⁴⁰ A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you want to, you can make me well again," he said.

⁴¹ Moved with pity, Jesus touched him. "I want to," he said. "Be healed!" ⁴² Instantly the leprosy disappeared—the man was healed. ⁴³ Then Jesus sent him on his way and told him sternly, ⁴⁴ "Go right over to the priest and let him examine you. Don't talk to anyone along the way. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy, so everyone will have proof of your healing."

⁴⁵ But as the man went on his way, he spread the news, telling everyone what had happened to him. As a result, such crowds soon surrounded Jesus that he couldn't enter a town anywhere publicly. He had to stay out in the secluded places, and people from everywhere came to him there.

Points of Interest:

- 'The fever suddenly left her'—Yesterday, we saw that Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom—he displaces evil spirits by the power of the Holy Spirit. We see here that Jesus' arrival isn't just good news for those with spiritual problems. He has as much authority over disease as he has over unclean spirits, and sickness has as little place in his kingdom as demons do.
- 'Jesus went out alone in the wilderness to pray'—It's comforting to note that Jesus himself depended on God to guide him. With all the demands of the people around him, he got alone to listen to God. It's amazing that the Son of God, just after a 40 days silent retreat and after only one day of ministry, sought a quiet place to listen to God before making his next move.
- 'Jesus touched him'—This man was a leper. It was illegal to touch him. Anyone else who touched him would be considered sick himself and prohibited from public worship until he or she could prove that they hadn't caught leprosy. When Jesus touched him, though, rather than Jesus becoming 'unclean,' the river reverses flow—Jesus' cleanness spreads to the man.
- 'Moved with pity'—Jesus heals because he wants to, because he has compassion. He doesn't need to be convinced or to be persuaded or to be bought. He wants to heal.
- Jesus tells the man not to tell anyone, but he spreads the news everywhere he goes. Probably, the man figures that no harm can come of it. He might think Jesus is just being humble, and he might actually thank the man for spreading the news. Even though the man can't see any harm, his choice has drastic consequences for himself and for Jesus. On his part, unless he goes to the priest, despite the fact that he no longer is ill, he will be still be officially a leper. The effect on Jesus is perhaps even more dramatic: remarkably, he has to change his whole approach to ministry: whereas he would prefer to be going to the towns, he now has to have people come to him.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* How often are our days dominated by the urgency of everyone asking for us. It is so easy for my life to be driven by the telephone and my e-mail. I come into the office and say, "Let me just check my e-mail quickly before I get started." The next thing I know, it's 2 o'clock, or 5, or 7. And my entire day was driven by an unreflective urgency. Before you turn on your computer or check voice mail today (or tomorrow if it's too late), pause, get as quiet as you can, and ask God what he has in store for you today.
- *For your six:* For so many of our six, the big question they have is the leper's question: "Do you want to do anything about my problem?" Basically, they wonder, does Jesus care? Ask Jesus to demonstrate his care by filling some need of your six. If your relationship allows for it, consider sharing this story of the leper with them. If they have the faith to do so, encourage them to pray the leper's prayer: "If you want to, you can help me."

- *For our church:* Jesus says, to the disciples, “We must go on to other towns as well.” One of God’s big calls to our church is to plant more churches. We are meant to be going on to other towns as well. Even within the last two months, there have been several people from the North Brooklyn Vineyard who have moved from New York to other towns/cities/countries. Pray that God would be preparing and using them to be powerful messengers of Jesus’ good news in these new places.

February 20

Mark 2: 1-12—The healing of the paralytic

Several days later Jesus returned to Capernaum, and the news of his arrival spread quickly through the town. ² Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there wasn’t room for one more person, not even outside the door. And he preached the word to them. ³ Four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. ⁴ They couldn’t get to Jesus through the crowd, so they dug through the clay roof above his head. Then they lowered the sick man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. ⁵ Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” ⁶ But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there said to themselves, ⁷ “What? This is blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins!” ⁸ Jesus knew what they were discussing among themselves, so he said to them, “Why do you think this is blasphemy? ⁹ Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Get up, pick up your mat, and walk’? ¹⁰ I will prove that I, the Son of Man, have the authority on earth to forgive sins.” Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ¹¹ “Stand up, take your mat, and go on home, because you are healed!” ¹² The man jumped up, took the mat, and pushed his way through the stunned onlookers. Then they all praised God. “We’ve never seen anything like this before!” they exclaimed.

Points of Interest:

- ‘Seeing their faith’—This paralyzed man could not get to Jesus on his own. He needed the help of his friends. Sometimes our own faith and our own strength are not enough to get us to Jesus. That’s okay. The faith of a group of people can accomplish what the faith of only one person cannot. That’s why we think small groups are such an important part of what we do as a church. Jesus recognizes the faith of the paralytic’s friends and credits that to the paralytic. We don’t need to get to Jesus completely on our own steam, and we can carry friends to him that could not get to him on their own.
- ‘Your sins are forgiven’—Imagine the surprise of the paralytic and his friends when they heard these words from Jesus. They carry their paralytic friend all the way across town. When they get there, there’s a huge crowd, with no room for anyone else; if they wait in line, it could take hours if they get to see him at all. So, they go around the crowds to the back of the house, climb on the roof, and dig through it. They lower their friend through the hole, set him in front of Jesus, and hold their breath. Will he chastise them for cutting in line? Will he complain about the ruined roof? Or will he heal their friend? He shocks them and everyone else by doing none of the above. Rather than seeing it as unacceptably rude behavior, he looks at their bold extra effort as a mark of tremendous faith. Yet, he rewards that faith in an unexpected way. Instead of healing, he gives forgiveness. Is he clueless as to what the man wants? I don’t think so. I think Jesus rewards the extraordinary faith of this man and his friends with a gift he considers to be greater than what the man might think of asking for himself. With both the leper and the paralytic, Jesus sees beyond the presenting problem to a deeper need. To the leper, Jesus goes beyond healing to offer social acceptance. To the paralytic, Jesus goes beyond physical needs to address a spiritual one. Sometimes, when Jesus does not give us what we want, it is because he has something even better in mind.
- ‘Who but God can forgive sins?’—The religious leaders greatly object to Jesus’ offer of forgiveness. They go so far as to charge him with blasphemy—that is, claiming that something unholy is holy or vice versa. Their thinking goes like so: “Only God can forgive sins. Jesus is not God. Therefore, he cannot forgive sins and is blaspheming by claiming he can.” Interestingly, Jesus does not disagree with their premise. He doesn’t say, “Actually, more than just God can forgive sins.” But he does claim that, nonetheless, he can forgive sins. His logic runs this way: “Only God can forgive sins. I am God. Therefore, it’s perfectly appropriate for me to offer forgiveness.” Jesus’ offer of forgiveness is an indirect, but clear, statement that he is more than a man. This is what makes Jesus’ offer of forgiveness such a great gift to the paralytic. It’s the most precious gift, because we all need forgiveness desperately. We need to be truly free from the mistakes we have made, and Jesus is the only one on earth who has the authority to offer that freedom.
- ‘Is it easier to say?’—Perhaps the religious leaders think Jesus’ offer of forgiveness is a cop-out. Jesus doesn’t have the ability to heal something so drastic as paralysis; so, to cover up his inability, he says, “You are forgiven.” It’s easier to say, “You are forgiven,” because there’s no proof one way or the other; a failure to heal a paralytic is much more obvious. They think they’re calling Jesus’ bluff. He throws down his cards and shows a royal flush. By healing the paralytic, Jesus demonstrates it was not lack of power that led him to offer forgiveness. He has more power than he was showing, not less.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Let yourself be carried. Is there something you need from Jesus, but you feel like you can't quite get there yourself? Ask your friends to carry you to him in prayer. You are worth the bother and the mess. To the paralytic's friends and to Jesus, a broken roof was insignificant compared with the need of the paralytic.
- *For your six:* Consider praying for your six together with another friend. No one of the paralytic's friends could have gotten him there, but it was easy work for four of them.
- *For our church:* Pray that we will be a "We've never seen anything like this before!" church. Pray that crowds of people come looking for Jesus in our midst, and that they receive freedom and healing like they've never seen before. Particularly pray for any advertisement work that we've done, or will do; that it would draw crowds of people expecting Jesus' goodness.

February 21

Mark 2: 13-3:6—Discussions about religion

³ Then Jesus went out to the lakeshore again and taught the crowds that gathered around him. ¹⁴ As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed him. ¹⁵ That night Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.) ¹⁶ But when some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with people like that, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum?" ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he told them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough." ¹⁸ John's disciples and the Pharisees sometimes fasted. One day some people came to Jesus and asked, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples don't fast?" ¹⁹ Jesus replied, "Do wedding guests fast while celebrating with the groom? Of course not. They can't fast while they are with the groom. ²⁰ But someday he will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. ²¹ And who would patch an old garment with unshrunk cloth? For the new patch shrinks and pulls away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger hole than before. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The wine would burst the wineskins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine needs new wineskins." ²³ One Sabbath day as Jesus was walking through some grainfields, his disciples began breaking off heads of wheat. ²⁴ But the Pharisees said to Jesus, "They shouldn't be doing that! It's against the law to work by harvesting grain on the Sabbath." ²⁵ But Jesus replied, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what King David did when he and his companions were hungry? ²⁶ He went into the house of God (during the days when Abiathar was high priest), ate the special bread reserved for the priests alone, and then gave some to his companions. That was breaking the law, too." ²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made to benefit people, and not people to benefit the Sabbath. ²⁸ And I, the Son of Man, am master even of the Sabbath!" **3** Jesus went into the synagogue again and noticed a man with a deformed hand. ² Since it was the Sabbath, Jesus' enemies watched him closely. Would he heal the man's hand on the Sabbath? If he did, they planned to condemn him. ³ Jesus said to the man, "Come and stand in front of everyone." ⁴ Then he turned to his critics and asked, "Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" But they wouldn't answer him. ⁵ He looked around at them angrily, because he was deeply disturbed by their hard hearts. Then he said to the man, "Reach out your hand." The man reached out his hand, and it became normal again! ⁶ At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to discuss plans for killing Jesus.

Points of Interest:

- 'I have come to call sinners'—Jesus' call of Levi follows the pattern of the call of the other disciples: he sees and calls Levi; Levi gets up, leaves what he is doing, and follows; and they end the night at Levi's house for dinner (just like they did with Peter, whose mother-in-law cooked once she was healed). The difference here is that Levi falls into a much different social class. Tax collectors were wealthier than fisherman, but far less respectable. They were considered traitors, because they were collecting taxes for the Romans, and they gained much of their wealth through extortion. Perhaps the best modern-day analog would be the mafia, making money off of 'protection' schemes. Fisherman like Andrew and Peter would be decent, hard-working small business owners. Levi got rich over extorting people like Andrew and Peter. And he hung out with a bad crowd, the kind of people Andrew's mom would warn him about. Now, Jesus the rabbi is bringing them over to Levi's for a party. When the religious teachers ask the disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum?" The disciples might be tempted to respond, "We were wondering the same." While they hem and haw, Jesus rescues them by answering himself. They must have felt relieved at first, and then shocked—if they really understood what he was saying to them. Jesus says that he is like a sin-doctor; he goes to those who are sick with sin, not those who are healthy. "I have come to call sinners," he says. But four out of the five people he has called are decent, up-standing fishermen. Jesus seems to be saying that they, just like the Mafioso

Levi, were called not because of their goodness, but because of their need for him. When Jesus said to Andrew and Peter, James and John, and Levi, 'Come, follow me,' he was really saying, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' To follow Jesus requires that we admit we are sick with sin. We follow Jesus, not because he needs us, but because we need him to make us spiritually well.

- 'No one puts new wine into old skins'—Jesus is not behaving like a religious leader is supposed to behave. People have come to expect certain behavior from rabbis. The Pharisees, it is said, fasted twice a week. But Jesus didn't follow the example of the Pharisees. This was confusing to people. Jesus answered that they were confused because he was something new and different, but they were trying to shove him into old categories. If you do that, you miss the good new thing Jesus brings. In the case of fasting, the good new thing he brings is the presence of God. Fasting symbolized sadness at distance from God; but the disciples were not far from God: he was eating at their table.
- 'The Sabbath was made to benefit people, and not people to benefit the Sabbath'—the Pharisees fundamentally misunderstand what God's laws are for. Jesus says that the law of the Sabbath was supposed to be something people enjoy. People are more important than even one of the 10 Commandments, and the commandment only exists to make people's lives better. The Pharisees, however, make people the slaves of the laws. Laws, when they are in charge, tend to become rigid; eventually, the rigid interpretation of the law gets in the way of the actual intention of it. This is exactly what the Pharisees have done, to the point that this wonderful provision of rest from God would get in the way even of someone being miraculously healed. While the law can get rigid if it is made the master, people need laws. Apparently, God felt that if he didn't command his people to rest, they wouldn't; we often don't know what's good for us without some help. At its best, God's law provides us that help. But the law becomes rigid. If the law tends to become rigid if it is in control, and people tend to become self-destructive if they are in control, what is the way out of the dilemma? Jesus says he is the way, "I am master of the Sabbath." If we stick close to Jesus and listen to him, he helps us get the best life we can out of following God's law.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Ironically, one of our suggested disciplines throughout this Leap of Faith is to experiment with some form of fasting. We live in a funny in-between time as far as fasting is concerned. Jesus says that there will, in the future, be times when the disciples will fast; but now is not the time. We live in an in-between time: Jesus' death and resurrection make his presence available to us in ways it was not available before, but we are not in Jesus' presence in the way the disciples were. It is appropriate for us both to feast at what Jesus has given us and to fast to show our desire for more. Consider fasting today, even if you are not fasting for the entire 40 days. During your fast, whenever you are hungry, tell Jesus how much hungrier you are for more of his presence.
- *For you six:* One of the main barriers to many of our six following Jesus is a history of someone lording it over them with a rigid use of God's law. In your prayers for your six today, ask Jesus to free them from any undue condemnation. Also, be on the lookout for ways that Jesus' words or God's commands could benefit them.
- *For our church:* Pray that we would be a church that is always getting new wine. It's so easy to start out fresh and vibrant, and end up hard and old. That's what happened to the Pharisees. If you can believe it, when the Pharisees began, they were offering a bold, new way for people to experience God. Over time, though, they became rigid. Pray for God's mercy for our church. A rigid, religious attitude is an easy trap for any church to fall into. That religious attitude dries up our love for people and our ability to receive from God. Pray that God would keep us soft.

February 22

Mark 3: 7-19—Jesus, the crowds, and the apostles

⁷ Jesus and his disciples went out to the lake, followed by a huge crowd from all over Galilee, Judea, ⁸ Jerusalem, Idumea, from east of the Jordan River, and even from as far away as Tyre and Sidon. The news about his miracles had spread far and wide, and vast numbers of people came to see him for themselves. ⁹ Jesus instructed his disciples to bring around a boat and to have it ready in case he was crowded off the beach. ¹⁰ There had been many healings that day. As a result, many sick people were crowding around him, trying to touch him. ¹¹ And whenever those possessed by evil spirits caught sight of him, they would fall down in front of him shrieking, "You are the Son of God!" ¹² But Jesus strictly warned them not to say who he was. ¹³ Afterward Jesus went up on a mountain and called the ones he wanted to go with him. And they came to him. ¹⁴ Then he selected twelve of them to be his regular companions, calling them apostles. He sent them out to preach, ¹⁵ and he gave them authority to cast out demons. ¹⁶ These are the names of the twelve he chose: Simon (he renamed him Peter), ¹⁷ James and John (the sons of Zebedee, but Jesus nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder"), ¹⁸ Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus, Simon (the Zealot), ¹⁹ Judas Iscariot (who later betrayed him).

Points of Interest:

- Jesus has become very popular. There are huge crowds coming to him from all over Israel and even the neighboring regions. Almost like a rock star who has to have the limo ready for a quick escape, Jesus has the disciples prepare a boat to save him from being crushed or drowned. It's clear that Jesus cares about the crowd: he's healing everyone he can touch. Yet, interestingly, in the midst of this moment of immense popularity, he decides to slip away with a few friends. He particularly chooses twelve to be apostles, which means, 'sent ones.' These sent ones are intended to go out and preach and cast out demons—in other words, they will be sent to do what Jesus has been doing. But before they get sent out, they have to do something else first: be his regular companions. Jesus withdraws from the crowd for the sake of the crowd. He realizes that he can't reach everyone who needs to be touched; so he selects twelve people to be his agents, to multiply his reach. His plan works only if 2 things happen: the twelve stay close enough to him to learn from him; and then they go out to do what he does. For us too, being a follower of Jesus can only work with both of these things: intimacy with Jesus and his people; and compassion for the world. We need to be with Jesus, and we need to do what Jesus does. Each is incomplete without the other.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Almost all of us prefer one or the other of Jesus' calls to his apostles. We may be very attracted to being with him, but daunted by the idea of doing what he does; or we may feel driven to go and do, but can't get excited about being with him. Which type of person are you? Take a step today in the opposite direction, and see what Jesus does.
- *For your six:* There were crowds of people in Jesus' life, but he focused on 12 people he really wanted to pour himself into. In fact, even among the 12 there were three with whom he was close enough to give them nicknames. We really want Jesus to do good things for our six. From this passage, it seems that he wants to do so, and you are one of his main plans. What would it take for you to more intentionally give more attention to your six? Are there 1 or 2 of them with whom you are closer than the rest? Ask Jesus for a creative, divine plan to make it possible, in the midst of all of the relationships and responsibilities of your life, for you to spend more time with those 1 or 2. Also, pray for them, not just that they would become companions of Jesus, but that they would do what he does—that they would become 'sent ones.'
- *For our church:* In this passage, Jesus' ministry is reaching beyond the boundaries of Israel to the neighboring countries as well. Continue to pray for our church, that Jesus would give us the ability to give to people beyond our borders. Particularly pray for our budding relationship with the Ukraine and the orphanage we help support, that Jesus would increase our ability to share his goodness with them.

February 23

Mark 3: 20-33—Jesus and evil spirits, Jesus' family

²⁰ When Jesus returned to the house where he was staying, the crowds began to gather again, and soon he and his disciples couldn't even find time to eat. ²¹ When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him home with them. "He's out of his mind," they said. ²² But the teachers of religious law who had arrived from Jerusalem said, "He's possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That's where he gets the power to cast out demons." ²³ Jesus called them over and said to them by way of illustration, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ A kingdom at war with itself will collapse. ²⁵ A home divided against itself is doomed. ²⁶ And if Satan is fighting against himself, how can he stand? He would never survive. ²⁷ Let me illustrate this. You can't enter a strong man's house and rob him without first tying him up. Only then can his house be robbed! ²⁸ "I assure you that any sin can be forgiven, including blasphemy; ²⁹ but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. It is an eternal sin." ³⁰ He told them this because they were saying he had an evil spirit. ³¹ Jesus' mother and brothers arrived at the house where he was teaching. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. ³² There was a crowd around Jesus, and someone said, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."

³³ Jesus replied, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" ³⁴ Then he looked at those around him and said, "These are my mother and brothers. ³⁵ Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Points of Interest:

- 'He's out of his mind'—Jesus is provoking pretty strong opinions about himself. His family thinks he is crazy, and the religious leaders think he is demon-possessed. Both of these opinions come from groups of people who might consider themselves experts. His family thinks they are experts on Jesus. They've known him his entire life. They know his place in the world. And this rock star popularity, bands of groupies, and antagonism with the authorities is not what they expect of him. It's not like him. He must be going through a nervous breakdown, they think. The religious teachers consider themselves experts on God. They know the law. They know what it says about God and about the kind of people God listens

to. And from what they know of God, God can't be behind what Jesus is doing. They recognize that casting out demons requires spiritual power, but it's not God's power—it must be from Satan. Both of these groups of experts get very harsh warnings from Jesus. The religious experts are told that they are in danger of committing an unforgivable sin. His family is left outside while he claims another group as his family. To pretend to be an expert on Jesus but reject what Jesus is doing leads toward being left out in the cold.

- Tying up the strong man—Jesus makes it very clear how it is he casts out demons. He is stronger than them. He wrestles them, ties them up, and then takes their possessions away. Satan would never allow him to do what he does if he had any power to resist, because Jesus is doing too much damage to his kingdom. In the contest of Satan's kingdom and Jesus' kingdom, Jesus is winning. The kingdom of God is taking ground.
- 'Anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven'—Why would there be a sin that could not be forgiven? And what happens if you accidentally commit the unforgivable sin? What exactly is this 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? What Jesus says is a bit paradoxical: any sin can be forgiven, including blasphemy; but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. How can it be simultaneously true that any sin can be forgiven and that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot? Perhaps blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is more than just a simple action. If the religious teachers are our example of someone in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, it seems like blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is more like a gradual process of rejection of Jesus. In their relationships with Jesus, they move from critical, to skeptical, to hostile. They end up claiming Jesus is demon-possessed, which is, in fact, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—it is calling the Holy Spirit an evil spirit. But it was not an impulsive action—it was a series of decisions to reject Jesus. By this process, they've gotten themselves to the point that they looked at a person being freed from the clutches of an evil spirit and they called it demonic. They look at good and they see harm. They look at Jesus, and they call his Spirit evil. They have moved a long way from Jesus. And if they think he is demon-possessed, they are not likely to seek him for forgiveness. And if they don't seek him for forgiveness, they can't receive it, because only God can forgive sins. By their own decisions and their own logic, they have cut themselves off from forgiveness. The apostles are on a process toward Jesus: they are spending time with him, and they will do what he does. The teachers have moved in the opposite direction: they went away from him, and they reject what he does. They've gotten so far away from Jesus that it would be very difficult at this point for them to turn and be forgiven.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* The Pharisees certainly didn't set out with the intention of calling the Holy Spirit the prince of demons. But through a long, slow process they cut themselves off from the source of God's mercy. This is a sobering thing! The disciples, on the other hand, made daily choices to follow Jesus, and now Jesus calls them his family. What are the decisions in front of you today? How could that decision distance you from Jesus? How could it take you another step toward him? Ask God for the grace today to make another step toward him.
- *For your six:* Jesus says, anyone who does my will is a member of my family. Not only does following Jesus' words bring benefits to the lives of your six, it draws them closer in relationship to him. Jesus loves to spend time with people who are trying to trust God. Again, encourage your friends to try out Jesus' advice for their lives. Affirm them for the choices of faith they make.
- *For our church:* Both the teachers of the law and Jesus' family became arrogant, and it left them on the outside. Ask Jesus to give our church a humble heart and a listening ear, so that we can learn more about him and draw closer to him. Ask Jesus to protect us from the desire to be experts.