

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Two

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 24

Mark 4: 1-25—The Story of the Farmer and the Soils

4 Once again Jesus began teaching by the lakeshore. There was such a large crowd along the shore that he got into a boat and sat down and spoke from there. ² He began to teach the people by telling many stories such as this one: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. ⁴ As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. ⁵ Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The plant sprang up quickly, ⁶ but it soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades so that it produced no grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted." Then he said, ⁹ "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!" ¹⁰ Later, when Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples and with the others who were gathered around, they asked him, "What do your stories mean?" ¹¹ He replied, "You are permitted to understand the secret about the Kingdom of God. But I am using these stories to conceal everything about it from outsiders, ¹² so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

They see what I do,
but they don't perceive its meaning.
They hear my words,
but they don't understand.
So they will not turn from their sins
and be forgiven.'

¹³ "But if you can't understand this story, how will you understand all the others I am going to tell? ¹⁴ The farmer I talked about is the one who brings God's message to others. ¹⁵ The seed that fell on the

hard path represents those who hear the message, but then Satan comes at once and takes it away from them.¹⁶ The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy.¹⁷ But like young plants in such soil, their roots don't go very deep. At first they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word.¹⁸ The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News,¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things, so no crop is produced.²⁰ But the good soil represents those who hear and accept God's message and produce a huge harvest—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted.”²¹ Then Jesus asked them, “Would anyone light a lamp and then put it under a basket or under a bed to shut out the light? Of course not! A lamp is placed on a stand, where its light will shine.²² Everything that is now hidden or secret will eventually be brought to light.²³ Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!²⁴ And be sure to pay attention to what you hear. The more you do this, the more you will understand—and even more, besides.²⁵ To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘You are permitted to understand the secret about the Kingdom of God’—What is the secret about the kingdom of God? Why would Jesus say it is permitted to this group, but not to others? Why would he use stories to conceal something from ‘outsiders’? Some people say that Jesus taught through stories because stories are more memorable or easier for simple people to grasp. Both of these theories make sense, but they’re not the explanations Jesus gives. He tells us in this passage very directly that he speaks in little stories in order to conceal. Why would he go through the bother of teaching, but not want people to understand? Why would Jesus, who has been so eager to get his message of good news to the people, want to be obscure? And, above all, is Jesus really saying that he is speaking in stories in order to prevent people from being forgiven? On first sight, this does not seem like the same Jesus who was moved with pity for the leper and who offered forgiveness to the paralytic and who called Levi to be his disciple. What is Jesus up to here? The answer seems to come from the story he tells: he says this story is the way to understand all the other stories he tells. The meaning of this story **IS** the secret about the kingdom of God—and the group which comes to him already knows this secret, even though they don't know that they know the secret. The seed in the story is God's message, and the farmer is sowing the seeds widely in order to find the good soil. Jesus, by telling these little stories, is that farmer. He's throwing out seeds, looking for where it grows. He's looking for the good soil, and when he finds it he will throw more seed that direction. Who is the good soil? It is the twelve and ‘others who were gathered around.’ Curiously, this group doesn't understand the story any more than anyone else: they have to ask what it means. So, what do they do differently?—they stay and ask. They respond to the words when everyone else goes home. Despite the fact that they don't understand what Jesus is saying, they believe his words are important and worth hearing more about. Jesus is willing to tell the disciples what the story means for the very same reason he is willing to eat with sinners at Levi's house. He has come not for ‘the righteous’ but for sinners; and he has not come for people who think they understand his words, but for people who are willing to be confused and ask. The secret about the kingdom of God is this: respond to Jesus' words by drawing closer to him, even if it's with a question; when you do so, you'll get more and more. So does Jesus want those who are on the outside to stay on the outside? No, he says that everything secret is meant to be brought to light. He wants outsiders not to understand his words, but to come inside, by coming to him and asking about his words. Jesus teaches in such a way that it requires relationship; we have to draw close to him to get the benefit of his words. Often, we can assume that it is unfaithful to ask Jesus questions about his words. Jesus says that it's actually the secret about the kingdom of God—the key to getting more of the message of the kingdom is to ask questions about what you have already heard. Questions show that we are treating Jesus' words seriously; and when we take our questions to Jesus, they bring us closer to him—and therefore within grasp of the Kingdom of God.

Taking It Home:

- *For you:* Do you want more words from Jesus? The best way to get more is to ask him about what you've heard. Use this story as an opportunity to draw close to Jesus today. Ask him, 'What does this mean? Is there anything I'm not seeing that you are trying to show me?' Listen for Jesus to give you more words.
- *For your six:* What are the questions your six have about Jesus' words? Encourage them to ask those questions, and to bring them to Jesus. A Jesus Experiment or a small group is a great place to do so; so is praying their questions alone and looking and listening for answers. If you aren't close enough to them to recommend a small group or a Jesus experiment, pray for them. Ask God to give them the secret of asking Jesus their questions.
- *For your church:* Pray for a big crop—30, 60, to 100-fold and more. We want to be more and more transformed by Jesus' good message, and we want more and more people who are transformed. Pray that even during this Leap of Faith, we will be getting more transformative power from God's words as an entire church.

February 25

Mark 4: 26-34—Further stories

²⁶ Jesus also said, "Here is another illustration of what the Kingdom of God is like: A farmer planted seeds in a field, ²⁷ and then he went on with his other activities. As the days went by, the seeds sprouted and grew without the farmer's help, ²⁸ because the earth produces crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. ²⁹ And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle." ³⁰ Jesus asked, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it?" ³¹ It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, ³² it grows to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter." ³³ He used many such stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they were able to understand. ³⁴ In fact, in his public teaching he taught only with stories, but afterward when he was alone with his disciples, he explained the meaning to them.

Points of Interest:

- 'finally the grain ripens'—It takes time for a plant to grow. If we can assume that the seed signifies Jesus' message here as it does in the previous story, then what this story teaches us is that there's often some time between hearing Jesus' message and that message bearing fruit in our lives. If you are hearing words from Jesus but you can't understand how they are immediately relevant, don't be frustrated or discouraged. Wait, and be on the lookout. God's words have a habit of coming alive at just the right time. Days, weeks, or months from now, something you are reading today might suddenly speak to you in a new way. Be on the lookout. God too is on the lookout for when the word comes alive, and he will respond.
- 'where birds can come and find shelter'—The mustard seed starts out as a very tiny seed. It is basically bird feed. But if it is given the chance to grow, it becomes a nesting place. It grows from insignificant to huge. That's the way Jesus' good news is too. It might seem small, almost inconsequential at first. Even the steps we take to respond to it may seem small. But in time, it grows huge in our lives. It grows into a place we can find shelter. Don't despise the small ways you are hearing and responding to Jesus' message. This is not the end of the story.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Reflect for a moment on your history with God's words. What are some words that seemed small when you began but have grown huge in your life? Spend a few moments celebrating what has happened.
- *For your six:* If you can't see immediately how Jesus' words are taking effect in the lives of your six, don't be discouraged. Be on the lookout for moments when the words of Jesus suddenly break through the surface. And be ready to respond when you see something happening.

- *For our church:* In this passage, we see again how Jesus speaks publicly to a larger crowd, but he follows it up with a much smaller discussion. It was in this smaller setting that the disciples really got to understand what the teaching meant for them. In our church, our small groups are meant to be that ‘when they were alone’ experience. Pray that our small groups would continue to grow, and that they would be places where we can really, personally unpack what Jesus is saying. If you are not in a small group, consider joining one. If you are a small group leader, make sure you take the opportunity to work out with one another what God has been saying to us.

February 26

Mark 4:35 to 5:20—The storm and the demoniac

As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let’s cross to the other side of the lake.”³⁶ He was already in the boat, so they started out, leaving the crowds behind (although other boats followed).³⁷ But soon a fierce storm arose. High waves began to break into the boat until it was nearly full of water.³⁸ Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. Frantically they woke him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you even care that we are going to drown?”³⁹ When he woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the water, “Quiet down!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm.⁴⁰ And he asked them, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith in me?”⁴¹ And they were filled with awe and said among themselves, “Who is this man, that even the wind and waves obey him?”⁵ So they arrived at the other side of the lake, in the land of the Gerasenes.² Just as Jesus was climbing from the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit ran out from a cemetery to meet him.³ This man lived among the tombs and could not be restrained, even with a chain.⁴ Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to control him.⁵ All day long and throughout the night, he would wander among the tombs and in the hills, screaming and hitting himself with stones.⁶ When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him. He ran to meet Jesus and fell down before him.⁷ He gave a terrible scream, shrieking, “Why are you bothering me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? For God’s sake, don’t torture me!”⁸ For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit.”⁹ Then Jesus asked, “What is your name?” And the spirit replied, “Legion, because there are many of us here inside this man.”¹⁰ Then the spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place.¹¹ There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby.¹² “Send us into those pigs,” the evil spirits begged.¹³ Jesus gave them permission. So the evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of two thousand pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake, where they drowned.¹⁴ The herdsmen fled to the nearby city and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. Everyone rushed out to see for themselves.¹⁵ A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, but they were frightened when they saw the man who had been demon possessed, for he was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane.¹⁶ Those who had seen what happened to the man and to the pigs told everyone about it,¹⁷ and the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone.¹⁸ When Jesus got back into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go, too.¹⁹ But Jesus said, “No, go home to your friends, and tell them what wonderful things the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been.”²⁰ So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to tell everyone about the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.

Points of Interest:

- In this passage, we have two parallel stories. Both passages introduce us to a chaotic situation: in one, it is the storm at sea; in the other, it is the life and emotions of the demoniac. In both situations, people are afraid: the disciples of the storm; and the townsfolk of the demoniac. In both, Jesus speaks a word and brings calm: the sea goes absolutely quiet; and the demoniac sits down with him, clothed and in his right mind. In both, the people end up more afraid of Jesus than they were of the previous frightening experience (Awe is literally ‘great fear.’).
- ‘Why are you so afraid?’—Fear is one of the big themes of both of these stories. Jesus enters into a fearful situation. He takes away the source of fear, but ironically it leads to an even

greater fear of Jesus. To a certain extent, that greater fear is appropriate. The disciples and the townspeople are getting a glimpse of just how powerful this man is. The disciples are afraid of the storm raging outside their boat, and then they discover that the man they are sitting with in their boat is so much more powerful than the storm that he can calm it with a word. If they were afraid of the storm, how much more should they be afraid of Jesus! It is appropriate to recognize just how powerful Jesus is, but Jesus seems to indicate that there is another option: faith. It's incredibly good news to have Jesus in your boat if you have faith in two things: he is more powerful than the storm; and he cares about you. In that case, there's no place safer to be than in that boat with Jesus. Faith in Jesus' power and in his care are the things that keep us from fear. And, conversely, fear keeps us from faith: even after Jesus demonstrates both his power and his care, the disciples are afraid.

- 'a large herd of pigs'—the presence of a herd of pigs indicates that these people are non-Jews. Since pigs are not kosher, Jews would have no need of large herds of them. This is the first time Jesus has interacted with non-Jews.
- 'Send us into those pigs'—The demons actually beg Jesus to go into the pigs, and—more incredibly—Jesus listens to their begging. Apparently, the demons do not want to report to their superiors empty-handed; they figure that bothering a herd of pigs is better than nothing. Why wouldn't Jesus make it as hard as possible on the demons? And why would he let these poor pigs suffer? I think Jesus is making a very strong statement about the value of this man. This demon-possessed man, who is treated like a chained animal, is worth more than 2000 animals to Jesus.
- 'Go home to your friends'—The man asks if he can go with Jesus, but Jesus sends him 'home to his friends' instead. Most recently, his home was the tombs and he had no friends. He must have had a life, family, and friends before his demon-possession. It would be understandable if he would rather go with Jesus than return to that previous life: what he has found in Jesus is pretty great; and it might be painful, shameful, or embarrassing to go back to his friends after the demon-possession episode. Who knows what terrible things he has done to them, or embarrassing things he's done in front of them? Jesus thinks it is pretty important for him to return to that life, though. It is important for the man: he will be able to see just how much has been restored to him. He's been given a home in exchange for the tombs. It's also important for the man's friends: they will be able to hear about Jesus from this man. The man wants to be a follower of Jesus. In one way, Jesus says no—he doesn't let him in the boat with him. In another way, Jesus really honors the man: he makes him a 'sent one,' an apostle, to his friends. This demoniac is the first messenger to non-Jews, and really the first person sent out to tell the message in his entire ministry. The 12 apostles, though appointed, haven't gone out yet.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* You've been asking Jesus for big things during the Leap of Faith. Have you experienced moments of fear about those things? Is it his power or his care in which it is more difficult to believe? Ask Jesus to demonstrate his goodness and his power to you in some way today.
- *For your six:* The message with which Jesus commissioned the demoniac is 'Tell what wonderful things the Lord has done for you.' That's really the message Jesus has given to all of us: tell your friends what I have done for you. What has Jesus done for you lately? Share the story with one of your six.
- *For our church:* In this story, Jesus frees someone who is homeless, poor, and mentally unstable. He reaches a person from whom everyone else shrinks. The townspeople, on the other hand, had been content to just keep him locked away from them. Pray that our church would grow in our willingness and ability to reach those others aren't willing or able to. Pray that we won't hide from such people.

February 27

Mark 5: 21-43—Jairus and the Woman

21 When Jesus went back across to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. 22 A leader of the local synagogue, whose name was Jairus, came and fell down before him, 23 pleading with him to heal his little daughter. “She is about to die,” he said in desperation. “Please come and place your hands on her; heal her so she can live.” 24 Jesus went with him, and the crowd thronged behind. 25 And there was a woman in the crowd who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years. 26 She had suffered a great deal from many doctors through the years and had spent everything she had to pay them, but she had gotten no better. In fact, she was worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched the fringe of his robe. 28 For she thought to herself, “If I can just touch his clothing, I will be healed.” 29 Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel that she had been healed! 30 Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” 31 His disciples said to him, “All this crowd is pressing around you. How can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’ ” 32 But he kept on looking around to see who had done it. 33 Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and told him what she had done. 34 And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. You have been healed.” 35 While he was still speaking to her, messengers arrived from Jairus’s home with the message, “Your daughter is dead. There’s no use troubling the Teacher now.” 36 But Jesus ignored their comments and said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid. Just trust me.” 37 Then Jesus stopped the crowd and wouldn’t let anyone go with him except Peter and James and John. 38 When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw the commotion and the weeping and wailing. 39 He went inside and spoke to the people. “Why all this weeping and commotion?” he asked. “The child isn’t dead; she is only asleep.” 40 The crowd laughed at him, but he told them all to go outside. Then he took the girl’s father and mother and his three disciples into the room where the girl was lying. 41 Holding her hand, he said to her, “Get up, little girl!” 42 And the girl, who was twelve years old, immediately stood up and walked around! Her parents were absolutely overwhelmed. 43 Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what had happened, and he told them to give her something to eat.

Points of Interest:

- ‘If I can just touch his clothing’—this woman knows that the Kingdom of God is within grasp. She knows if she just reaches out and grabs, she can get a hold of Jesus’ power.
- ‘he turned around in the crowd’—Remember, Jesus is in a hurry to get to Jairus’ daughter before she dies. But he stops to find out who touched him. Why? Because he wants to honor the faith of this woman. He wants her to have the peace and security of knowing that she did not steal a healing: it came from her faith. And he wants her to know that he cares. While everyone’s mind is on the daughter of this important man Jairus, Jesus calls this woman his daughter. He cares about her in the exact same way Jairus cares about his daughter.
- ‘Go in peace’—this woman, like the disciples and the townspeople in yesterday’s passage, has a choice between fear and faith. She is afraid of being found out, but she trusts the man who heals her. She steps forward in faith, and her fear disappears; she comes ill and frightened, and leaves well and peaceful.
- ‘Don’t be afraid. Just trust me’—Jairus too has the choice between fear and faith. He might at this point distrust whether or not Jesus cares, because he stopped to have the conversation with this woman. He also certainly doubts that Jesus has the power to raise the dead. Jesus asks him not to give up his faith, even though it looks as if the situation is hopeless. Jesus’ care and his power go further than we would ever guess.
- ‘not to tell anyone what had happened’—Jesus raises someone from the dead, but only his three closest disciples, the parents, and the girl know. Why wouldn’t Jesus want the story to be told? The answer goes back to the story of the sower. While Jesus is inside Jairus’ house, he keeps everyone else, including most of his disciples, outside. The last time we heard the word ‘outside’ is in Jesus’ explanation of the story of the sower: ‘I am using these stories to conceal everything about it from outsiders.’ Jesus uses stories to sift out the good soil from the bad, those who are responsive to his words from those who aren’t. Outsiders, those unresponsive to his words, get only stories. Both the disciples and the mourners have been unresponsive to his words: the disciples answer sarcastically when he asks who touched him; and the mourners laugh when he says the child is only sleeping. Because of that, they

are left out on the exciting thing going on inside the house. Of course, they will wonder what happened when they actually see the girl alive. But they might very well explain it away by saying, “I guess she was only sleeping.” Their lack of belief in a miracle left them out of experiencing one. Sarcasm and skepticism are easy places to go when we don’t understand what God is doing, but they harden our hearts. When the disciples ask an open question of Jesus, they get more words and more of the kingdom of God. When they ask a sarcastic question, they leave themselves out in the cold.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The woman was ill for twelve years, and had tried everything else; only Jesus could help her. Is there a long-standing problem you have, one that it’s even tempting to accept as a fact of life? Reach out and grab for Jesus. Even the hem of his garment has enough power to help you.
- *For your six:* The woman tries to take care of the problem quietly, and to stay in the crowd. When Jesus calls her out, she comes forward, but afraid that she will be rebuked for stealing a healing. Instead, she gets validation, blessing, and peace from him. Often our friends have things they want from Jesus, but they want to address them quietly. They don’t want to bother Jesus, or they’re afraid of what he thinks about them. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give them the faith to step out and allow themselves to be seen so that they can receive the full blessing Jesus has for them.
- *For our church:* In the face of fear and desperate circumstances, Jairus and the woman choose faith rather than skepticism or sarcasm. Pray for that kind of overcoming faith for our church, the faith to genuinely believe in Jesus’ power even when he asks crazy things of us.

February 28

Mark 6: 1-13

Jesus left that part of the country and returned with his disciples to Nazareth, his hometown. ² The next Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They asked, “Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform such miracles?” ³ He’s just the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us.” They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. ⁴ Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.” ⁵ And because of their unbelief, he couldn’t do any mighty miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then Jesus went out from village to village, teaching. ⁷ And he called his twelve disciples together and sent them out two by two, with authority to cast out evil spirits. ⁸ He told them to take nothing with them except a walking stick—no food, no traveler’s bag, no money. ⁹ He told them to wear sandals but not to take even an extra coat. ¹⁰ “When you enter each village, be a guest in only one home,” he said. ¹¹ “And if a village won’t welcome you or listen to you, shake off its dust from your feet as you leave. It is a sign that you have abandoned that village to its fate.” ¹² So the disciples went out, telling all they met to turn from their sins. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and healed many sick people, anointing them with olive oil.

Points of Interest:

- ‘They were greatly offended’—The people in Jesus’ hometown are actually offended by the miracles. It doesn’t say that they don’t believe he can do them; it says that they don’t like the fact that he can do them. Jesus has offended their sensibilities, by not staying in his place. They reject the miracles, because they don’t like the fact that Jesus can do them.
- ‘sent them out’—Jesus finally sends out the ‘sent ones.’ They go with nothing but their faith in Jesus. They need to trust Jesus for their own provision and for the power to do the ministry he assigns them. And it works! They are able to do exactly what he has done: preach the message, cast out demons, and heal the sick. They become carriers of Jesus’ kingdom.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus tells the disciples to be a guest in only one home. He wants them to focus on depth rather than breadth. In the long term, the village gets a better hold of the kingdom of God if the disciples spend a lot of time with one family than a little time with every family. Jesus wants them to stay with one family so that that family can really get to know the apostles and the apostles can really get to know them. So that they can see one another at their best and worst, and so that they can have influence on one another. What would it mean for you to focus on 'only one home,' one person or small group of people? What is attractive about that? Unattractive?
- *For your six:* Jesus says, 'If a village won't welcome you or listen to you, shake off its dust from your feet as you leave.' In the end, Jesus lets people choose for themselves whether they will listen or not. He tells the disciples that if a town won't listen to them, they should respect the choice, leave the town to its own decision, and find a more welcome place. To stay in the unwelcoming town would have been frustrating to the town and the disciples; and meanwhile a more responsive town may not have gotten the chance to hear the message. Has one of your six told you, in no uncertain terms, that they are not interested? It may be time for a strategic withdrawal. Commit that person to God, but perhaps it is time to focus your energies elsewhere.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would be marked by doing what Jesus does. Pray for more power to our message, more people free from the power of evil spirits, and more physical healing. We don't want to leave out any part of the message Jesus gave us.

March 1

Mark 6: 14-29—Herod and the death of John the Baptist

¹⁴ Herod Antipas, the king, soon heard about Jesus, because people everywhere were talking about him. Some were saying, "This must be John the Baptist come back to life again. That is why he can do such miracles." ¹⁵ Others thought Jesus was the ancient prophet Elijah. Still others thought he was a prophet like the other great prophets of the past. ¹⁶ When Herod heard about Jesus, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has come back from the dead." ¹⁷ For Herod had sent soldiers to arrest and imprison John as a favor to Herodias. She had been his brother Philip's wife, but Herod had married her. ¹⁸ John kept telling Herod, "It is illegal for you to marry your brother's wife." ¹⁹ Herodias was enraged and wanted John killed in revenge, but without Herod's approval she was powerless. ²⁰ And Herod respected John, knowing that he was a good and holy man, so he kept him under his protection. Herod was disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him. ²¹ Herodias's chance finally came. It was Herod's birthday, and he gave a party for his palace aides, army officers, and the leading citizens of Galilee. ²² Then his daughter, also named Herodias, came in and performed a dance that greatly pleased them all. "Ask me for anything you like," the king said to the girl, "and I will give it to you." ²³ Then he promised, "I will give you whatever you ask, up to half of my kingdom!" ²⁴ She went out and asked her mother, "What should I ask for?" Her mother told her, "Ask for John the Baptist's head!" ²⁵ So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, "I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!" ²⁶ Then the king was very sorry, but he was embarrassed to break his oath in front of his guests. ²⁷ So he sent an executioner to the prison to cut off John's head and bring it to him. The soldier beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a tray, and gave it to the girl, who took it to her mother. ²⁹ When John's disciples heard what had happened, they came for his body and buried it in a tomb.

Points of Interest:

- 'people everywhere were talking about him'—The miracles and teaching of Jesus and his disciples are causing quite a stir. Rumors of him even reach the king. And the big question on everyone's mind is, 'Who is this guy?' They've seen and heard enough to know that he's no ordinary man, but they don't know exactly what it all means.
- "John kept telling Herod, 'It is illegal for you to marry your brother's wife.'"—John the Baptist speaks with integrity. He has the same message for the king as he has for everyone else: turn from your sins.

- 'Herod was disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen'—He likes to hear John's message of repentance; it rings true to him. Yet, he doesn't have the resolve to actually make the path straight for Jesus. He refuses to repent. In the end, rather than listening to John's message, he cuts off the source of the words. He chooses not to turn. Because of that, when Jesus comes, he can't see him. He can't reach out and grasp the kingdom of God, because rather than seeing Jesus all he sees is John's ghost. His own doubly guilty conscience gets in the way of Jesus coming to him.
- 'I will give you whatever you ask, up to half of my kingdom!'—Herod is playacting a bit here. He's acting more magnificent than he really is. In point of fact, he doesn't have the authority to give away half of his kingdom: he is a puppet king of Rome, and only the Romans have the authority to divide his kingdom. But his vanity costs him dearly: because of his foolish oath, he is forced to do what he doesn't want to do: kill John the Baptist.
- This is the first passage since Jesus' baptism in which Jesus isn't the primary actor. All along, we've seen life in the Kingdom of God, a kingdom full of freedom, healing, deliverance, and dignity. Here we get to compare Jesus' kingdom with the kingdom of Herod. In Herod's kingdom, there is entrapment, death, and debasement. Praise Jesus for bringing his kingdom.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Part of Herod's mess is caused by his flippant promise. It would have been best if he had never made it. It would have been better for him to face the embarrassment of breaking his word than seeing it through, but he felt stuck. Is a foolish promise keeping you back from responding to the good news? What are the consequences of extricating yourself from the promise? Ask Jesus if that's what you should do, and ask for the strength to do it.
- *For your six:* Herod is intrigued by the message of John, but to listen to it would have big consequences for his life. He isn't willing to face those consequences. Our friends may also be daunted by the effects following Jesus would have on their lives. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give them boldness to move forward. Also, Herod's decision to listen is made more complex by the fact that his wife is completely uninterested. Pray for the close relationships of your six that they would also be open to Jesus and his words.
- *For our church:* Jesus sent the twelve out, and it caused a stir. But the buzz was about Jesus, not the disciples. Pray that our work as a church will cause a buzz here in North Brooklyn, and that the buzz will be about Jesus, not our church.

March 2

Mark 6: 30-44

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and what they had taught. ³¹ Then Jesus said, "Let's get away from the crowds for a while and rest." There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat. ³² They left by boat for a quieter spot. ³³ But many people saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the shore and met them as they landed. ³⁴ A vast crowd was there as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he taught them many things. ³⁵ Late in the afternoon his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and it is getting late. ³⁶ Send the crowds away so they can go to the nearby farms and villages and buy themselves some food." ³⁷ But Jesus said, "You feed them." "With what?" they asked. "It would take a small fortune to buy food for all this crowd!" ³⁸ "How much food do you have?" he asked. "Go and find out." They came back and reported, "We have five loaves of bread and two fish." ³⁹ Then Jesus told the crowd to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat in groups of fifty or a hundred. ⁴¹ Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and asked God's blessing on the food. Breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread and fish to the disciples to give to the people. ⁴² They all ate as much as they wanted, ⁴³ and they picked up twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish. ⁴⁴ Five thousand men had eaten from those five loaves!

Points of Interest:

- ‘many people saw them leaving’—The people recognize the disciples, not just Jesus. That’s because the disciples have been among the people preaching. Many of these people are coming to Jesus because they are responding to the teaching of the disciples.
- ‘he had compassion on them’—Jesus’ intention was to be alone with the disciples to rest, but the crowds get in the way of the plan. Rather than being irritated, Jesus has a heart of compassion for the crowds. When he sees how hungry they are for care and guidance, he can’t help but respond. Jesus is unashamed about seeking rest when he needs it, but he is also not selfish or rigid about his rest. He’s willing to lay aside his rest for the sake of the people. It’s easy to be either too soft or too hard about rest. Often, we don’t get away from the crowds for rest when we really need it. A false sense of responsibility or the ego boost of being needed prevent us from putting aside our busyness to rest with God or a small group of friends. On the other hand, we can also have an attitude of entitlement toward our rest, thinking we deserve our rest and nothing or no one can get in the way. We treat people harshly, because we see them only as impediments to rest. Jesus was quick to recognize his need for rest, and open-handed about serving others instead when he saw a great need.
- ‘You feed them’—Jesus has the heart of a shepherd for these people, and he expects the disciples to have that same attitude. These people are following the disciples too, after all. A shepherd feeds the flock. So, if this flock is hungry, Jesus reasons, the disciples should feed them. The disciples have the exact opposite instinct to the instinct of a shepherd. The shepherd’s biggest job is to keep the flock together, but the disciples want to scatter them everywhere. They have a lot to learn about shepherding.
- ‘With what?’—Jesus has called them to a task that they simply don’t have the resources to do on their own. But that’s okay. They are with Jesus. He will give them what they need. The disciples do, in fact, end up feeding the crowds. Jesus miraculously multiplies the bread, and then he gives it to the disciples to feed the people.
- ‘twelve baskets of leftover bread and fish’—Jesus does really ask a lot of the disciples here. When they are tired and hungry already, he has them give up all their available food to feed a huge crowd of people. But he gives the disciples more than they give the people. They give up 5 loaves and 2 fish. After they feed the crowd, they have 12 baskets of food left over—one entire basket for each disciple.

Taking It Home:

- *For you:* What is a task to which Jesus has called you for which you don’t have the resources? Is it leading a small group? Praying for your six? Loving a particular person? Give Jesus everything you have and ask him to multiply it. Jesus will always give us enough resources to complete the mission he’s given us; and he’ll always give us more than we give.
- *For your six:* Jesus has the heart of a shepherd for the crowd: he sees their needs, has compassion on them, and does what he can to care for them. Ask Jesus to give you a heart of a shepherd for your six.
- *For our church:* Ask God for a miracle of multiplication, especially for the church’s financial situation. Ask God to multiply what we have, so that we do not simply breakeven, but that we actually have ‘leftovers’ to give away, just as there were leftovers for the disciples and crowd in today’s reading.

