

40 DAYS OF FAITH ***The User's Manual!***

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Welcome to 40 Days of Faith!

A lot of us have been looking forward to this season for quite some time, and we're believing God that this could be your greatest 40 days ever! This manual should walk you through everything you know to get going. My guess is that the introductory material will take you, give or take, maybe a half hour or forty-five minutes to get through—but, man alive, will it be time well-spent!

What are the goals of 40 Days of Faith?

Let me detail some for **you** and some for all of us together in **this church**.

My goals for you during the 40 days:

- 1) *That you'd experience at least one concrete gift from God.*
- 2) *That you'd experience an ever-deeper joy of finding your purpose in God's work on earth.*
- 3) *That you'd grow spiritually more than you have in any other 40 day period of your life.*
- 4) *That, because of these 40 days, you'll never worry about money again.*

My goals for our church during the 40 days:

- 1) *That we'll come to a new level of spiritual maturity.*
- 2) *That we'll come to a new level of loving others in our community.*
- 3) *That God will lift up a site for a facility of our own.*
- 4) *That God will lift up the funds for that facility.*

What does it look like to participate in 40 Days of Faith?

Okay, let's not kid ourselves: it's going to take some faith.

Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God." Jesus says to a woman who's been healed by his touch, "*Your faith has made you well.*"

We'll talk in just a moment about the value so many of us are experiencing in praying the Psalms. But perhaps the central theme of the Psalms is that we worship a God who *acts*, that we should praise God for *all the things he has done*. And yet it can be very painful to live a life with that kind of faith! Maybe it seems as if we've tried that before and he didn't come through. Maybe hard things have happened to us and God hasn't seemed to bail us out.

So much of a life of heartfelt pursuit of God involves learning how faith *does* and *doesn't* work. What should we do when our expectations aren't met? The Psalmists themselves are often in desperate situations as they call out to God—but they still *are* calling out to God (rather than cursing him for allowing them to have gotten into desperate situations in the first place), and they often experience his amazing answers.

The 40 Days of Faith has been designed to accomplish just a slew of objectives in all of our lives—maybe too many! But very much at the heart of what we're hoping for is that many, many of us would experience a revitalization of our faith and our hope in the God who loves us, who laid down his life for us, who wants us to look to him to do awesome things in our lives. We think it will be a lot of fun—and will provide a lot of extra faith and support—for us all to do this *together*. Psalm 116 puts it this way:

*I love the Lord because he hears
and answers my prayers.
Because he bends down and listens,
I will pray as long as I have breath!
...What can I offer the Lord
for all he has done for me?
...I will offer you a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the Lord. (Ps. 116:1-2,12,17, NLT)*

We love God because he actually *hears* and *answers* our prayers. And our response to those direct and awesome answers should be that we'll *thank* him—and *call on him* in our next experience of need.

Let me walk you through what that might look like for you during these next 40 days. We'll talk about **3 concrete steps** to consider, and then about **4 more things** you might pursue in order to grow in your spiritual life and power.

3 STEPS TO CONSIDER

Step 1: Go hard after what you're hoping God will do for you.

A heck of a lot of what you're hoping will happen in your life *can't* happen unless God gives it to you.

You need to learn—as we all do—what it looks like to look to *God* to give you the things you really need in life. If you don't directly and consciously look to him in such a way that you'll know that *he did it* if the thing actually happens, that means that you'll look to *other sources* to give you those things. And, even if we manage to get some neat things when we *haven't* looked to God to give them to us, they rarely pan out with the kind of joy and life we were hoping for from them. God likes to be the giver of all good things. When we learn how to take him up on that offer, it seems that he doesn't only *give* us those gifts, he also *fills* the gifts themselves with this sort of hyper-life—those things just work out great and they bring joy and encouragement with them.

So why not take these 40 days to see if that can be your experience on some key things you'd like to see happen in your life?

Here are two categories of things that, if I were you, I'd ask God for during these 40 days.

1) Ask Jesus for *something specific* that he'd like to do for you during these 40 days to make your life better.

So here you're looking for some *circumstance* about your life that you'd love it if God would address. So, for instance, I'm a would-be published novelist. (Some of you know that I actually was a produced playwright before my pastoring days, and I'm trying to keep my hand in with this storytelling stuff.) I've written a draft of a novel... only to discover that approximately 400 novels get written for every one that's published! I'm told that the key road to getting a novel to a good publisher is to get the right literary agent—also no easy task, since they reject about 99% of the proposals they see (seriously—one agent I read about received something like 1,300 letters from new novelists... and asked to even *look at* 6). So what I'm asking Jesus for is to have a good literary agent by the end of the 40 days.

So that's what I'm talking about—something specific that, if Jesus would do it for you by the end of the 40 days, you'd be jazzed.

Now why do this? First off, ***what if it doesn't happen?*** If it's actually something you really care about, you're risking major disappointment! But risking being disappointed is a hallmark of actual faith. Isn't the point of faith that we take real things we actually *care about* to God, things we don't claim to be able to pull off on our own?

The reason to take this first step is to put yourself in a position to see that God is actually *alive*; he actually listens to your prayers and he cares about you.

Now, again, that's no guarantee of anything. God can do anything he wants. But he does *like* it when we ask him for things (Matthew 7:7-11). For about 20 years of almost *daily* asking God to reveal Jesus to someone I really love, I didn't see a thing. And then I did—and it was pretty stunning. So we need to figure out how to ask in faith and—as Matthew 7:7 says directly—*keep* asking. But let's agree together that these 40 days will be a place to start!

So, before we go on, let's do it! What good gift do you think Jesus would like to give you before these 40 days are done? (If you've been asking him and don't have a clear sense, you may have to punt to option number 2 and write down what, all things being equal, you'd *like* him to do for you.)

Write that here:

2) Ask Jesus for how he'd like to make your life *feel* better during these 40 days.

A surprising truth is that what makes or breaks our lives is not so much what happens to us as how our life *feels* to us. Isn't that a stunner? You might think, "I'm lonely and miserable because I'm 'x' age and I'm still unmarried. Nobody loves me!" But a moment's observation will tell you that there are people older than you are who've never married who are *not* lonely and miserable. And there are married people you know who *are* lonely and miserable! Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that God's *ultimate* work in us will be to give us a sense of an utterly hopeful future. We're not sure what the *circumstances* of that future will be (Jesus, for instance, promises his disciples a life of persecution!), but we *do* know what that future will *feel* like.

So how would Jesus like to make your life *feel* better during these next 40 days? Here's what I'm asking for, for what it's worth. I realized late last year that my work as a pastor has been utterly satisfying and meaningful (no small thing on the feelings front!), but still had begun to feel like work. When I brought that up to God, it was clear that his heart for me was that my work would feel like satisfying and meaningful *play*. So that's what I'm asking for—and I've already been seeing results!

So... let's do it! How do you think Jesus would like to make your life *feel* better over the course of these 40 days?

Now what?

First off, congratulations! You've done a key thing—you've crystallized in your heart and on paper what you want God to do for you, a very important thing. Having done that, can I encourage you to do a few things in order to take advantage of the 40 Days of Faith in reference to the things you've just written down?

First, ask God for these things every day during the 40 days.

As you ask, he might speak to you about what you're asking for. Obviously, pay attention to that! But, in the spirit of Matthew 7, God gives good gifts to people who "keep on asking" him for them!

Second, tell someone else (best case scenario: your spouse, if you have one and/or someone in your small group, if you have one) what you wrote down and ask *them* to pray for you about those things too.

And it would be neighborly of you if you prayed about *their* things! Jesus says he's uniquely present and at work when two or more people come before him with things (Matthew 18:20). Your chances of seeing something happen go way up when someone else is praying too—and they might even have more faith than you do, so you can leech off of them!

Third, when you see answers to these two things, tell me, either by e-mailing me at mail@cambridgevineyard.org or by filling out a testimony card.

This is a super-powerful and often-overlooked spiritual principle: when God answers our prayers, the proper response is to *tell* as many people as we can—most particularly "in the sanctuary," where God's people come to worship. Let me run just a few psalms by you that make this point:

Psalm 107:2—“*Has the Lord redeemed (done something good for) you? Then speak out! Tell others he has saved you from your enemies.*”

Psalm 108:3 (and Psalm 57:9)—“*I will thank you, Lord, in front of all the people.*”

Psalm 71:15-16—“*All day long I will proclaim your saving power, for I am overwhelmed by how much you have done for me. I will praise your mighty deeds, O Sovereign Lord. I will tell everyone that you alone are just and good.*”

Psalm 73:28—“*I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.*”

Psalm 40:10—“*I have not kept this good news hidden in my heart; I have talked about your faithfulness and your saving power. I have told everyone in the great assembly of your unfailing love and faithfulness.*”

The psalms also teach us that, if we *don't* do this, if we don't speak out to about actual things God does for us, then those things will fade in our memory and we'll ultimately *forget* them! It seems that God's one central purpose in the Bible is that his “name” would be known throughout the earth. His “name” here is, essentially, “the God who does great things for those who call on his name.” (One representative scripture would be Habakkuk 2:14—*But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD—everyone would know that he does great stuff for people who trust him!—as the waters cover the sea.*) So when we tell others—even the whole congregation on occasion—about whatever great thing God has done for us, we're then participating in his ultimate occupation on earth!

So, *whenever* God does something wonderful for you, always tell all your friends, and always tell *us* (if you're still in this church!).

Okay! Let's go onto:

Step 2: Go hard after what you're hoping God will do for your 6.

In Mark 4, Jesus tells his very first parable, his very first story intending to show us something significant about faith in him. He's talking about the effect that genuine faith in him should have on responsive people (and being responsive is a good thing in this parable—its opposite is death!). Responsive people are called “good soil” on the terms of the parable. Here's what he says about all of the soils, good and bad:

The seed (representing faith in Jesus) that fell on the hard path represents those who hear the message, but then Satan comes at once and takes it away from them. The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy. 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. The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, 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. 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. (Mark 4:15-20)

Maybe you identify a bit with one of the other soils, which is a helpful thing to note! If we notice this about ourselves, that becomes a great thing to pray about and ask for help with.

But you'll also notice that good soil, truly responsive people, can expect to “produce a huge harvest”—30, 60 or a hundred times as much as we ourselves represent! You can understand this in terms of plants: healthy plants are usually seed-producing, and so they produce a lot *more* healthy plants. For *people*, this seems to mean that healthy, responsive followers of Jesus can expect to produce a lot more healthy, responsive followers of Jesus.

This observation—not a new one for most veteran followers of Jesus—can freak us out a bit. It seems intimidating! But, interestingly, most veteran followers of Jesus I know who *are* intimidated by this say something else interesting at the same time. They say that their deepest dreams in life have something to do with this being true in their lives. We all want lives that matter. I'd suggest that, if there really is only one thing God is focused on on earth, as I've said,

—a little refresher course: He's determined that everyone on earth would know that he does awesome things for people who trust him—and, presumably, the “everyone” would consist largely of people who don't currently know that—

then participating in this one thing is at the heart of what will satisfy us in life, is at the heart of what we all really want.

If there's really only one central thing happening on the earth, only one thing God has given himself to accomplishing, which of us really wants to be about some *unrelated* thing?

[For what it's worth: here's another of many, many passages that gives a picture of this one purpose of God's and how we fit in. One whole Psalm paints a pretty compelling picture of it.

96 ¹ *Sing a new song to the LORD!*

Let the whole earth sing to the LORD!

² *Sing to the LORD; bless his name.*

Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.

³ *Publish his glorious deeds among the nations.*

Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.

⁴ *Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise!*

He is to be revered above all the gods.

⁵ *The gods of other nations are merely idols,*

but the LORD made the heavens!

⁶ *Honor and majesty surround him;*

strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

⁷ *O nations of the world, recognize the LORD;*

recognize that the LORD is glorious and strong.

⁸ *Give to the LORD the glory he deserves!*

Bring your offering and come to worship him.

⁹ *Worship the LORD in all his holy splendor.*

Let all the earth tremble before him.

¹⁰ *Tell all the nations that the LORD is king.*

The world is firmly established and cannot be shaken.

He will judge all peoples fairly.

¹¹ *Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice!*

Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise!

¹² *Let the fields and their crops burst forth with joy!*

Let the trees of the forest rustle with praise

¹³ *before the LORD!*

For the LORD is coming!

He is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness

and all the nations with his truth.

So we've been trying something out as a church over the last few months as a means of inviting God into this all-important but often-intimidating part of following him. We've called it:

Praying for your 6.

The hope is that you know and love at least 6 people who live right here in the Boston area, people that you'd really love to see experience Jesus's goodness and power in their lives in ways that really haven't, so far as you can tell, been true for them to date. Our hope is that each of our small groups has been praying for their 6, often in pairs, each meeting. Many folks in our small groups are themselves not yet sure what they believe about Jesus. But my experience has been that those of you in that category have actually liked this part of things quite a bit! Who *wouldn't* want to see Jesus concretely bless 6 of our friends, if such a thing were possible?

In these 40 days, we'd love to up the ante a bit, in the whole spirit of taking a season of faith together. So I've got two suggestions you might want to explore during these 40 days.

1) Pray daily for each of your 6.

Ask Jesus to reveal himself to these great folks. Ask him to concretely bless them in such a way that his name would be made great in their lives—*during* these 40 days. And ask him to give you as much of the following “steps of faith” for each of your six as possible during the 40 days.

2) Believe God to bless each of your 6 as much as possible with the “steps of faith.”

During this time, why not ask God to show you ways you can concretely hope he might even use *you* to be a blessing for folks included in your 6? In that spirit, we’ve got 6 “steps of faith” to propose you dream about with your 6 during these 40 days.

1. ***Initiate social time with one of your 6.***
2. ***Ask one of your 6 for prayer requests.***
3. ***Tell a story about how Jesus has blessed you.***
4. ***Pray for one of your 6 in person.***
5. ***Invite them to Sunday service or your small group.***
6. ***Invite them to get together to talk about Jesus.***

I’m sure you get the sense that these folks you’re praying for are not just abstractions whom you’re hoping *Jesus* will bless, but *you’re* too busy for! If God would be so gracious, certainly it would be great if *you* could be part of the process, if you could be in on loving them in Jesus’s name. Of the 6 folks Grace and I are praying for, we’ve hung out with 4 in the last few weeks, and have the other 2 on tap for next week. We’ve told stories about Jesus’s work in our lives. Of the first group of 6 we prayed for, 3 came to Sunday services for the first time within a month or so.

During the 40 Days, we’ll also be running life skills groups we’re calling “*Jesus Experiments*” that might be of interest to some of your 6. These are 4-week classes focusing on practical issues from a Jesus-based perspective. So there are classes on God’s role in parenting, prospering at work or financially, praying with more power, or having better relationships or marriages. For the most part, these will be starting up on the week of March 17. (Feel free to call our office or check our web site for more details.) We’ll also be running our *Alpha Course* again starting on April 29, in case your friends would appreciate a time-tested and wildly popular course focused on helping spiritually-interested people think through questions about Jesus and faith in general. Each of these could be life-changing for one of these wonderful folks you’re praying for.

And you, actually, could consider leading one of these *yourself* for some of your 6 or for others. There’s another training for these on March 16. E-mail Andrew Snekvik if you’re interested at Andrew@cambridgevineyard.org.

So don’t miss out on connecting with this deepest of all purposes during these 40 days! Believe God for your 6 and go for it!

Step 3: Go hard after what you’re hoping God will do for your church.

We’ve just got huge dreams for what God might want to do through us as a whole church. I detail those dreams in my recent sermon called *The Driving Force Behind All Abundance*, and it’d be great if you could pick that up some Sunday soon and give it a listen if you haven’t already.

But, in brief, we’re believing God to help us love thousands of people in the Greater Boston area who otherwise would have no access to all of his benefits. We’re believing him to help us love the poor at an entirely new level. We’re believing him to start up hundreds of new churches through us that, we hope, could really make a significant difference for our whole *country*. And there’s a lot, lot more where that came from.

I’d love it if you could ***pray for our church*** each day during these 40 days! Pray that some of these dreams would come to pass, maybe even sooner than expected! Pray about ***your*** role in seeing these things come to pass! Pray about whether you might even be called to stay in Boston for the longer-term to really give yourself to these dreams!

And, additionally, ***pray for a facility of our own*** that could *house* these and other things. As I say in a number of places elsewhere, we’ve come to realize a few fun and interesting things. Unless we’re misinformed, we’re:

- The largest church in Cambridge;
- The largest Vineyard church on the East Coast;

- By far the largest congregation in Greater Boston without its own facility;
- And (we think) the largest of America's 550 Vineyard churches without its own facility.

Now, on the one hand, who cares about any of that stuff? But, on the other hand, all that is at least *kind of* noteworthy! And we've discovered why so few congregations make it to our size without having found a facility of their own. They just can't do all they're called to do in rented facilities forever. They have no venue from which to love the poor. They can't pray together in any regular way. They can't host community events or offer up arts events. And they're always at risk of being booted out of where they're currently meeting! (There was some talk early in the school year—talk that's since died down—that the entire administration, teachers and students of the Morse School would be moved to another Cambridge school, which would have put us at great risk of being kicked out of meeting there. And, so far as we know, there are no other facilities that could host us at our present size apart from exorbitantly-priced hotel convention rooms—which would cause problems (apart from the exorbitant cost) of how we'd run kids church.)

So we're praying during these 40 days that God would lift up:

- a facility or an appropriate site, and
- the money we'd need to buy such a thing!

Now, as you'd guess, in Cambridge, neither one of these things is a minor deal. There's extremely-limited property available that would be sufficient to house us (and Harvard and MIT tend to swipe what little there is), and what property there is is way expensive. A pretty conservative estimate of what such a facility would cost us is *6 million dollars*. By comparison, our intake last year was just over *1 million dollars*. Now 1 million dollars is nothing to sneeze at! But it does seem worth pointing out that, from within our congregation, we're believing God to lift up at least *6 times* our annual intake—*along with ALL* of our annual intake itself (and hopefully even more, as we grow). That will take some faith!

So we're asking each of you, during this time, to really pray about what—if anything—God would encourage you to give to make this happen. On April 6, at our Sunday services, we'll collect money and pledge cards (proposing what people will plan to give over three years) and then we'll announce the total at our services on April 13, Palm Sunday.

We're asking people to consider giving by faith rather than by reason.

Faith asks God for an amount we can give that would require his help to pull off. **Reason** looks at our bank balance and reasons out what would be a "reasonable" amount to give. On the one hand, God bless giving by reason! On the other hand, he only promises to *reward* faith. So Grace and I have each prayed quite a bit about what *we'll* be giving towards the facility during these 40 days and then over these next 3 years, and we felt God direct us to give a full year's salary. Let's be honest: that's nuts! But we really have felt that's the fun challenge God has put before us, so we're banking on him to provide the means by which we can do that, and more! If you sincerely ask God, I believe he'll speak to you about what to give—and then he'll *back* the amount he tells you.

So, to summarize, as you go hard after what you're hoping God will do for your church during these 40 days, I'd encourage you to do these things:

- 1) ***Pray each day for the dreams of the church.***
- 2) ***Ask God whether you might be called to stay in Greater Boston for the longer term—to be a part of building this church!***
- 3) ***Pray for God's direction on how you can give in faith towards this facility (remembering that "Commitment Sunday" is April 6).***
- 4) ***Pray that God, even during these 40 days, would lift up the site that he'd like to give us.***

4 WAYS TO GROW IN JESUS'S INTIMACY AND POWER

Wouldn't it be awesome if you came out of these 40 days closer to Jesus than you've ever been? And obviously filled with more spiritual power than you've ever had? And freed from any worry about his financial provision for you for the rest of your life? Our motto for these 40 days is *Jesus is Really Good!* And our hope is that this will be as true for you as it's ever been! (Tying our themes together, I'm sure you can see how this becoming more and more true in your life accomplishes God's one great activity of "making his name great" in you.)

We have 4 thoughts about things that—we hope!—will dramatically help you accomplish this.

1) Pray 10 Psalms a day during the 40 days.

For 3,000 years, God's people have learned how to pray through one primary means—regularly praying the actual words of the 150 Psalms as if they were their own prayers.

This continued right up until the 19th century, when some German theologians decided this was an outmoded idea and lobbied against it so effectively that the practice largely died out. But, praise God, it's resurging as a practice again, and our belief is that this could be a key benefit to these 40 days for you.

Why pray Psalms?

It seems that God gave us the Psalms to be prayed. When we pray Psalms, we're taking on a much greater identity than we actually have. We pray with David as he faces thousands of enemies. We pray in utter despair. We praise God as if our most intimate and awesome dreams have just come to pass. We pray as if we've been ruinously slandered by our closest friends. We ask God to kick our enemies's teeth in. As we take on these roles—in actual prayers to an actual God—it seems to me that we find our own soul being expanded. Suddenly our concerns go beyond just our immediate needs, and that does something powerful to us, to our whole sense of identity, to our dreams for our future. We find our lives being simplified. (I had something that felt like a big failure last week. I was agonizing about how I could have done better, but it wasn't clear that I could. As I prayed my Psalms that morning, it suddenly seemed clear that my one calling in life was to have utter passion for God himself and for his law. As I gave myself to that, I had total peace about the failure.)

My favorite titans of faith prayed Psalms (except they prayed between 100 and all 150 Psalms *each day*), and they attributed that spiritual practice as being the thing most responsible for making them who they were.

How do we pray Psalms?

First, if at all possible, **pray them out loud**. Everyone I'm in touch with who prays Psalms says this is way more potent than doing them silently. And, in the history of the church, they've mostly been prayed out loud.

Then, **pray the actual words of each Psalm**. We've talked about this.

Then, if you want, **pray what they bring to mind about *your life***. Not all of my friends do this. Some just pray the actual words of each Psalm and trust them to do their work, and that's worked great for them. But I often receive a fair amount of benefit by taking maybe 20 seconds after each Psalm to, usually without any real thought, just pray—out loud—whatever comes to mind in reference to my life or my family or our church or the world at large.

A few other suggestions and comments:

To my mind, **praying from a modern translation is best**. We aren't going for style points here—whatever feels like language that you can best relate to is going to help you the best. I'm loving praying from the New Living Translation these days. The NIV has also been just great.

Study Bibles can often be helpful. Remember (and this is key) **YOU'RE NOT READING OR STUDYING THESE PSALMS, YOU'RE PRAYING THEM**. That said, I've been totally helped by the study Bible I'm using at the moment (the Life Application Bible, NLT translation—we carry it on our book table, if you'd like to take a look at it). Even the few words the editors offer at the start of each Psalm help me understand what I'm praying that much better. There are more-extensive notes

below in any study Bible. I dip into those as needed, but don't want to get too distracted from my actual mission of PRAYING these Psalms...

When the Psalm talks about "enemies," think "demons." Maybe you have actual human enemies at the moment, in which case these Psalms should be quite helpful for you! But most of us are going to wonder if we should *really* be asking God to destroy human enemies. That said, if the Bible's right, we all have armies of enemy spirits that are hell-bent (pun intended) upon ruining our joy and our life with God. I don't know about you, but I *do* want God to kick *their* teeth in and protect me from them! Praise God for praying the Psalms, or I might not think to *ask* him to do that for me!

Why 10?

Obviously the number is a little random. (A lot of us on staff are praying 25.) But a lot of the benefit of praying Psalms seems to come from *volume*. The more we pray, the more we get into the whole *world* of the Psalms. And experience suggests that's a great thing. 10 could take you as little as 10 minutes... or more, depending upon the length of the Psalms in question and how much you like extrapolating your own prayers from them.

What if I miss a day?

Oh well, such things happen. Just jump back in the next day. But I do find goals are helpful, and I'm shooting for 5 out of every 7 days, and I'm shooting to actually pray all the Psalms I'm shooting for each day that I pray. Sometimes I miss, but then I do my best the next day.

2) ***Study the life of Jesus each day.***

The rest of this user's guide will be—we're hoping!—a pretty gripping, helpful and manageable walk through Mark's gospel.

Brian has broken the 16 chapters of Mark down into 40 sections, so you'll be reading about a third of a chapter a day. Pretty manageable we hope!

We're calling these 40 days "Jesus is Really Good." What better way to experience that than spending some time reading and praying through his story? And we're thinking it will be a kick to do this **together**.

3) ***Learn more about giving.***

This part is the basis of my goal that you'll never worry about money again.

There are two resources about how God blesses our use of money by way of how we give that I'd love you to take a look at in the next week or so. One is a tiny little book (I read it in one pretty brief sitting) that will *cost* you some money: about \$10. It's called:

The Treasure Principle, by Randy Alcorn.

The other is a newsletter article by this big-name prophetic guy. It's called:

"Winds of Change," by Rick Joyner.

Can you make me a deal? Can you pick each of these up after the service in our lobby (I'm banking on them being available by the *second* week of the 40 Days of Faith, March 9) and then read them **that week**? It'd be really helpful to have these in our common experience as we process the 40 days together.

I think you'll get a kick out of each of them, but let me give you a quick briefing on each. *The Treasure Principle* is by a big-name Christian author on money (among other things) who used to be a pastor and now runs his own ministry. I think it's great and helpful. One thing to note about it is that one prominent story he tells about himself features him protesting at abortion clinics. Some of you won't bat an eye at that, and some of you won't like that story. For our purposes here, can we agree to read that sympathetically in order to see the point he's driving at?

"Winds of Change" is, to me, a total kick and very encouraging and challenging in terms of my own use of money. But it is helpful to remember that this is written by a major player in the so-called prophetic arm of the church. So he talks about some sweeping interpretations about prophetic scriptures in the biblical book of Revelation. What's the basis of his (pretty interesting and

provocative) interpretation? Beats me. So take it with a grain of salt, but see how you respond to the heart of his argument which, again, I find really helpful and challenging.

4) *Consider fasting in some way.*

You might have noticed that when people really wanted something from God in the Bible, they almost always fasted.

What does fasting do?

Fasting tells God and our own spirits that we really are desperate for *God* to meet some need or hope that we have. As you've picked up, here in the 40 Days, we're really hoping for God to do a *lot*, for you personally, for your 6 and for all of us as a church. That sounds like "fast territory" to me.

Though fasting—in any fashion (and we'll talk about some options in a minute)—is, by definition, *hard*, it's actually meant to be a *joyous opportunity*. Suddenly we're really serious about something with God; we're really expecting him to come through; we aren't just playing around. That can often be exhilarating!

What are options for fasting?

Well, first off, fasting often involves abstention from food in some way. In shorter fasts, that can be a total abstention from food. These are usually called "**water fasts**," because water is the only thing going into us. For the most part, I don't recommend these at any length beyond a week's time, because after that, health problems can ensue. (Clearly God can speak and call you into anything—but I'd just be aware of the risks if you water fast for more than a week, and be in good touch with a doctor.)

Also, I DO NOT RECOMMEND WATER FASTS IF YOU'VE EVER SUFFERED FROM ANY EATING DISORDER. Forgive the stern words and printing, but this is a biggie. Those in our midst who've suffered from eating disorders historically have a difficult time separating this sort of fasting from the very motivation that drove them to the disorder, and thereby risk serious health problems. There are other great fasts that will do you a lot of good, if you've been in this situation, and can I ask that you'd pursue those?

Other food-abstention fasts involve imposing some sort of **conditions** on our eating over a period of time. This can involve anything from giving up some beloved food item for a time (desserts being a popular favorite—I actually just came off one of these) to something more challenging, like the so-called "**Daniel fast**," which involves (as it did for Daniel in the biblical book bearing his name) abstaining from everything but vegetables.

For longer fasts, I've sometimes done a "**one meal a day**" fast. It's pretty much what it sounds like. The key is to actually eat a *smaller* meal than you normally would at the time, and to make that "it" for the day. If you ever know I'm on a "one meal a day" fast and it looks after awhile as if I haven't lost an ounce, have a little talk with me.

People often pursue "**juice fasts**." Again, this would customarily apply to *shorter fasts*, but it's just like a water fast, except you're allowed to drink juice.

Are there any non-food-related options?

You bet! Fasting from **television** is a popular choice for folks who aren't fasting from food.

These can really involve, under God's direction, doing without *anything* that feels costly to give up for a season. I've heard recently about fasts from *criticism* or from *catalogs*!

The point of fasting is that, under God's direction, we're feeling desperate for something and we direct that desperation towards God. It's just hard to truly be desperate for God and what he might do for us when our bellies are full and all our needs are abundantly provided for.

What does it mean to fast "for" something?

If you fast, I'd encourage you to let God know, frequently, what it is you're fasting *for*. Now in these pages I've already proposed *plenty* that would fill the bill. Maybe you're fasting for your answers to what you want God to do for *you* during the 40 days. Or maybe you're going nuts and

fasting for a fully paid-for facility for our church! (That is permissible to fast for, just to note...) But I do think it's a great idea to ask God to give you direction for the specific thing or things you're fasting for.

During my last long fast, I realized in, like, Day 3 that I didn't really have a specific *focus* for my fast, and I asked God. He seemed to tell me that it was a fast primarily on behalf of a close friend of mine who was really far from God. Not long thereafter, that friend plunged himself into a life of pursuing Jesus for the first time in his life.

Does fasting help us lose weight (and I know you're asking that on behalf of a friend)?

Isn't this one of life's colossal bummers? The answer, from all reputable sources, is, "No, not really." There are 2 problems that keep this from being, for most people, about weight loss. First, once we've fasted (from food) for awhile, our metabolism slows way down (a good thing if we were ever to face famine!). Second, sadly, it seems to be human nature that, whatever weight we lose in fasting, we quickly put back on once we resume our previous diet.

Now, the upside of this truism is that we really *can* let God know that we're doing this because we want deeper desperation for and connection with him. This really is about more than body image.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

First, congratulations! You've made it though the whole roadmap for the 40 Days!

Now, of course, there's *doing* the 40 days!

How long might it take to *do* this stuff each day?

I, of course, couldn't really say, not being you. I'd think these spiritual exercises could take as little as ***half an hour each day***. Or they could take as much more time as you chose to give them. (The length of the day's Psalms will also affect the time.)

So that's some real time. But, as we said, this is a unique season of growth in God. I'm really not sure how to accomplish that apart from at least ***some*** time.

And, that said, if you're like my friends, you'll get a total kick out of every minute. You'll just love praying your 10 Psalms—it's one of the great parts of my day. You'll love learning more about Mark's Gospel from Brian—not to mention that you'll love just spending some time immersed in Jesus's story each day. You'll love praying and believing God. You'll love joyful financial giving—something that carries more promise of joy in scripture than almost any other act of faithfulness.

So, hey, if it's going to be a whole half hour a day, at least it will most likely be one ***awesome*** half hour each day!

Could you possibly *summarize* the steps so that I can, like, post them on my refrigerator and be sure to do them?

To paraphrase the current hero of the 5-year-old set, Bob the Builder, "***Yes I can!***"

Before I do that, let me just close by reiterating how excited I am for this season, and how eager I am to see what God does for all of us. I'm praying for you!

40 DAYS OF FAITH

My goals for you during the 40 days:

- 1) That you'd experience at least **one concrete gift from God**
- 2) That you'd experience an ever-deeper joy of **finding your purpose in God's work on earth**.
- 3) That you'd **grow spiritually** more than you have in any other 40 day period of your life.
- 4) That, because of these 40 days, you'll **never worry about money again**.

My goals for our church during the 40 days:

- 1) That we'll come to a **new level of spiritual maturity**.
- 2) That we'll come to a **new level of loving others** in our community.
- 3) That God will **lift up a site for a facility** of our own.
- 4) That God will **lift up the funds** for that facility.

3 STEPS TO CONSIDER

Step 1: Go hard after what you're hoping God will do for you.

- Ask Jesus for something specific that he'd like to do for you during these 40 days to make your life better.
- Ask Jesus for how he'd like to make your life *feel* better during these 40 days.
 - Ask God for these things every day during the 40 days.
 - Tell someone else what you wrote down and ask *them* to pray for you about those things too.
 - When you see answers to these two things, tell me, either by e-mailing me at mail@cambridgevineyard.org or by filling out a testimony card.

Step 2: Go hard after what you're hoping God will do for your 6.

- Pray daily for each of your 6.
- Believe God to bless each of your 6 as much as possible with the "steps of faith."
 1. Initiate social time with one of your 6.
 2. Ask one of your 6 for prayer requests.
 3. Tell a story about how Jesus has blessed you.
 4. Pray for one of your 6 in person.
 5. Invite them to Sunday service or your small group.
 6. Invite them to get together to talk about Jesus.

Step 3: Go hard after what you're hoping God will do for your church.

1. Pray each day for the dreams of the church.
2. Ask God whether you might be called to stay in Greater Boston for the longer term—to be a part of building this church!
3. Pray for God's direction on how you can give in faith towards this facility (remembering that "Commitment Sunday" is April 6).
4. Pray that God, even during these 40 days, would lift up the site that he'd like to give us.

4 WAYS TO GROW IN JESUS'S INTIMACY AND POWER

- 1) **Pray 10 Psalms a day during the 40 days.**
- 2) **Study the life of Jesus each day.**
- 3) **Learn more about giving.**
 - a. The Treasure Principle
 - b. "Winds of Change"
- 4) **Consider fasting in some way.**

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week One

Over the 40 Days 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.

March 3

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 over these 40 Days 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 these 40 Days of Faith.

March 4

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 not 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.

March 5

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 now, there are several people who are preparing to move on to other towns, or considering it. Pray for the team that will be going to New York and for other potential teams, that God would be preparing them to be powerful messengers of Jesus' good news in these new places.

March 6

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 our newest wave of postcards and T ads, that they would draw crowds of people expecting Jesus' goodness.

March 7

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, the day we read that Jesus’ disciples didn’t fast is a specially dedicated fast day for our church. 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.

March 8

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 the Arab Middle East, that Jesus would increase our ability to share his goodness with them.

March 9

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.

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Two

Over the 40 Days 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:

4. **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?
5. **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.
6. **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.

March 10

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 these 40 Days of Faith, we will be getting more transformative power from God's words as an entire church.

March 11

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.

March 12

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 40 Days 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.

March 13

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.

March 14

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 15

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 Boston, and that the buzz will be about Jesus, not our church.

March 16

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 purchase of a building. If we are going to buy a building, it will take everything we can give—and that won't be enough. Ask God to multiply what we have, so that we can buy a building and have more left over than we started with.

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Three

Over the 40 Days 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:

7. **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?
8. **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.
9. **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.

March 17

Mark 6: 45-56—Jesus walks on the water

⁴⁵ Immediately after this, Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat and head out across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. ⁴⁶ Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray. ⁴⁷ During the night, the disciples were in their boat out in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves. About three o'clock in the morning he came to them, walking on the water. He started to go past them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the water, they screamed in terror, thinking he was a ghost. ⁵⁰ They were all terrified when they saw him. But Jesus spoke to them at once. "It's all right," he said. "I am here! Don't be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were astonished at what they saw. ⁵² They still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the multiplied loaves, for their hearts were hard and they did not believe. ⁵³ When they arrived at Gennesaret on the other side of the lake, they anchored the boat ⁵⁴ and climbed out. The people standing there recognized him at once, ⁵⁵ and they ran throughout the whole area and began carrying sick people to him on mats. ⁵⁶ Wherever he went—in villages and cities and out on the farms—they laid the sick in the market plazas and streets. The sick begged him to let them at least touch the fringe of his robe, and all who touched it were healed.

Points of Interest:

- 'Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat'—This passage tells us that the disciples 'did not understand the significance of the miracle of the multiplied loaves.' The miracle of the multiplied loaves should have demonstrated to the disciples that Jesus can give them enough to serve the crowds and to provide abundantly for themselves as well. But the disciples must still be operating from a poverty mentality: to serve the crowds is a loss for us. They're still wondering, "If we stay with the crowds, when and how are we going to get our rest?" I can imagine the disciples glumly watching Jesus teach, giving him the 'isn't it time that we be leaving' glare, drumming their fingers, or ostentatiously getting the boat ready for departure. Eventually, Jesus tires of their sullenness and just sends them off without him, while he finishes with the crowd. Unless Jesus sends them out to

do his work, it's never a good sign when the disciples are separated from Jesus—they were called to be his regular companions. Last time the disciples were separated from Jesus, they missed out on a resurrection. This time, they miss out on the rest they wanted so badly. They cut out on the crowds a little early to get some extra rest, but they end up spending the whole night rowing. Jesus, on the other hand, spends the night alone praying. Jesus understands the miracle of the loaves: God provided him with time to give the crowds, and enough left over for rest for himself. The disciples spend the whole day cranky instead, and they end it by rowing in a storm.

- 'Their hearts were hard and they did not believe'—The last time we heard about hard hearts, it was concerning the religious teachers who went out to destroy Jesus. The disciples are heading in the wrong direction. They've forgotten the secret of the kingdom: draw near to Jesus and ask. They might have thought that, having gotten the secret once, they were permanently 'in.' But they need to stay near and keep asking if they want to keep getting more from Jesus. They could have asked Jesus, "With these crowds, how are we going to get our rest?" but instead they try to send the crowds away, and they respond sarcastically and faithlessly to Jesus' suggestion that they feed the crowds. They're soil is becoming bad, so bad that they don't even recognize Jesus. There's a snowball effect to our choices. A few bad decisions in a row can lead to a little part of us being hardened off from Jesus. If we want to keep getting more from him, it's important to turn quickly from poor choices and to draw near to him.
- 'he climbed into the boat'—Even though they've done nothing to deserve it, Jesus shows them mercy. When they are overwhelmed by the predicament they've gotten themselves in, he steps back into their boat, restoring companionship with them. Praise Jesus for his mercy! He doesn't quickly give up on his followers.
- 'The people standing there recognized him at once'—Mark gives us a little sign here that, despite Jesus' mercy, the disciples are not living up to their potential. Before the feeding of the 5000, the crowds recognize them. After their failure as shepherds to the 5000, the crowds recognize him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples heard Jesus' words 'Let's get some rest,' and they had a specific idea of how it would look. When circumstances went the other way, they tried to grab hold of the promise with their own power, and they ended up miserable. Is there a promise you have from Jesus, but it doesn't seem to be working out the way you thought? If you've been trying to grab it yourself, consider letting it go. Draw near to Jesus and ask him about it.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six in the midst of storms? Perhaps their even, to some extent, self-inflicted storms. Pray for Jesus' mercy for them in the midst of that storm. Ask Jesus not to pass them by.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would give our entire church understanding of the significance of the miracle of the multiplied bread. Understanding God's ability to multiply resources for the good of all is the key to joyful ministry. It's what gives us the faith to give, to serve others, and to reach out to new people with the message of the good news. Without understanding the multiplied loaves, we cannot do what we've been called to.

March 18

Mark 7: 1-23—The outside and the inside

One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to confront Jesus.² They noticed that some of Jesus' disciples failed to follow the usual Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating.³ (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions.⁴ Similarly, they eat nothing bought from the market unless they have immersed their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremony of washing cups, pitchers, and kettles.)⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old customs? For they eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony."⁶ Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was prophesying about you when he said,

⁷ 'These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far away.
Their worship is a farce,
for they replace God's commands with their own man-made teachings.'

⁸ For you ignore God's specific laws and substitute your own traditions." ⁹ Then he said, "You reject God's laws in order to hold on to your own traditions. ¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.' ¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I could have given to you.' ¹² You let them disregard their needy parents. ¹³ As such, you break the law of God in order to protect your own tradition. And this is only one example. There are many, many others." ¹⁴ Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. ¹⁵ You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do!" ¹⁷ Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowds, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the statement he had made. ¹⁸ "Don't you understand either?" he asked. "Can't you see that what you eat won't defile you? ¹⁹ Food doesn't come in contact with your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then comes out again." (By saying this, he showed that every kind of food is acceptable.) ²⁰ And then he added, "It is the thought-life that defiles you. ²¹ For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God."

Points of Interest:

- 'You reject God's laws in order to hold on to your own traditions'—Traditions have a habit of taking on a life of their own. While there might have been a good reason for their ceremony when the ceremony was established, it seems like now the only reason the Pharisees and teachers have is, "because we've always done it that way." Traditions are like ruts in the road, unless you actively work your way out of them, you end up following them. The Pharisees have gotten themselves so far into a rut that their tradition overrides the word of God. Most likely, the traditions were established as a way of following God, but now they trump following God. But, because that's the way they've always done it, they probably don't even notice.
- 'You are not defiled by what you eat'—It's a peculiar trait of traditions that they tend to focus on the superficial, rather than the heart of the matter. Maybe that is not the case in the beginning, but when traditions are followed so long that the purpose gets forgotten while the behavior is still obvious. The Pharisees care very much about how things appear, but neglect what is going on below the surface. It's especially easy for religious people to judge by appearances. It's easy to fall in the trap of believing you are speaking for God, when all you are doing is enforcing traditional behavior.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* All of us have a temptation to keep the outside looking good while we neglect the heart. Spend a moment confessing to the ways you maintain appearances.
- *For your six:* Jesus finds the message about the difference between the appearance and the heart so important that he gathers the entire crowd to tell them. For their whole lives, they've been hearing the opposite from the Pharisees and teachers. Pray for your six that Jesus would be able to break through any barriers tradition puts up in front of your six.
- *For our church:* It's so easy to fall into the rut of tradition. Jesus says earlier in Mark that you can't get any more wine if you don't also get new skins, and traditions are like the old, brittle wineskins. Pray that our church would have the willingness to get new skins when necessary. Particularly pray that we would not pursue our usual practices after having forgotten their purpose.

March 19

Mark 7: 24-37—Two healings

²⁴ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He tried to keep it secret that he was there, but he couldn't. As usual, the news of his arrival spread fast. ²⁵ Right away a woman came to him whose little girl was possessed by an evil spirit. She had heard about Jesus, and now she came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ She begged him to release her child from the demon's control. Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, ²⁷ Jesus told her, "First I should help my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are given some crumbs from the children's plates." ²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "And because you have answered so well, I have healed your daughter." ³⁰ And when she arrived home, her little girl was lying

quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.³¹ Jesus left Tyre and went to Sidon, then back to the Sea of Galilee and the region of the Ten Towns.³² A deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him, and the people begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man to heal him.³³ Jesus led him to a private place away from the crowd. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then, spitting onto his own fingers, he touched the man's tongue with the spittle.³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and commanded, "Be opened!"³⁵ Instantly the man could hear perfectly and speak plainly!³⁶ Jesus told the crowd not to tell anyone, but the more he told them not to, the more they spread the news,³⁷ for they were completely amazed. Again and again they said, "Everything he does is wonderful. He even heals those who are deaf and mute."

Points of Interest:

- 'It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs'—This seems to be an extraordinarily offensive thing for Jesus to say. Moreover, it is inconsistent with Jesus' previous actions. We've already seen him cast a demon out of a gentile before, when he freed the demoniac. Why would he so insultingly refuse now? Although it doesn't take away the shock of Jesus' words completely, the story of the farmer and the seeds offers some insight into the situation. Jesus says, 'To those on the outside, everything is in stories.' He speaks in riddles to test the soil. He finds very good soil here, and he rewards it with affirmation and with healing.
- 'even the dogs under the table are given some crumbs'—This woman understands the significance of the multiplication of the loaves! The disciples, who were there and who are regular companions of Jesus, don't get it. But this woman understands that Jesus has enough for everyone—even his crumbs would be enough to solve here problem. Her faith gives her the ability not only to understand Jesus' story, but to add to it herself.
- 'He put his fingers into the man's ears . . . he touched the man's tongue'—Jesus is using sign language. Again and again in this story, Jesus has responded to the faith of the people being healed. He gives the deaf man the chance to demonstrate faith here by signing to him what he intends.
- "he sighed and commanded, 'Be opened!'"—Jesus is able to miraculously open the ears of a man who is physically deaf. The disciples ears work fine, but their hearts are having a hard time hearing. How does soil that's gone hard get good again? How do ears that have closed open up again? It can only happen like the actual healing of the deaf man happened, by the touch of Jesus.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Sometimes Jesus' words are hard to understand or difficult to accept. Pray that God would give you the faith to engage with him about difficult things, and that he would give you the insight to see through to his purposes. Lift up to Jesus the things about your relationship with him that are difficult to understand. Ask him to make those very places the source of great miracles in your life.
- *For your six:* Speak to the ears of your six, 'Be opened.' Pray that their hearts will be able to hear Jesus' words more and more clearly all the time.
- *For our church:* Jesus does a great job of interpreting to the deaf man what is happening to him. As a church, we want to be able to explain to people in understandable ways the ways that God is working. Ask God that he would always be giving us new and better ways of communicating naturally about the supernatural.

March 20

Mark 8: 1-10—the feeding of the 4000

About this time another great crowd had gathered, and the people ran out of food again. Jesus called his disciples and told them,² "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat."³ And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road. For some of them have come a long distance."⁴ "How are we supposed to find enough food for them here in the wilderness?" his disciples asked.⁵ "How many loaves of bread do you have?" he asked. "Seven," they replied.⁶ So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to his disciples, who distributed the bread to the crowd.⁷ A few small fish were found, too, so Jesus also blessed these and told the disciples to pass them out.⁸ They ate until they were full, and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over!⁹ There were about four thousand people in the crowd that day, and he sent them home after they had eaten.¹⁰ Immediately after this, he got into a boat with his disciples and crossed over to the region of Dalmanutha.

Points of Interest:

- 'the people ran out of food again'—often Jesus gives us second chances at our moments of failure. That is what Jesus did for the disciples here. The feeding of the 5000 was probably the worst day in their lives of following Jesus: it was miserable for them, and they failed in their relationship with Jesus and with others. Jesus doesn't allow that mark of failure to stain their soul. He gives them a second chance at success. The great news is that Jesus doesn't leave the disciples to do it on their own; he gives them what they need to succeed. This time, Jesus leads them step-by-step through the experience to help them get it right: he tells them explicitly that he has compassion on the crowd; and he preemptively tells them that sending the crowds away would not work. Although they don't necessarily get a straight A (It's a little surprising that they have to ask where they will find bread in the wilderness; although, to their credit, the tone of their response seems more open), it's a much better experience for the disciples. They feed the crowds, stay with Jesus until the crowds depart, and they get in the boat with Jesus at the end of the day. Is there a moment of failure in your following of Jesus that you often get stuck on? It especially seems that when we fail at assignments Jesus gives us to love and serve others, it inhibits our relationships with him and others until we overcome it. Ask Jesus for a chance to overcome this block, and for the help you need to succeed and move beyond your failure.
- 'four thousand people'—The last time there was a mass feeding, the count was five thousand men. This time it's four thousand people. This most likely indicates that this crowd is non-Jews. The standard practice of the Jewish people at the time was to count only men (which means that there were probably many more than 5000 at the first feeding, once you include women and children). But, when counting Gentiles, they just lumped them all together, not separating men and women in the count. The Syrian woman told Jesus in the last passage that she knew that he had enough bread for non-Jews as well as Jews. In this passage, Jesus responds to that faith: he demonstrates literally that he has enough bread to give to the Gentiles as well. The Syrian women's responsiveness to Jesus gives not only her, but a whole crowd, a miracle.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Do you feel like you've missed out on a miracle? People who weren't at the feeding of the 5000 might have felt like they had been left out of a once-in-a-lifetime event, but Jesus demonstrates that he is willing and able to do it again. If you feel like people around you have experienced something supernatural from God but you missed it, ask God to do it again.
- *For your six:* Jesus says of the crowd, 'And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road.' Are any of your six close to fainting—they just don't have the energy to go forward? Ask Jesus to give you something to feed and restore them.
- *For our church:* It's wonderful to be a part of a church in which so many new people are coming to experience Jesus' goodness with us all the time. Pray that the trend would continue and, in fact, increase. Pray that we would have a new wave of people joining us. Ask God to send us a whole new crowd of people to feed with his Spirit, his words, and his presence.

March 21

Mark 8: 11-26—the yeast of the Pharisees, and the healing of a blind man

¹¹ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had arrived, they came to argue with him. Testing him to see if he was from God, they demanded, "Give us a miraculous sign from heaven to prove yourself." ¹² When he heard this, he sighed deeply and said, "Why do you people keep demanding a miraculous sign? I assure you, I will not give this generation any such sign." ¹³ So he got back into the boat and left them, and he crossed to the other side of the lake. ¹⁴ But the disciples discovered they had forgotten to bring any food, so there was only one loaf of bread with them in the boat. ¹⁵ As they were crossing the lake, Jesus warned them, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." ¹⁶ They decided he was saying this because they hadn't brought any bread. ¹⁷ Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said, "Why are you so worried about having no food? Won't you ever learn or understand? Are your hearts too hard to take it in?" ¹⁸ "You have eyes—can't you see? You have ears—can't you hear?" Don't you remember anything at all? ¹⁹ What about the five thousand men I fed with five loaves of bread? How many baskets of leftovers did you pick up afterward?" "Twelve," they said. ²⁰ "And when I fed the four thousand with seven loaves, how many large baskets of leftovers did you pick up?" "Seven," they said. ²¹ "Don't you understand even yet?" he asked them. ²² When they arrived at Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to Jesus, and they begged him to touch and heal the man. ²³ Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then, spitting on the man's eyes, he laid his hands on him and asked, "Can you see anything now?" ²⁴ The man

looked around. “Yes,” he said, “I see people, but I can’t see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around.”²⁵ Then Jesus placed his hands over the man’s eyes again. As the man stared intently, his sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly.²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t go back into the village on your way home.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘he got back into the boat and left them’—Jesus has shaken the dust off of his feet (ch. 6:11) as far as the Pharisees are concerned. If he has done so many signs for the Pharisees without them acknowledging them, he knows that one more will not make the difference. He goes in search of people who will be receptive to him and his teaching.
- ‘They decided he was saying this because they hadn’t brought any bread’—The disciples have become completely deaf to Jesus’ words. They take the story literally instead of knowing it is a pointer to some other meaning—and rather than asking Jesus, they ask one another what it means. And they come up with the ridiculous interpretation that Jesus doesn’t want them to shop at the same grocery store as the Pharisees. They have had plenty of opportunity to know what Jesus is talking about. If they had eyes to see, they would have seen Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees and known what was going on. If they had ears to hear, they would have understand what Jesus was talking about. If only they would remember the miracle that just happened, they would know that Jesus isn’t talking about bread. The disciples have been with Jesus, but it’s as if they’ve been unable to really notice what has been going on.
- ‘Why are you so worried about having no food?’—It seems that the main reason that the disciples are having such a hard time understanding what Jesus is saying is that they are still stuck on the question, ‘Are we going to have enough to eat?’ No matter how many times Jesus miraculously provides, the next time things are looking a little short they begin to be anxious again. Each time, they fall into doubt, ‘Will Jesus really be able to take care of us?’ This question of the disciples is indeed a big one. We are constantly tempted to doubt that Jesus is willing and able to care of us. If we don’t believe he will provide for us, it makes it very hard for us to get something new from God. Every day, we need to ask God to give us our daily bread, trusting in him to do it. And the next day, we need to remember that he provided yesterday. Otherwise, we will be doomed to spending much of our lives worrying about whether we have enough.
- ‘They look like trees walking’—sometimes healing doesn’t come all at once. It’s a process over time. Even Jesus has this occasion where the healing happens in two stages. Two things help the healing to completion: Jesus touches the man again; and the man stares intently. More prayer from Jesus and more faith and effort on the part of the man turn a partial healing into a complete one.
- ‘he could see everything clearly’—last time the disciples had a hard time understanding Jesus’ words, he immediately gave a deaf man the ability to hear perfectly. This time, Jesus immediately gives a blind man the ability to see clearly. Right now the disciples are deaf and blind, but their situation is still not hopeless. Jesus can return clear sight and perfect hearing to them. It will take his touch, and it will take them ‘staring intently,’ making an extra effort.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus gives us here a great model for how to pray for healing.
 1. He lays hands on the person and prays.
 2. He stops to ask the person how it is going.
 3. When he finds out that something is happening but it is incomplete, he prays for the healing to be complete.
 4. And he invites the man to be active in his own healing—striving for what Jesus can give him.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would be able to see, hear, and remember. Ask that Jesus would give them eyes to notice what he is doing, ears to hear his words, and a memory to recall when Jesus does something good for them. Particularly pray that your six would not forget when God answers their prayers.
- *For our church:* Ask Jesus to make our church that never forgets the baskets of leftovers. May God preserve us from ever falling back on mere survival as our goal.

March 22

Mark 8: 27-9:1—Who do you say I am?

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets." ²⁹ Then Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ Then Jesus began to tell them that he, the Son of Man, would suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the leaders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, and three days later he would rise again. ³² As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and told him he shouldn't say things like that. ³³ Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and then said to Peter very sternly, "Get away from me, Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." ³⁴ Then he called his disciples and the crowds to come over and listen. "If any of you wants to be my follower," he told them, "you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. ³⁵ If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life. ³⁶ And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process? ³⁷ Is anything worth more than your soul? ³⁸ If a person is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in the glory of my Father with the holy angels." **9** Jesus went on to say, "I assure you that some of you standing here right now will not die before you see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Who do people say I am?'—This passage marks the mid-point of Mark's story, and in this passage we see a significant turning point in Jesus' ministry. Among other things, the first half of the story is about Jesus' identity. Jesus has said and done amazing things—heal the sick, cast out demons, calm the waves, raise the dead—that provoke the question, 'Who is this guy?' And there have been many answers to the question. John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets seem to be the dominant answers: the people are tossing around these answers in the story about King Herod, and Peter repeats them here. Other answers to the question, 'Who is Jesus?' include the carpenter's son, the servant of the prince of demons, and a crazy man. Everyone is interested in the question, 'Who is Jesus?' and everyone has an opinion.
- 'Who do you say I am?'—Jesus indicates with this question that Peter's answer should be different from all the rest. Just like Jesus' question of the blind man led the blind man to stare intently, Jesus' question of Peter makes him think carefully. And Peter, who has been a bit blind recently, sees clearly: 'You are the Messiah,' who is the king and savior of the Jews.
- 'Peter took him aside and told him he shouldn't say things like that'—The first half of the gospel of Mark provokes and addresses the question, 'Who is Jesus?' In this passage, we hear the definitive answer: Jesus is the Messiah. The second half of Mark's story addresses the question, 'What is the Messiah and what does it mean for me?' Even though Peter has just declared that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, Peter thinks he has a better idea of what the Messiah ought to be than Jesus does. In Peter's view, the Messiah should be a glorious conqueror who rallies all of Israel behind him and conquers their enemies. To Peter, Jesus' prediction of his death is an unseemly loss of nerve. He thinks Jesus is being defeatist: 'I'm the Messiah, but I don't think it's ever going to work because the Pharisees don't like me.'
- 'Get away from me, Satan!'—Jesus reaction to Peter is strong. Satan's role so far in the book of Mark has been to tempt Jesus and to fight him. Peter thinks he is being helpful and encouraging to Jesus, but he's really taking Satan's role: he's tempting Jesus away from God's will, and he is working against the kingdom of God. Jesus has to sternly warn Peter.
- 'If any of you wants to be my follower'—Peter rebukes Jesus because Jesus says that he is going to be killed. In response, Jesus ups the ante by saying anyone who is his follower will also be killed. All of the disciples have made previous decisions to follow Jesus: they left behind their old identities and picked up the identity of his disciples. Now, Jesus significantly changes the game. He is no longer simply inviting them to follow him around Galilee performing miracles; he is asking them to follow him to execution. In light of this new calling, he renews the offer to follow: he gives the disciples a chance to go back, and he invited anyone from the crowd who would like to join.
- 'If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it'—Now comes the good news. Jesus isn't defeatist, and he isn't a masochist. He is offering everyone a solution to the problem, how do I save my life? All of us want to save our lives, but we can't. No matter how successful we are at living, we spend a day of our lives every day, and we can't get that day back. We are constantly moving one step closer to death. No level of safety can protect us from death, and no amount of money can buy us out of death. Jesus is asking everything of his followers: he is asking their lives. But, he

is only asking of them something that they are slowly losing anyway. And, in exchange, he offers what we all want: true, heavenly, eternal life. This is why he rebukes Peter so strongly. By telling Jesus to save himself, he is directing him toward losing his life—and toward ruining everyone else's opportunity to gain life.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* 'And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?'—What are your big plans for giving yourself a good life? The bad news is that Jesus says the plans will fail. The good news is that he offers a better one. What would you have to put aside in order to take up Jesus' offer? Are you ready for it? Start by laying aside your plan for giving yourself a good day today. Ask Jesus what his plan for your day is. That plan will probably involve some death, and even more life.
- *For your six:* Jesus asks Peter a question that helps Peter to see clearly. Ask Jesus to give you clarifying questions to ask your friends.
- *For our church:* Peter gets carried away by his unbelievably fortunate circumstances. He finds himself the most prominent follower of the man who turns out to be the one and only Messiah. In his enthusiasm, he slips into a human perspective on it: he wants it to be easy and flashy. We are incredibly fortunate to be a part of what Jesus is doing. Pray that we would look at our success from a divine point of view, and embrace both the suffering and the blessing that comes with it.

March 23

Mark 9: 2-13—the transfiguration

² Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain. No one else was there. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance changed, ³ and his clothing became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly process could ever make it. ⁴ Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus. ⁵ "Teacher, this is wonderful!" Peter exclaimed. "We will make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He didn't really know what to say, for they were all terribly afraid. ⁷ Then a cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." ⁸ Suddenly they looked around, and Moses and Elijah were gone, and only Jesus was with them. ⁹ As they descended the mountainside, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until he, the Son of Man, had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by "rising from the dead." ¹¹ Now they began asking him, "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" ¹² Jesus responded, "Elijah is indeed coming first to set everything in order. Why then is it written in the Scriptures that the Son of Man must suffer and be treated with utter contempt?" ¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and he was badly mistreated, just as the Scriptures predicted."

Points of Interest:

- 'I assure you that some of you standing here right now will not die before you see the Kingdom of God arrive in great power'—This sentence is actually the end of yesterday's passage. Jesus tells them that the life of one of his followers will not be all suffering; they will get amazing tastes of glory also. Six days later, three of them get just such a taste.
- 'Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus'—Moses and Elijah are two of the major figures of the Old Testament, the story of God's people before Jesus arrived. Why do they all of a sudden appear here? It would seem to make sense for a number of reasons. Moses and Elijah also had notoriously difficult times getting God's people to hear and understand God's words; so maybe they are commiserating. An even better reason, though, is that they serve as proof of Jesus' offer. Jesus has just asked his followers to lay down his life, trusting that he will give them a better one. These are big stakes to ask: what if it's not really possible to be raised from the dead? You certainly wouldn't want to find this out at the moment of death. So, Jesus introduces Peter, James, and John to two people who, by all rights, ought to be dead. They each lived hundreds of years ago: one of them died, and has apparently risen again; the other never tasted death and was immediately taken to heaven. They are—literally—living proof that Jesus can give life. A third reason is that Moses represents God's law and Elijah represents prophecy. Jesus seems to be demonstrating to the disciples that in what he says, he has the backing of both God's law and God's prophecy.
- 'We will make three shrines'—Peter, awed at being in the presence of such greatness, just blurts something out. It seems like he's fishing for a good reason for him to be there: hey, I can pitch tents for the three of you. By suggesting three shrines, Peter is putting them on equal footing. He might have thought that he was actually being pretty generous to Jesus, making him the peer of two of

the most important men in Jewish history. But God the Father steps in and shows him just how great Jesus is. God says, 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him,' and when they look around, Moses and Elijah have disappeared. God is saying, even more than Moses and more than Elijah, you should listen to what Jesus has to say.

- 'This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him'—at the beginning of Mark's story, God spoke to Jesus from heaven, saying, 'You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.' Here, as the second half of the story begins, God speaks from heaven again. This time, he speaks to the disciple, telling them that Jesus is his trustworthy son. This too is meant as validation for the words Jesus spoke yesterday. God's voice from heaven is backing Jesus' statement that trying to save your life only leads to death, and he is backing Jesus' promise that he has true life to give.
- 'Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?'—Remember from the first day that the prophet Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord—that is of the Messiah. The disciples have now heard that Jesus is the Messiah, and they have seen Elijah. They're wondering whether they have just seen the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Jesus seems to be telling them that they did, in fact, see the fulfillment, but it was at Jesus' baptism and John's martyrdom.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* If yesterday's passage was overwhelming to you, ask Jesus for confirmation of its truth. Ask him to point you to more passages of the Bible that back Jesus' warning and promise. Ask for a word from God.
- *For your six:* What are the other voices that your six listen to? They might not even be evil alternatives: Moses and Elijah certainly are not. But, Jesus' voice has to be unique if we are to find life. Pray that God would diminish the other voices in your six's life so that Jesus can be heard more clearly.
- *For our church:* Ask that God would give our church moments of great glory. Ask for power in our times of worship, that they would be times that fuel us and encourage us for our life together of following Jesus.

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Four

Over the 40 Days 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:

10. **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?
11. **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.
12. **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.

Monday, March 24th

Mark 9: 14-29—the healing of a demon-possessed boy

¹⁴ At the foot of the mountain they found a great crowd surrounding the other disciples, as some teachers of religious law were arguing with them. ¹⁵ The crowd watched Jesus in awe as he came toward them, and then they ran to greet him. ¹⁶ "What is all this arguing about?" he asked. ¹⁷ One of the men in the crowd spoke up and said, "Teacher, I brought my son for you to heal him. He can't speak because he is possessed by an evil spirit that won't let him talk. ¹⁸ And whenever this evil spirit seizes him, it throws him violently to the ground and makes him foam at the mouth and grind his teeth and become rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it." ¹⁹ Jesus said to them, "You faithless people! How long must I be with you until you believe? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." ²⁰ So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth. ²¹ "How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was very small. ²² The evil spirit often makes him fall into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us. Do something if you can." ²³ "What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes." ²⁴ The father instantly replied, "I do believe, but help me not to doubt!" ²⁵ When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Spirit of deafness and muteness," he said, "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!" ²⁶ Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy lay there motionless, and he appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd, "He's dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with his disciples, they asked him, "Why couldn't we cast out that evil spirit?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer."

Points of Interest:

- 'The crowd watched Jesus in awe'—Who knows, but perhaps the people are in awe because Jesus' clothes are still dazzlingly white. The book of Exodus, chapter 34, tells us that whenever Moses

came away from speaking with the Lord, his face would glow for a while. Perhaps Jesus has a similar heavenly glow to him as he returns.

- 'What is all this arguing about?'—Isn't it so often true that what is being fought over gets lost in the midst of the argument? Jesus comes down into a chaotic scene in which he can't even tell what the disciples and the religious teachers are arguing about. Perhaps the disciples and the religious teachers are arguing about methods for casting out demons. Perhaps the religious teachers are using the disciples' failure as a way to fight against Jesus' legitimacy. Whatever the case, the actual, helpless demon-possessed boy is lost in the shuffle as the disciples and teachers argue. It is so easy to let arguments over turf and over methods get in the way of helping hurting people, and it is such a great pity when it does. Although Jesus asks what the argument is about, he doesn't actually get himself entangled in the substance of the argument. Rather, he goes straight to the original matter: the healing of the boy.
- 'How long has this been happening?'—Jesus asks a little bit more about the boy's condition. Knowing more about exactly what's going on with the boy apparently helps him to treat the problem effectively. Often, when we are praying for someone, especially when it appears that their problem is influenced by an evil spirit, it's worth it to ask a few questions to discover what we are dealing with.
- "What do you mean, 'If I can'?"—The father thinks that the limiting factor is Jesus' ability. Jesus responds that the question is not whether or not he has the power, but whether or not others have the faith. Earlier on, Jesus says, "You faithless people!" Apparently, the whole environment here is one of faithlessness. No one, not the father, nor the disciples, nor certainly the religious teachers have demonstrated faith that this boy can be healed. Perhaps the intrusion of the religious teachers into the situation has disrupted the faithfulness of the people involved.
- 'This kind can be cast out only by prayer'—it seems that before Jesus arrives no one has even prayed during this attempt to cast out the evil spirit. Imagine what it would have been like for the disciples when they first began to cast out demons. They must have been totally reliant on God: "Oh, Lord, please, please, please, give us the ability to cast out this demon. We know we can't do it without you," must have been their feeling if not their actual words. Perhaps by now, casting out demons has become a little old hat. They know they can do it; it just takes a little laying on of hands. They've become confident in their own abilities, maybe even their own techniques, rather than on the power of God. They follow their time-tested technique, but it doesn't work. They've forgotten the most important ingredient: faithful prayer to God.
- 'I do believe, but help me not to doubt!'—Jesus says that this kind of spirit comes out only by prayer, but Mark makes no mention of Jesus praying. Who prays the prayer that causes the demon to leave? The only thing it could be is the father saying, 'I do believe, but help me not to doubt.' This confession of faith and cry for help to have faith is the kind of prayer Jesus loves to answer. Jesus doesn't expect perfect faith: he only expects the man to cry out in dependence on him. We don't need to have perfectly phrased prayers or have all our ducks in a row before we pray. All Jesus expects is for us to come to him with what we have. Just like Jesus could multiply the 5 loaves to feed a crowd, he could multiply the man's faith once given the invitation.
- 'he appeared to be dead'—Jesus has told his disciples that he will be killed and rise again, and they don't understand his words. Here, Jesus tries to give them a little picture of the resurrection to bolster their imagination and their faith. Jesus predicts that he will suffer, die, and rise again. The boy suffers at the hand of the spirit. He appears to be dead. And when Jesus touches him, he rises up from the ground. Just like Jesus revives this father's son, God the Father will revive his own son.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The father brings the boy to Jesus to be healed, but it looks very much like Jesus has killed the boy instead. Sometimes, when we bring a problem to Jesus it seems to get worse rather than better. That doesn't necessarily mean that something is going wrong. The example of this boy shows us that sometimes the path to healing goes through death to resurrection. If you have brought a problem to Jesus, and it's gotten worse, ask him to see it through to resurrection.
- *For your six:* All that Jesus needs to do something amazing in a person's life is a little starter faith. All the father can do is offer a prayer that Jesus would help him to believe, and Jesus responds willingly and abundantly. Pray that your six would have enough faith to ask Jesus for more. Ask Jesus to respond to them as lavishly as he does to this man.

- *For our church:* Pray that our church would become more and more a place of prayerful dependence on God. We don't want to rely on our ministry techniques, but on God's power. We want to do the things that only happen by prayer.

Tuesday, March 25th

Mark 9: 30-49—the greatest and the least

³⁰ Leaving that region, they traveled through Galilee. Jesus tried to avoid all publicity ³¹ in order to spend more time with his disciples and teach them. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed. He will be killed, but three days later he will rise from the dead." ³² But they didn't understand what he was saying, and they were afraid to ask him what he meant. ³³ After they arrived at Capernaum, Jesus and his disciples settled in the house where they would be staying. Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing out on the road?" ³⁴ But they didn't answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down and called the twelve disciples over to him. Then he said, "Anyone who wants to be the first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." ³⁶ Then he put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes my Father who sent me." ³⁸ John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't one of our group." ³⁹ "Don't stop him!" Jesus said. "No one who performs miracles in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Anyone who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I assure you, that person will be rewarded. ⁴² "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who trusts in me to lose faith, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter heaven with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell with two hands. ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter heaven with only one foot than to be thrown into hell with two feet. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It is better to enter the Kingdom of God half blind than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out.' ⁴⁹ "For everyone will be purified with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other."

Points of Interest:

- 'they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest'—Jesus is telling them that he is going to be betrayed and killed, and they respond by arguing about which one of them is the greatest. It seems a bit calloused and inappropriate. Why are they arguing about greatness now? Are they trying to decide who will succeed Jesus when he dies? Or perhaps the whole topic just goes over their head, and they are arguing about greatness because of their recent experiences: James, John, and Peter may be saying to the others something like, 'We saw something really cool, but we can't tell you what it is,' or, 'I guess you had a little trouble casting out demons when we were gone.' Competitiveness has sprung up amongst the disciples.
- 'Anyone who wants to be the first . . .'—Perhaps to their surprise, Jesus does not rebuke them for wanting greatness. He encourages their desire to be first, but tells them that they are going about it all wrong. This is the second such paradox statement we've seen recently. Earlier, Jesus said that anyone who tries to save their life will lose it. Here, he says if you want to be first you have to be last. According to Jesus, on some of our most fundamental human drives—the drive for life, and the drive for greatness—our instincts send us in exactly the wrong direction. Stated bluntly, our instinct is to fight and grab for these things. Jesus asks us to put ourselves in a place where he can give them to us instead.
- 'he put a little child among them'—They've been arguing about who is greatest, and Jesus tells them how to be great: serve the least. Then he gives them an opportunity at greatness, by giving them a chance to serve a little child. In the world's way of looking at things, if you want to be great, you ignore the least and you curry the favor of the great. You increase your own importance by being seen among important people. Maybe James, John, and Peter thought they were great now, because they could do a little name-dropping: 'James, do you remember that thing Elijah said when we were with him?' A little child is completely inconsequential in this way of thinking: she can give you nothing; she has no status to confer on you; and you get no credit or help from serving her. In Jesus' mind, the best possible path toward greatness is paying attention to someone like this.

Welcoming a no-status person like this child gives you an open freeway to the Father. Either they don't believe his recipe for greatness, or it's a little less appetizing to them than the old way. None of them take Jesus up on the offer. So, Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed the greatest among them by welcoming the child himself.

- 'he isn't one of our group'—the disciples encounter a non-union exorcist. Again, their priority in their dealings with this man seems to be to maintain their own greatness: 'I'm sorry, but only we are authorized to cast out demons.' Ironically, they have just demonstrated some difficulty casting out a demon, but this man seems to have no trouble. If they knew what true greatness is about, they would have welcomed the man. With so much less contact with Jesus, he nonetheless had the faith to go around casting out demons. They should have honored his faith, and they should have looked for ways to raise him up though he was less credentialed than them. Instead, they tried to protect their monopoly. Jesus says that it's not about competition; it's about expanding the kingdom of God. Anyone who does any small service in advancing the kingdom of God should be rewarded and encouraged.
- 'But if anyone causes one of these little ones who trusts in me to lose faith'—'These little ones who trust in me,' seems to refer to both the literal child and to this unofficial disciple. The man casting out demons is little, at least in their perspective, because he has less status among the disciples. With this 'little one' particular, the disciples have actually put up a barrier to faith: they've told him that casting out demons in Jesus' name is wrong. By using the power that comes with being an apostle to their own benefit in this way, they've moved onto very dangerous ground. Jesus basically says, 'Next time you think about doing something like that again, commit suicide instead; it's less harmful.' If they really want to be great, they should do it by encouraging the faith of others. The way they're going about greatness is prohibiting the kingdom and bringing them lower and lower.
- 'If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off'—Jesus isn't literally recommending amputation. It's not really our limbs that cause us to sin; remember, Jesus says in chapter 7 that, 'It is the thought-life that defiles you' not the body. Jesus is using a very violent analogy to tell the disciples just how serious their error is. The really cause of their sin is their pride; and Jesus is saying that they need to do something drastic to get rid of that pride. We might prefer something like, 'If your hand causes you to sin, slap it,' or, 'If your hand causes you to sin, hide it behind your back.' We tend to treat sin lightly. Jesus recommends that we treat sin drastically, permanently, and immediately. We want to excuse our sin or explain it in order to protect ourselves. We've got our priorities dangerously wrong: we might avoid a little harm, only to lead toward greater harm in the end. Jesus says that the best way to protect ourselves is by doing anything we can to get rid of our sin. What are the habitual sins that you tend to coddle? What would it look like to treat it drastically, permanently, and immediately instead? Ask Jesus for the strength you need to cut sin off at the root.
- 'where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out.'—a quote from the prophet Isaiah, ch. 66:24.
- 'have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other'—This is a particularly difficult metaphor of Jesus' to understand, and, unfortunately, the disciples don't ask Jesus what he means. For what it's worth, it's my opinion that the salt is judgment. Jesus is telling the disciples that they should judge themselves—that is, treat their own sin seriously and get rid of it—and be at peace with one another. The disciples have been doing the opposite. They've been at peace with themselves—each of them thinking that he is pretty great—and judging others: they've competed with one another, judged the little child as unworthy, and judged the non-union exorcist as invalid. They've been trying to season everyone else, when they're the ones who have lost their taste. If they don't reverse the flow and deal with their own faults instead, they will end up in serious trouble.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus wants you to be first—and the best way to be first is to put yourself last. Ask God for the grace and the faith to welcome and encourage others, especially those who apparently have little to offer you.
- *For your six:* Are there ways your six are already trying to do the work of the kingdom in Jesus' name? Jesus says in this passage that you don't have to be 'part of the group' to begin to do works of faith. Encourage your six in ways you see them advancing the kingdom, and ask God to reward them for it—even if what they're doing is a small thing, like giving a cup of water.
- *For our church:* The disciples try to bolster their egos through competition, but Jesus warns that competition sends us the exact opposite direction of greatness. It's easy to fall into an attitude of

competition. Ask God to protect us from a spirit of competition, both within our church and with other churches.

Wednesday, March 26th

Mark 10: 1-12—on divorce and marriage

Then Jesus left Capernaum and went southward to the region of Judea and into the area east of the Jordan River. As always there were the crowds, and as usual he taught them.² Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: “Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?”³ “What did Moses say about divorce?” Jesus asked them.⁴ “Well, he permitted it,” they replied. “He said a man merely has to write his wife an official letter of divorce and send her away.”⁵ But Jesus responded, “He wrote those instructions only as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness.⁶ But God’s plan was seen from the beginning of creation, for ‘He made them male and female.’⁷ ‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife,⁸ and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one,⁹ let no one separate them, for God has joined them together.”¹⁰ Later, when he was alone with his disciples in the house, they brought up the subject again.¹¹ He told them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her.¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘tried to trap him’—What is the trap the Pharisees have set? The last time we heard about divorce, it was regarding Herod and Herodias’ marriage. John the Baptist was thrown in jail and eventually beheaded for calling their marriage unlawful. Undoubtedly, John criticized Herod’s marriage because it involved incest (marrying a brother’s wife) as well as divorce. Nonetheless, the Pharisees are trying to lure Jesus on to dangerous ground—the last prophet who spoke up about divorce was killed. If Jesus answers as strongly as John, he may put himself in danger also. If he doesn’t, the Pharisees can criticize him for softening his response for political reasons.
- ‘a man merely has to write his wife an official letter of divorce’—In Jewish culture, only the man had the right to divorce. Moses’ law about an official letter was actually a legal protection for women. Before Moses’ law, husbands would dismiss wives, denying them any support, but the wives were still legally contracted to the husbands and couldn’t marry anyone else. This official letter would allow the woman the chance to start again rather than being a lonely outcast for her whole life.
- ‘God’s plan was seen from the beginning’—While the Pharisees question focuses on what is allowed, Jesus re-frames the discussion on what is best. He quotes the book of Genesis 1: 27 and 2: 24 which describe the relationships between humans and God and men and women as they are supposed to be: both men and women are created in the image of God; and they are meant to be partners to one another. Divorce is a separation, a sending away. Marriage is supposed to be about joining together. The Pharisees treat divorce almost flippantly: it’s merely a matter of writing a letter. Jesus doesn’t want divorce to be trivialized in this way. He presents it as what many of us have experienced it to be: a marriage gone horribly, painfully wrong.
- ‘send her away’—Jesus speaks so strongly against divorce because so often it comes from the exact opposite spirit to the one he was recommending in the previous teaching. Jesus tells us to judge ourselves and be at peace with others. Especially in a situation in which only the man had the ability to begin divorce proceedings, divorce lends itself toward being at peace with oneself and judging others. Jesus recommends that we cut off our own hand if it causes us to sin; these divorced men were instead cutting off their wives. Of course, situations like abuse, infidelity, or being rejected by your spouse require more sensitive, complex treatment; and the Bible does indeed discuss some of these more complex divorce situations elsewhere. In this passage, however, Jesus strongly warns us against putting off the blame for a failed marriage on our spouses. So often, in the midst of a fight, it is easy to be at peace with ourselves and judge the other. A situation of divorce can often be an entire relationship—and our most intimate relationship—in which each is judging the other and absolving himself or herself. It’s tempting to think that sending one another away would be the easiest thing. Jesus responds that it will only create a tearing apart and more hardship. It’s far better, early on, to cut off the things that cause you to sin against your spouse.
- ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery’—this verse is very sobering, and it should give any of us pause before we divorce and re-marry. It may be helpful, though, in understanding what Jesus means to think of the Herod and Herodias situation in the backdrop.

Herod and Herodias were both married to other people but conducting a very famous affair. Then, they each dropped their spouses (as a cosmopolitan aristocrat Herodias, though a woman, could get away with it) and married one another. They had treated their previous marriages as temporary and disposable. Jesus is saying here that the legally covering for their actions doesn't change the reality: they had wronged their previous spouses, and their previous spouses still had a better claim on them. Divorce does not legitimize unfaithfulness.

- 'And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery'—Jesus here equalizes the relationship between women and men. The woman has the same rights, the same choices, and the same responsibility as the man.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Not many of us in our society have escaped being intimately affected by divorce. Jesus speaks some hard words here about divorce which ought to be taken seriously. At the same time, it is extremely important to know that Jesus' grace extends over divorce also. Divorce isn't blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-29, done on March 9th); Jesus has the authority and the willingness to forgive any sins we have done associate with it. If this teaching on divorce has struck you hard, you may want to talk more about your thoughts and feelings with a trusted follower of Jesus. Perhaps you need to ask God's forgiveness for ways you have blamed your spouse and been at peace with yourself—whether that has led to divorce or not. You may also want to ask Jesus for healing for the way you were 'sent away,' either by your former spouse, or by your parents if you are a child of divorced parents.
- *For your six:* For any of your six who are affected by divorce, ask for healing and forgiveness for them. Pray against the power of divorce to continue to harm them, and pray against it being a barrier to them seeking Jesus.
- *For our church:* Pray that God will bless and protect the marriages in our church. Ask God to give all of us who are married the ability to love our spouses well and the life-giving experience of being two united as one.

Thursday, March 27th

Mark 10: 13-31—the little children and the rich man

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him.¹⁴ But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these."¹⁵ I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God."¹⁶ Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them. As he was starting out on a trip, a man came running up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?"¹⁸ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good."¹⁹ But as for your question, you know the commandments: 'Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not testify falsely. Do not cheat. Honor your father and mother.'²⁰ "Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was a child."²¹ Jesus felt genuine love for this man as he looked at him. "You lack only one thing," he told him. "Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."²² At this, the man's face fell, and he went sadly away because he had many possessions.²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for rich people to get into the Kingdom of God!"²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, "Dear children, it is very hard to get into the Kingdom of God.²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"²⁶ The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked.²⁷ Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."²⁸ Then Peter began to mention all that he and the other disciples had left behind. "We've given up everything to follow you," he said.²⁹ And Jesus replied, "I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News,³⁰ will receive now in return, a hundred times over, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—with persecutions. And in the world to come they will have eternal life."³¹ But many who seem to be important now will be the least important then, and those who are considered least here will be the greatest then."

Points of Interest:

- 'but the disciples told them not to bother him'—Two passages ago, Jesus told the disciples that the key to being welcomed by him and the Father is welcoming little children. But here the disciples are again, sending away little ones. Jesus is indignant with the disciples, and he increases the stakes. Not only do you have to welcome children, but you have to imitate them to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It takes faith like a child's—open, expectant, and dependent—to get to the kingdom of heaven. After the very adult topic of divorce, Jesus brings our attention back to the simple faith of a child.
- 'Why do you call me good? Only God is truly good'—Although he happens to be correct this time in calling Jesus good, Jesus calls into question the man's definition of the word 'good.' He doesn't know Jesus is God, but he calls him good. Perhaps he also thinks of himself as 'a good person.' He's done all of the right things, and perhaps he is depending on that, on his goodness, to bring him eternal life. He has indeed done well. He claims to have kept all of the commandments Jesus lists since he was a child, and Jesus doesn't contradict his claim. Rather, the man's fervor provokes genuine love from Jesus. And yet, his own moral accomplishments are not enough.
- 'You lack only one thing'—What does he lack? One way to describe what he lacks is a relationship with God. The commandments he has obeyed are 6 of the famous 10 commandments. The 10 commandments can be split into two different sub-categories: those having to do with love of your neighbor, and those having to do with love of God. The man has obeyed all 6 of the commandments about loving his neighbor, but apparently he has overlooked the 4 that have to do with loving God. How can he have eternal life? By having a relationship with God. How can he gain that relationship with God? The same way everyone else has: by leaving what they have and following Jesus.
- 'How hard it is for rich people to get into the kingdom of God'—Although Jesus says that it is impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God, he singles out rich people. This young man is, in fact, unique among the people we have seen in the story of Mark so far. When Jesus called James, John, Simon, Andrew, and Levi to follow him, they all immediately left what they had behind. Either this rich man decides not to do it at all, or he at least needs time to think about it. Why is it harder for this rich man? The cost is the same for everyone: they have to leave what they have. But it looks bigger, because he has more to leave. The idea that he is leaving more is somewhat of an illusion. As Jesus says, there's no benefit in even gaining the whole world but losing your life (Mark 8: 36). No matter how much money this man has, it's worth less than his life. But it feels to him like so much more than the others are leaving behind.

Another way to look at it is that it takes the faith of a child to enter the kingdom of God. People with means have a hard time being children. They are used to being in charge, getting things done, being the people who have the means to accomplish what they want. Being like a child means receiving things as a gift from God—the only one who can make eternal life possible. Rich people are used to doing things on their own power.

- 'a hundred times over'—Jesus said two passages ago that no one who did something so small as giving a cup of water would lose their reward. The disciples have given up everything, and Jesus says they will be rewarded generously—a hundred times over in this life, besides eternal life in the age to come. Now, none of the disciples became real estate magnates during their life time. They did not possess, in the traditional sense, 100 times more land by the time they died than they did before they started following. But, they also never lacked for a place to stay, food to eat, or community. Jesus says anyone who does God's will is his family (3: 35, March 9th). The disciples have become a part of that larger family, and it is that family that gives them houses to live in and food to eat. When they went on their mission, they stayed in the houses they were welcomed into. They will continue to live that way, and Jesus promises it is a rich life, much better than depending on what you can gain for yourself.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus says that no one can enter the kingdom of God without the faith of a child. Ask Jesus for the power to become a child.
- *For your six:* Sometimes, like for the rich man here, the price tag of following Jesus can feel dauntingly high. For each of your six, it will take the faith to leave behind something they depend on if they are going to follow Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to give them the faith and insight they need to respond to Jesus' invitation. Ask that they will not go away sadly when given the choice.
- *For our church:* Ask God to make us more and more a community of 100-fold blessing. Look for opportunities to rely on others in our midst and to give to them.

Friday, March 28th

Mark 10: 32-52—true greatness, the healing of blind Bartimaeus

³² They were now on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him in Jerusalem. ³³ “When we get to Jerusalem,” he told them, “the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. ³⁴ They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.” ³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do us a favor.” ³⁶ “What is it?” he asked. ³⁷ “In your glorious Kingdom, we want to sit in places of honor next to you,” they said, “one at your right and the other at your left.” ³⁸ But Jesus answered, “You don’t know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of sorrow I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?” ³⁹ “Oh yes,” they said, “we are able!” And Jesus said, “You will indeed drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism, ⁴⁰ but I have no right to say who will sit on the thrones next to mine. God has prepared those places for the ones he has chosen.” ⁴¹ When the ten other disciples discovered what James and John had asked, they were indignant. ⁴² So Jesus called them together and said, “You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. ⁴³ But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.” ⁴⁶ And so they reached Jericho. Later, as Jesus and his disciples left town, a great crowd was following. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) was sitting beside the road as Jesus was going by. ⁴⁷ When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus from Nazareth was nearby, he began to shout out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸ “Be quiet!” some of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, “Tell him to come here.” So they called the blind man. “Cheer up,” they said. “Come on, he’s calling you!” ⁵⁰ Bartimaeus threw aside his coat, jumped up, and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked. “Teacher,” the blind man said, “I want to see.” ⁵² And Jesus said to him, “Go your way. Your faith has healed you.” And instantly the blind man could see! Then he followed Jesus down the road.

Points of Interest:

- ‘The disciples were filled with dread and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear’—Perhaps Jesus’ words about being killed are starting to sink in. At the very least, everyone is aware that they are leaving Galilee, their home turf, and moving on to the home turf of the religious leaders with whom Jesus has clashed so much. In response to their fear, Jesus repeats his predictions in far greater detail than he has before. Jesus wants them to know when it happens that it was not a surprise: no matter how bad it looks, it is all going according to plan.
- ‘they were indignant’—It seems that the disciples were not indignant because of James’ and John’s rudeness, but because they felt that James and John had outmaneuvered them. This is the second time that Jesus’ prediction of his death has led to squabbles about greatness amongst the disciples.
- ‘we want you do us a favor’—James and John are behaving a bit like children who say, ‘Daddy, will you promise to say yes to whatever I ask you.’ Nonetheless, Jesus hears their request.
- ‘You don’t know what you are asking’—James and John naively ask for the honor that Jesus will have in his glorious kingdom. They don’t know that you can only get the reward by passing through the suffering: you can’t have resurrection without death. Again, Jesus doesn’t rebuke them for wanting honor. He says that they are going about it in the wrong way. Although they aren’t ready yet to follow Jesus in this way, he promises them that they will someday be able.
- ‘What do you want me to do for you?’—Jesus says that what makes him great is that he is a servant. Then, he demonstrates his servanthood by asking the question of a servant: what can I do for you? In fact, he is even willing to serve James and John, but he cannot give them what they want.

- 'Be quiet!' some of the people yelled at him—Bartimaeus is another little one. Just like the disciples tried to stop the children from getting to Jesus, the people try to get Bartimaeus to shut up. Jesus welcomes Bartimaeus just like he does the children.
- 'Then he followed Jesus down the road'—Jesus tells Bartimaeus to go his way, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus. Jesus' way has become Bartimaeus' way. Bartimaeus wants to be close to the man who has the power and the care to heal him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* You've been asking Jesus to do something for you for almost 4 weeks now. If Jesus has not answered you yet, follow Bartimaeus' example: ask louder. If Jesus has answered you, consider what it would mean to follow Jesus down the road. Where does Jesus want to lead you?
- *For your six:* Jesus wants you to be great, and he wants your six to be served. Look for opportunities to do something kind or helpful for your six today. Ask Jesus if he has an idea for you.
- *For our church:* As a church, we have the same spirit as James and John. We like to say, 'We are able!' to the calling Jesus gives us. Also, like James and John, we are not actually currently able to do all of the things we have said we will do. Ask Jesus to make us able to do what he has called us to do.

Saturday, March 29th

Mark 11: 1-11—Palm Sunday

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ² "Go into that village over there," he told them, "and as soon as you enter it, you will see a colt tied there that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs it and will return it soon.' " ⁴ The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside a house. ⁵ As they were untying it, some bystanders demanded, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many in the crowd spread their coats on the road ahead of Jesus, and others cut leafy branches in the fields and spread them along the way. ⁹ He was in the center of the procession, and the crowds all around him were shouting,

"Praise God!

Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Bless the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Praise God in highest heaven!"

¹¹ So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. He looked around carefully at everything, and then he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he went out to Bethany with the twelve disciples.

Points of Interest:

- 'They said what Jesus had told them to say'—Jesus gives them a small miracle of being provided a donkey. This little miracle is a little reminder of the trustworthiness of Jesus' words. It's especially important in the following days that they remember and believe Jesus' words.
- 'the colt'—Jesus is self-consciously fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah. It was written by the prophet Zechariah (9:9): 'Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—even on a donkey's colt.'
- 'spread their coats on the road'—They are using their own coats to lay down a carpet for Jesus' arrival. It honors Jesus—even the feet of his donkey shouldn't have to touch the ground—and it keeps down the dust. This action refers back to the Isaiah quote from the very first passage: 'Prepare a pathway of the Lord's coming!'
- 'Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'—the crowds are shouting Psalm 118. Psalm 118 was a common psalm to be sung during the period of the Passover; so it would have been on the minds of the crowd. The crowds are welcoming Jesus in a similar way to how all pilgrims were welcomed, but there is an anticipation of something great in Jesus' arrival that is extraordinary. The crowds add on to the psalm the phrase about David's kingdom, showing that they know Jesus' lineage and that they are expecting something kingly and David-like of him.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples who went for the colt found things just as Jesus said they would be. Ask Jesus if he has any directions for you today. Follow his instructions, and see what happens.

- *For your six:* Ask Jesus to give your six small miracles to show the trustworthiness of his words. Pray that these small miracles would lead them deeper into faith.
- *For our church:* Pray that God would enlarge our ability to worship. Ask him to give us the exuberance and lack of self-consciousness that these crowds of pilgrims had.

Sunday, March 30th

Mark 11: 12-25—the clearing of the temple

The next morning as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus felt hungry. ¹³ He noticed a fig tree a little way off that was in full leaf, so he went over to see if he could find any figs on it. But there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. ¹⁴ Then Jesus said to the tree, “May no one ever eat your fruit again!” And the disciples heard him say it. ¹⁵ When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and he stopped everyone from bringing in merchandise. ¹⁷ He taught them, “The Scriptures declare, ‘My Temple will be called a place of prayer for all nations,’ but you have turned it into a den of thieves.” ¹⁸ When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him. But they were afraid of him because the people were so enthusiastic about Jesus’ teaching. ¹⁹ That evening Jesus and the disciples left the city. ²⁰ The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it was withered from the roots. ²¹ Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree on the previous day and exclaimed, “Look, Teacher! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” ²² Then Jesus said to the disciples, “Have faith in God. ²³ I assure you that you can say to this mountain, ‘May God lift you up and throw you into the sea,’ and your command will be obeyed. All that’s required is that you really believe and do not doubt in your heart. ²⁴ Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it. ²⁵ But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.”

Points of Interest:

- ‘May no one ever eat your fruit again’—It seems a bit unfair and impetuous of Jesus to curse a fig tree simply because he was hungry and disappointed—especially since it wasn’t even fig season. It’s important to notice that the story of the fig tree brackets the story of the temple. Jesus is using the fig tree as a symbol of the temple. Jesus goes to the fig tree expecting figs, and all he finds are leaves. He goes to the temple expecting to find prayer, and he finds plenty of activity but no prayer. Just like a fig tree without figs is of no use to Jesus, a temple without prayer is of no use to him. The fig tree is a sign to the people who run the temple: they can expect the same thing to happen to the temple as happened to the tree.
- ‘you have made it into a den of thieves’—the quote about the house of prayer comes from the prophet Isaiah 56:7. The quote about the den of thieves comes from Jeremiah 7: 11. It’s not just that Jesus finds no prayer at the temple, it has been replaced with robbery. What exactly was going on? When people came to the temple, they were expected to offer unblemished animals for sacrifice. Some people traveled to Jerusalem from great distances, and found it difficult to bring animals all the way from home. For their convenience, the temple began to offer animals for purchase on the spot. However, over time—rather like hot dogs and beer at the ballpark—they began to severely over-charge. Furthermore—also like at the ballpark—they went from offering these official temple sacrifices for whomever wanted them to requiring that people buy the temple sacrifices. So, the temple officials were making a tidy profit on this business, but they were robbing the worshippers of their money and God of some of his offering. They were also robbing non-Jews of a place to pray. Jesus says that the temple is supposed to be a place of prayer for all nations; but the officials have set up all of these tables in the court of the Gentiles, the place set aside for non-Jews to worship.
- ‘you can say to this mountain’—‘This mountain’ would be Mount Zion, the site of the temple. Jesus is making another reference to the fact that he has little use for this prayerless temple.
- ‘first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too’—Jesus offers them the lavish promise that, with faith, they can ask for anything they need. Then, he suggests what their first priority should be with this great gift—the most important thing they can ask for in faith is forgiveness. Take notice of the fact that the forgiveness has a condition: the Father will forgive us if we are forgiving others. We have the choice: we can live in

an economy of justice or an economy of forgiveness. If we insist on justice for those who have wronged us, we will also receive justice. If we offer forgiveness, we will also receive forgiveness.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus says the greatest thing we can ask for is forgiveness. Spend a few minutes offering forgiveness to people you have something against, and receive the Father's forgiveness. If you ask in faith, God will give it to you.
- *For your six:* Jesus removed all of the merchants that were in the way of the Gentiles worshipping. Are there things that are crowding out your six, giving them no space to pray or worship? Especially think about religious barriers. Ask Jesus to remove them. Also take any steps you can to remove those barriers.
- *For our church:* Ask Jesus to make us a house of prayer for all nations. Ask him to remove anything that gets in the way of people being able to seek him, and ask him to draw all kinds of people from everywhere into our midst.

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Five

Over the 40 Days 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:

13. **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?
14. **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.
15. **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.

Monday, March 31st

Mark 11: 27-12: 12—By whose authority?

²⁷ By this time they had arrived in Jerusalem again. As Jesus was walking through the Temple area, the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the other leaders came up to him. They demanded, ²⁸ "By whose authority did you drive out the merchants from the Temple? Who gave you such authority?" ²⁹ "I'll tell you who gave me authority to do these things if you answer one question," Jesus replied. ³⁰ "Did John's baptism come from heaven or was it merely human? Answer me!" ³¹ They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn't believe him. ³² But do we dare say it was merely human?" For they were afraid that the people would start a riot, since everyone thought that John was a prophet. ³³ So they finally replied, "We don't know." And Jesus responded, "Then I won't answer your question either." **12** Then Jesus began telling them stories: "A man planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ² At grape-picking time he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³ But the farmers grabbed the servant, beat him up, and sent him back empty-handed. ⁴ "The owner then sent another servant, but they beat him over the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ The next servant he sent was killed. Others who were sent were either beaten or killed, ⁶ until there was only one left—his son whom he loved dearly. The owner finally sent him, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.' ⁷ "But the farmers said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ⁸ So they grabbed him and murdered him and threw his body out of the vineyard. ⁹ "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do?" Jesus asked. "I'll tell you—he will come and kill them all and lease the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures?

'The stone rejected by the builders
has now become the cornerstone.

¹¹ This is the Lord's doing,
and it is marvelous to see.' "

¹² The Jewish leaders wanted to arrest him for using this illustration because they realized he was pointing at them—they were the wicked farmers in his story. But they were afraid to touch him because of the crowds. So they left him and went away.

Points of Interest:

- 'Who gave you such authority?'—The leaders are accusing Jesus of vigilantism. They are certain that they are the proper authorities, and they know that they haven't given him permission to do what he did. From their perspective, they've caught him in a rash, improper act; and with this problem they are intending to let him know that they now have him in their power. Instead, Jesus ends up presenting them with a puzzle that demonstrates just how limited their authority really is.
- 'We don't know.'—The leaders think that they are being evasive; they are avoiding giving a direct answer to Jesus' question. Ironically, their answer is profoundly true. While they claim that they don't know, it seems that they think that they really do know that John's baptism is only human. If that is the case, they are mistaken and therefore, in point of fact, do not know.

But their profession that they don't know is true on an even deeper level than that. The leaders don't know because they don't really even try to figure it out. They have not really addressed the question in terms of truth, but only in terms of consequences. Their answer is a political answer, formulated to cause the least public relations damage. They do not know the source of John's baptism because they have not bothered to even try to find out. They do not know because they operate in a system that ignores genuine seeking of answers. They never even really consider looking for the truth of the matter.

- 'Then I won't answer your question either'—Jesus calls it like it is. They claim that they don't know, but Jesus lets them know that he knows that they are instead refusing to answer. He refuses to respond to their question in return for a couple of reasons:
 1. He doesn't feel the need to interact with people who are playing a public relations game rather than genuinely relating to him.
 2. He has already given them what they need to answer their own question, but they have refused to engage. His answer to their question is essentially, 'My authority comes from the same place as John's baptism.' John's baptism of Jesus was Jesus' coronation ceremony, at which the Father's voice validated Jesus' ministry. If they knew where John's baptism came from, they would know Jesus' authority. But their refusal to consider Jesus' question cuts them off from the answer to their own.
- 'he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop'—The tenants probably feel like the owner's desire to have a share is greedy and unjust: 'We did all of the harvesting. Why should he get a share?' But they forget that the land belongs to him, and that he has actually put a lot of work into it to make it a good vineyard: he built the wall, the tower, and the winepress; and he did the planting. They were lucky to get the chance to work in such a vineyard. The owner certainly deserves his share.
- 'Surely they will respect my son'—This is an amazing little story! First of all, it's another answer to their question about his authority. Jesus actually uses the story to turn the leaders' question around on them. The Vineyard is either the temple or the people of God, and the fruit is worship and prayer (like in the example of the fig tree). Jesus is, of course, the son; and his authority comes from the Father, the owner of the Vineyard, by whom he was sent. The leaders are represented by the tenants, and it is they, not Jesus, who have usurped someone else's authority. Like the tenants, the leaders have begun to act like owners of something for which they are only caretakers. The temple and its offerings belong to God, but the leaders have been taking the profit for themselves. They are the ones who have acted without authority. John the Baptist and other prophets have come in the past to get them to turn around, but they've ignored and abused them. With this story, Jesus predicts that they will do the same to him, killing him. He also predicts that they will not enjoy the benefits of their scheme for long. Soon, charge of God's people will be given to others.
- 'Let's kill him and get the estate'—The tenants start out just wanting to hold back a little fruit; murder was not on their mind. But as they harden their hearts, insistent on not listening to the messages, they move by slow degrees from holding back fruit, through beating and abuse, to murder and even murder of the owner's son.
- 'they were afraid to touch him because of the crowds'—The leaders begin this passage by questioning Jesus' authority and presenting themselves as the legitimate authority, but their actions demonstrate their own lack of authority. Jesus offers two potential sources of authority: heaven and mere humans. Throughout this passage, by basing their decision on fears of the crowd, the leaders

demonstrate that the basis of their authority is human, and that it is a weak authority at that—they pretend to be authorities, but they are controlled by the crowds.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Just like the temple, every once in a while our hearts need to have a clearing out of the other things that have come in and crowded out prayer and worship. Like the Vineyard owner in the story, God sends us messages and promptings by his Spirit when this needs to happen. Has God been sending you messages of ways you need to clean your heart? How have you responded to these promptings? Ask God to give you a soft heart to these promptings. The story of the Vineyard shows just how much God wants to be in good relationship to him, and just how far we can get from him when we refuse to listen to him.
- *For your six:* The leaders are too afraid of the consequences to interact with Jesus genuinely. In attempts to maintain their own power and dignity, they seal themselves off from truly considering Jesus' words. This refusal will have a disastrous effect on their future. Pray that God would protect your six from this fear of consequences. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give them the boldness and trust to interact with Jesus' genuinely. Pray that attempts to maintain their own power or dignity would not keep them from honestly seeking Jesus.
- *For our church:* The leaders in this passage have begun to think of themselves as the owners of something that actually belonged to God. Pray that God would preserve us from the same error, that our hearts would always recognize God's good provision for us, and that we would always give him his due worship.

Tuesday, April 1st

Mark 12: 13-27—The traps of the Pharisees and Sadducees

¹³ The leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to try to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. ¹⁴ "Teacher," these men said, "we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You sincerely teach the ways of God. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or should we not?" Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, "Whom are you trying to fool with your trick questions? Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you." ¹⁶ When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to him. But everything that belongs to God must be given to God." This reply completely amazed them. ¹⁸ Then the Sadducees stepped forward—a group of Jews who say there is no resurrection after death. They posed this question: ¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses gave us a law that if a man dies, leaving a wife without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will be the brother's heir. ²⁰ Well, there were seven brothers. The oldest of them married and then died without children. ²¹ So the second brother married the widow, but soon he too died and left no children. Then the next brother married her and died without children. ²² This continued until all the brothers had married her and died, and still there were no children. Last of all, the woman died, too. ²³ So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her." ²⁴ Jesus replied, "Your problem is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God. ²⁵ For when the dead rise, they won't be married. They will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ But now, as to whether the dead will be raised—haven't you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ²⁷ So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error."

Points of Interest:

- 'we know how honest you are'—again, the leaders are ironically truthful. They are intending to flatter Jesus, but they are actually telling the truth: he is indeed honest, sincere, and impartial. Meanwhile, in these very words they are being deceitful, partial, and insincere.
- 'is it right to pay taxes?'—The leaders think that they have given Jesus a political puzzle on a par with the one he gave them the day before. Taxes are always a tricky political issue. If Jesus says it is wrong to pay taxes, he will be in trouble with the Romans. And it's always unpopular with the crowds to endorse taxes.
- 'Whose picture and title are on it?'—Jesus' answer is disarming and profound. Obviously, if the coin has Caesar's name and picture on it, it belongs to him. How can anyone argue with that? His addition, 'everything that belongs to God must be given to him,' is where his answer becomes profound. How do we know what belongs to God? In the same way we can tell that the coin

belongs to Caesar: whatever bears his name and picture belong to God. This would apply to the temple. It would also apply to Jesus, God's son; ironically, the priests are about to hand Jesus, who belongs to God, over to Caesar. Finally, all people belong to God. In the book of Genesis, at the creation of human beings, it is said that we are made in God's likeness; we all bear his picture. Since we bear his picture, we belong to him. To Jesus, the question of taxes is insignificant in light of this profound insight.

- 'the Sadducees'—The Pharisees, who we've seen a lot of, and the Sadducees, who we first meet here, are the two major political/religious parties of the Jews. The Pharisees are upper middle class and religiously conservative, as we've seen. They are the dominant party among the teachers of the law. The Sadducees are much more urbane and liberal. They are the upper class, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, and, therefore, suspicious of the supernatural. They are the dominant party among the priests. The Pharisees and Sadducees are naturally enemies (as both are with the Herodians), but they are brought together in a common desire to get rid of Jesus, who threatens the popularity and power of all of them.
- 'For all seven were married to her'—Once the Pharisees have tried their best and been thwarted, the Sadducees step up to bat. They bring Jesus their best stumper, the one they use in their arguments with the Pharisees all the time. The idea is, of course, that the idea of rising from the dead is illogical because this hypothetical woman cannot be married to seven different men at the same time. While the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus, the Sadducees are trying to make him look like a fool.
- 'You have made a serious error'—although they may not even be aware of it, they are bringing up an issue in which Jesus has large personal stakes: he knows he is going to die within days, and he is depending on the reality of the resurrection. He has also promised all of his followers that if they die for his sake they will receive new life. Therefore, Jesus responds quite strongly.
- 'they won't be married'—In their supposedly air-tight argument against the resurrection, they make a very big, and mistaken, assumption in Jesus' estimation: they have assumed that heaven is just like earth. It is just the sort of assumption that someone who does not believe in the supernatural would be prone to make. But if that assumption is untrue, their whole argument unravels.
- 'you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God'—these so-called religious leaders are making such basic errors that it's clear they don't know God's power or his words at all. Knowing God's words and his power are two powerful ingredients to being able to know God. God's words can teach us about God's power and God's power helps us to interpret God's words for our situation and make real contact with God. When both are together, they provide a strong, living connection to God. With neither, it is difficult not to seriously misunderstand God.
- 'haven't you ever read about the burning bush'—Jesus is making fun of them a little here. Of course they know the story about the burning bush: it's one of the most famous moments in Jewish history. They've read it plenty of times, but they've never really understood its significance.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus is staking his life on the resurrection from the dead, and he asks his followers to do the same. Do you, like the Sadducees, have doubts that the resurrection from the dead is true? If so, bring those doubts to Jesus in prayer. Unless he assures you of the resurrection, it is impossible to truly follow him. Ask him to point you to his words and to meet you with his power to give you the understanding you need.
- *For your six:* What are the questions that keep your six from faith in Jesus? Do you think they need to know more of God's word, more of his power, or both? Are there stories from the Bible you could tell them that might address their question in a surprising way? Pray for them that God's power would give them insight into their questions.
- *For our church:* If we continue to follow in Jesus' footsteps as a church, we—like him—will gain enemies that want to trap us. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us surprising, provocative, insightful answers like the Spirit gave to Jesus.

Wednesday, April 2nd

Mark 12: 28-44—The most important commandment

²⁸ One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the discussion. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord.' ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.'

³¹ The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." ³² The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbors as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law." ³⁴ Realizing this man's understanding, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. ³⁵ Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked, "Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah will be the son of David?" ³⁶ For David himself, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said,

'The LORD said to my Lord,
Sit in honor at my right hand
until I humble your enemies beneath your feet.'

³⁷ Since David himself called him Lord, how can he be his son at the same time?" And the crowd listened to him with great interest. ³⁸ Here are some of the other things he taught them at this time: "Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they love to parade in flowing robes and to have everyone bow to them as they walk in the marketplaces. ³⁹ And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. ⁴⁰ But they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property, and then, to cover up the kind of people they really are, they make long prayers in public. Because of this, their punishment will be the greater." ⁴¹ Jesus went over to the collection box in the Temple and sat and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴² Then a poor widow came and dropped in two pennies. ⁴³ He called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you, this poor widow has given more than all the others have given. ⁴⁴ For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she has."

Points of Interest:

- 'He realized that Jesus had answered well'—here is a religious leader who is not trying to trap Jesus. He is better soil than the other leaders who either don't understand Jesus' words or respond by hating him all the more. He has actually been listening, and wants to hear more. The question he asks is probably not because he is completely ignorant of the answer. This teacher would think about this question all the time, and he would have his own opinion. But he's interested in what Jesus would say, and he invites Jesus to dialogue with him.
- 'Hear, O Israel . . . '—the first of the 10 Commandments. It can be found in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5. The teacher asks Jesus about the most important commandment, but Jesus responds with the top two. He's accepting the teacher's invitation to dialogue and continuing the conversation. He's also giving the man more words in response to his good soil. The first commandment is kind of easy pickin's: it would be no surprise that the first of the 10 Commandments would be pretty important. The second one Jesus mentions shows a little more insight. It's actually a little more obscure than one might think: it's tucked away in a long list of commandments in Leviticus 19: 18. But Jesus sees that that commandment ably summarizes what all of those other commandments are about.
- 'Realizing this man's understanding'—The man adds a little insight of his own: that these two commandments to love are more important than the offerings and sacrifices at the temple. Jesus is impressed that a religious teacher who works in the temple would have the clarity to see that love is more important than the offerings and sacrifices which are the temple's main business. Unlike the Sadducees, this man knows the scripture. He isn't just familiar with the words, but he understands what they mean. He can see that if you add up all the sacrifices ever given in the temple, they aren't as important as love. Meanwhile, the other temple leaders are trying to kill Jesus—we could safely say that is not love—in order to protect the illicit profits they make from the sacrifices.
- 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God'—despite all of his insight, this scribe is only 'not far' from the kingdom of God. Somewhat reminiscent of the rich man who did all the neighbor-related commandments, this teacher still lacks something. Perhaps what he lacks is the experience of loving God. He knows that loving God is important, but he discusses it abstractedly. It's just a matter of knowledge and understanding to him. His knowledge, insightful though it is, is not enough. He actually needs to step beyond his intellectual understanding into actual loving God and his neighbors with his life. Perhaps this man knows the scripture, but he doesn't really know yet the power of God to make an actual difference in his life.
- 'Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah will be the son of David?'—David was the greatest king of all Israel, and his reign (which was about a thousand years before Jesus) was the golden age of the Jews. The teachers were presenting the Messiah's reign as a sort of return to that

golden age. The Messiah would be like David's 'chip off the old block.' He'd make things almost as good—perhaps even as good—as they were under David. The Messiah's greatness would be a sort of inheritance from David. Jesus points out here that David himself (in Psalm 110) expected the Messiah to be greater than David. David was only a little preview of the Messiah, not the standard to which the Messiah would be compared. The golden age of David was nothing in light of the coming Kingdom of the Messiah. No wonder the crowds are excited.

- 'how they love the seats of honor'—In yesterday's passage, Jesus told the teachers to give to God what belongs to God. Here we see that instead of leading people toward God they are leading people toward themselves: they take the honor for themselves, as well as stealing people's money.
- 'this poor widow has given more than all the others have given'—Jesus doesn't look at the absolute value of the gift. On a percentage basis, the widow gives much more than her wealthier fellows. Most of them would have given ten percent, but she gives 100. The impressiveness goes beyond mere percentages, though. She could have given just one of her coins and still given 50% of what she had—5 times the percentage of the others. But she gives both coins. When she gives both coins, she is giving God what belongs to God: she's putting her life in God's hands. She is giving herself to God, and trusting him to provide for her.

In discussing the rich man who went away sad (ch. 10: 31, March 27th), Jesus says, 'But many who seem to be important now will be the least important then, and those who are considered least here will be the greatest then.' Here we see a prime example: this widow is able to do what the rich man could not—give everything—, and she is honored by Jesus. She is the greatest because she knows and acts on the teacher's insight from earlier in the passage: that loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength is more important than sacrifices and offerings. God does not need the money that all the wealthier people are giving, but he wants people's hearts and lives. That's what the widow offers when she gives her last coins.

Jesus went to the temple expecting prayer and worship. Instead, he found robbery and hypocrisy. The teacher of the law comes close to genuine worship, but finally with this woman Jesus finds one example of what the temple should have been filled with.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The Jews were hoping that the Messiah would be able to restore the kingdom of David, but Jesus told them to expect much more. What do you hope that Jesus' kingdom will measure up to? What is your definition of the good life? Ask Jesus to expand your expectations.
- *For your six:* What do your six already know about God? Are they acting on what they know? Encourage your six to step forward in what they know. Ask God to give them the faith they need to do it, and ask him to meet them when they step forward in faith.
- *For our church:* The religious teachers looked good, but there were all sorts of hypocrisy and wickedness beneath the surface. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us pure hearts of genuine worship of God and love of others.

Thursday, April 3rd

Mark 13—Things to come

As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, "Teacher, look at these tremendous buildings! Look at the massive stones in the walls!"² Jesus replied, "These magnificent buildings will be so completely demolished that not one stone will be left on top of another."³ Later, Jesus sat on the slopes of the Mount of Olives across the valley from the Temple. Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to him privately and asked him,⁴ "When will all this take place? And will there be any sign ahead of time to show us when all this will be fulfilled?"⁵ Jesus replied, "Don't let anyone mislead you,⁶ because many will come in my name, claiming to be the Messiah. They will lead many astray.⁷ And wars will break out near and far, but don't panic. Yes, these things must come, but the end won't follow immediately.⁸ Nations and kingdoms will proclaim war against each other, and there will be earthquakes in many parts of the world, and famines. But all this will be only the beginning of the horrors to come.⁹ But when these things begin to happen, watch out! You will be handed over to the courts and beaten in the synagogues. You will be accused before governors and kings of being my followers. This will be your opportunity to tell them about me.¹⁰ And the Good News must first be preached to every nation.¹¹ But when you are arrested and stand trial, don't worry about what to say in your defense. Just say what God tells you to. Then it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit.¹² "Brother will betray brother to death, fathers will betray their own children, and

children will rise against their parents and cause them to be killed.¹³ And everyone will hate you because of your allegiance to me. But those who endure to the end will be saved.¹⁴ The time will come when you will see the sacrilegious object that causes desecration standing where it should not be"—reader, pay attention! "Then those in Judea must flee to the hills.¹⁵ A person outside the house must not go back into the house to pack.¹⁶ A person in the field must not return even to get a coat.¹⁷ How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for mothers nursing their babies in those days.¹⁸ And pray that your flight will not be in winter.¹⁹ For those will be days of greater horror than at any time since God created the world. And it will never happen again.²⁰ In fact, unless the Lord shortens that time of calamity, the entire human race will be destroyed. But for the sake of his chosen ones he has shortened those days.²¹ And then if anyone tells you, 'Look, here is the Messiah,' or, 'There he is,' don't pay any attention.²² For false messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform miraculous signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God's chosen ones.²³ Watch out! I have warned you!

²⁴ "At that time, after those horrible days end,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will not give light,
²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with great power and glory.²⁷ And he will send forth his angels to gather together his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.²⁸ Now, learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its buds become tender and its leaves begin to sprout, you know without being told that summer is near.²⁹ Just so, when you see the events I've described beginning to happen, you can be sure that his return is very near, right at the door.³⁰ I assure you, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these events have taken place.³¹ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will remain forever.³² However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.³³ And since you don't know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch.³⁴ The coming of the Son of Man can be compared with that of a man who left home to go on a trip. He gave each of his employees instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return.³⁵ So keep a sharp lookout! For you do not know when the homeowner will return—at evening, midnight, early dawn, or late daybreak.³⁶ Don't let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning.³⁷ What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch for his return!"

My interpretation

This passage is significantly different in style and content to what we have encountered so far in Mark. Here, Jesus takes on the role of prophet, and he speaks the language of a prophet, making references to Old Testament prophecies and using the colorful, dense imagery that is characteristic of Hebrew prophets, especially in prophecies about cataclysmic events. In order to more clearly unpack what Jesus might be saying, rather than taking it one intriguing phrase at a time, as we have in the rest of the story, I am going to interpret the passage as a whole.

Jesus' prophecy is precipitated by the disciples commenting on the beautiful buildings and massive stones. Indeed, the temple in Jerusalem was an astounding place built by Herod the Great—grandfather of the Herod who killed John—who was the king of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. He was a non-Jew who had usurped the Jewish throne by forcibly marrying into the Jewish royal family and then assassinating all of his in-laws. In an unsuccessful attempt to make himself popular, he undertook a massive renovation project on the temple which was still not quite complete by the time of this passage. Although Herod never gained the people's love, he did manage to build a marvelously impressive temple, of which even Herod's enemies were proud.

While the disciples notice the architectural wonder of the temple, Jesus focuses on its spiritual bankruptcy. Despite how impressive it appears, it is full of corruption, thievery, deception, and hypocrisy. Because of this spiritual bankruptcy, he has already predicted several times in the past several passages that the temple will not be allowed to stand for long:

- He cursed the barren fig tree as an example;
- He told the disciples that they could throw Mount Zion into the sea;
- And he told the story of the vineyard, in which the tenants would be destroyed and the vineyard given to others, among other things we haven't discussed.

Apparently, the disciples have not picked up on Jesus' hints about the future of the temple; so he says here in plain language, 'Not one stone will be left on another.' The disciples are astonished. They can't imagine

that something so beautiful, and so strong, that's taken so long to build could be destroyed. They ask Jesus when and how such a thing could happen. In verse 30, Jesus answers them: it will happen before their generation dies out. In fact, the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, less than 40 years later. Several of the disciples were alive to see it, and Mark is probably writing during the war that leads up to the temple's destruction. Mark is watching this prophecy come true as he writes; thus the inserted warning, 'reader, pay attention!'

Besides wanting to know when it will happen, they want to know the sign that it is about to happen. They expect that some cataclysm will have to occur in order for the temple to be destroyed, and they want to be able to get out of the way. Jesus starts by discounting anything that they could possibly construe as a sign: not his return, not war, not earthquake, and not famine. They will see some of these things soon (and they will see people claiming to be him), but they aren't the sign that the temple will be destroyed. The temple may be safe during this time, but the disciples are not: they are going to face all sorts of persecution. Jesus doesn't want them to be surprised, and he wants them to know that the Holy Spirit will be with them.

The 'sacrilegious object' (v. 14) is the sign that the temple will be destroyed. Jesus is quoting Daniel 9: 27 here, and the sacrilegious object is some sort of blasphemy to the temple, perhaps referring to a Roman desecration of the temple and perhaps referring to a usurping high priest appointed around the time Mark is writing. We know this sacrilege is the sign, because while he has been saying 'don't panic,' after the sacrilege, Jesus says, 'Run!' We know he is still talking about the destruction of the temple because the events, though terrible, are local: only those in Judea need run, and if they run to the hills they will be safe.

What follows is a highly figurative, spiritual perspective on the destruction of the temple. The passages about the sky falling are quotes from the prophet Isaiah (13:10 and 34:4). Stars, sun, and moon are frequent prophetic images for earthly rulers and the spiritual power behind them. In this case, they refer to the priests and the Jewish council: when the temple is destroyed, their power will be destroyed. The Son of Man arriving on the clouds is a quotation from the prophet Daniel (7: 13-14), and it refers to the Son of Man ascending, not returning. He is coming before the Father to receive authority and dominion. Jesus said in Monday's passage that 'the stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone' (Psalm 110). Once the temple is destroyed, a new temple will be built on a new cornerstone—that is on him, who was rejected by the priests. In other words, as the temple is crashing down, both physically and spiritually, Jesus' church will be rising up. And the news is good news, not bad, because in this new era all the nations who were neglected by the temple leaders will be included.

The destruction of the temple will happen during the disciples' generation, and it is not the end of the world; in fact, it is just the beginning of their work. Whereas Jesus knows very particular signs for the destruction of the temple, even he does not know when the end of the world will be. What he does know is that his words last beyond the end of the world. If they keep alert and stay faithful to his words, the disciples too will outlast the temple, the persecutions they face, and even heaven and earth.

In this prophecy, Jesus is giving the disciples something strong to hold on to in the tough times that will follow his death and resurrection. When the disciples live through all of these events and see Jesus' words come true, they will indeed know that they are trustworthy. Jesus' words will prove to be far stronger than the massive stones of the temple. This demonstration will give them the assurance they need to remain faithful employees, doing his bidding and looking for him, until he comes again.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* The disciples couldn't imagine anything more solid than the temple, but Jesus tells them that they will outlive it. What are the institutions you can't imagine failing? How would you respond if Jesus were to tell you that you will outlive Microsoft, or Harvard University, or the United States? What would be your emotional response? How would it change your worldview? Although there are no specific prophecies about any of these institutions, the truth is that they are earthly things that will pass away. Jesus' words will outlast all of them. In what ways do you stake your life on human institutions lasting? What would it take for you to rely on Jesus' words instead? If you are ready to do so, spend some time today renouncing your reliance on these marvelous-looking human creations. Ask Jesus to give you his word and his Spirit instead.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six frightened by the earth-shaking events that are happening today? Ask Jesus to give them peace. Particularly pray that they would turn to Jesus in their fear.
- *For our church:* Pray that we would be a church who stays alert, watching and working for Jesus' return. Pray particularly that God would move us forward in our dreams of a 24-hour prayer center.

Ask that God would give us what we need to establish such a center, and that it would be a place of faithful watching for his return.

Friday, April 4th

Mark 14: 1-11—A woman anoints Jesus

It was now two days before the Passover celebration and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The leading priests and the teachers of religious law were still looking for an opportunity to capture Jesus secretly and put him to death.² “But not during the Passover,” they agreed, “or there will be a riot.”³ Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had leprosy. During supper, a woman came in with a beautiful jar of expensive perfume. She broke the seal and poured the perfume over his head.⁴ Some of those at the table were indignant. “Why was this expensive perfume wasted?” they asked.⁵ “She could have sold it for a small fortune and given the money to the poor!” And they scolded her harshly.⁶ But Jesus replied, “Leave her alone. Why berate her for doing such a good thing to me?⁷ You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But I will not be here with you much longer.⁸ She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial ahead of time.⁹ I assure you, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman’s deed will be talked about in her memory.”¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests to arrange to betray Jesus to them.¹¹ The leading priests were delighted when they heard why he had come, and they promised him a reward. So he began looking for the right time and place to betray Jesus.

Points of Interest:

- ‘not during the Passover’—Jesus’ words will outlast heaven and earth, but the leaders’ words don’t even outlast the day. They agree that they will not capture Jesus during the Passover, but the very same day they make arrangements for Jesus’ capture with Judas. The Passover begins the next day.
- ‘Why was this expensive perfume wasted?’—the woman gives lavishly to Jesus, but the others who see it call it ‘a waste.’ Essentially what they are saying is that Jesus is not worth the expense of this honor. They find the deed unworthy, because it is impractical. Jesus honors the woman for the deed, because it shows her deep love for him. Like the widow who gives everything she has in the offering, this woman pours out her whole bottle for Jesus. Therefore, Jesus puts her forward, just like he did the widow.
- ‘You will always have the poor with you’—By saying this, Jesus is not minimizing service to the poor. In fact, he is quoting from Moses (Deuteronomy 15: 11), who goes on to say, ‘That is why I am commanding you to share your resources freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.’ He is merely saying that there is no need to put this act of the woman’s in competition with service to the poor. He may also be subtly suggesting that these people so quick to criticize the woman could instead actually give more to the poor.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Perhaps you’ve done something radical for Jesus. Perhaps you’ve given a large sum of money to someone because you felt like God was asking you to do so. Perhaps you’ve given up a high-paying job so that you could spend more time with your small group, or you’ve declined a promotion so that you could stay in Boston. Often, when we do such things, there are voices in our lives that say, ‘What a waste!’ They call us crazy, or criticize us, pointing out all of the good things you could have done with the extra resources we gave up. Jesus wants you to know that he sees and honors your choice. Receive Jesus’ affirmation of you today.
- *For your six:* Judas reaches the end of his rope in this passage. Perhaps he is frustrated because Jesus honors the woman, or perhaps he can’t handle Jesus talking about death anymore. Whatever the case, he seems to reject Jesus because he just won’t be conventional. Perhaps your six also wish that Jesus would just be more ‘normal.’ Pray that God would protect your six from a spirit of Judas. Ask the Spirit to expand their ability to be surprised by Jesus.
- *For our church:* Pray that our church would be known for radical acts of devotion to Jesus.

Saturday, April 5th

Mark 14: 12-31—the last supper

¹² On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread (the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed), Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Where do you want us to go to prepare the Passover supper?”¹³ So Jesus sent two of

them into Jerusalem to make the arrangements. "As you go into the city," he told them, "a man carrying a pitcher of water will meet you. Follow him." ¹⁴ At the house he enters, say to the owner, 'The Teacher asks, Where is the guest room where I can eat the Passover meal with my disciples?' ¹⁵ He will take you upstairs to a large room that is already set up. That is the place; go ahead and prepare our supper there." ¹⁶ So the two disciples went on ahead into the city and found everything just as Jesus had said, and they prepared the Passover supper there. ¹⁷ In the evening Jesus arrived with the twelve disciples. ¹⁸ As they were sitting around the table eating, Jesus said, "The truth is, one of you will betray me, one of you who is here eating with me." ¹⁹ Greatly distressed, one by one they began to ask him, "I'm not the one, am I?" ²⁰ He replied, "It is one of you twelve, one who is eating with me now. ²¹ For I, the Son of Man, must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. But how terrible it will be for my betrayer. Far better for him if he had never been born!" ²² As they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread and asked God's blessing on it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take it, for this is my body." ²³ And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ And he said to them, "This is my blood, poured out for many, sealing the covenant between God and his people. ²⁵ I solemnly declare that I will not drink wine again until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God." ²⁶ Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ "All of you will desert me," Jesus told them. "For the Scriptures say,

'God will strike the Shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'

²⁸ But after I am raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there." ²⁹ Peter said to him, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will." ³⁰ "Peter," Jesus replied, "the truth is, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." ³¹ "No!" Peter insisted. "Not even if I have to die with you! I will never deny you!" And all the others vowed the same.

Points of Interest:

- 'found everything just as Jesus had said'—another small miracle of Jesus' provision for them, to prove the trustworthiness of his words.
- 'I'm not the one, am I?'—Each of the disciples seems more concerned that they not be the betrayer than they are at the fact that he will be betrayed. No wonder Jesus is so grateful for the woman from yesterday's passage; she is the one person who has paid any attention to what he is going through.
- 'he broke it in pieces'—Jesus breaks the loaf of bread to symbolize his broken body, and he pours the wine to symbolize his blood. In yesterday's passage, the woman broke the seal and poured the perfume. The woman's act of service was a sort of foreshadowing of Jesus' death. Just like this woman's act, his sacrifice will be called a waste. But just like he took her action as a good thing done for him, he knows his death will be a good thing done for us.
- 'the day the Passover lambs were sacrificed'—The center of the Passover meal was usually the lamb. The Passover meal commemorated the escape of the Israelites from Egypt, when the firstborn of all of Egypt were killed but the firstborn of all the Jews who sacrificed the lambs were saved. Jesus transfers the focus of the meal to the bread and wine, which symbolize his death. He is the new Passover lamb.
- 'all of you will desert me'—Jesus tells them ahead of time that he knows they will desert him. He wants them to know that he knows they will fail, and yet he will not reject them: even though he knows they will desert him, he still wants to meet them in Galilee when he rises. His prediction increases the chances that they will not permanently lose heart when they fail.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Are you troubled over a way you have failed Jesus? Praise him for his mercy and patience. Turn back to him and remember his words, because he is waiting for you.
- *For your six:* Pray for the salvation of your six. Jesus broke his body and poured out his blood so that people could be saved. Pray that they will accept Jesus' sacrifice for them.
- *For our church:* Pray for our times of communion. Pray even for tomorrow's communion, that we would be aware of Jesus' presence with us in a special way. Pray that God would give us special awareness of Jesus' love for us and his sacrifice on our behalf.

Sunday, April 6th

Mark 14: 32-51—Jesus in the garden

³² And they came to an olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, "Sit here while I go and pray." ³³ He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be filled with horror and deep distress. ³⁴ He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me." ³⁵ He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. ³⁶ "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine." ³⁷ Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. "Simon!" he said to Peter. "Are you asleep? Couldn't you stay awake and watch with me even one hour?" ³⁸ Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak." ³⁹ Then Jesus left them again and prayed, repeating his pleadings. ⁴⁰ Again he returned to them and found them sleeping, for they just couldn't keep their eyes open. And they didn't know what to say. ⁴¹ When he returned to them the third time, he said, "Still sleeping? Still resting? Enough! The time has come. I, the Son of Man, am betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Up, let's be going. See, my betrayer is here!" ⁴³ And immediately, as he said this, Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived with a mob that was armed with swords and clubs. They had been sent out by the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the other leaders. ⁴⁴ Judas had given them a prearranged signal: "You will know which one to arrest when I go over and give him the kiss of greeting. Then you can take him away under guard." ⁴⁵ As soon as they arrived, Judas walked up to Jesus. "Teacher!" he exclaimed, and gave him the kiss. ⁴⁶ Then the others grabbed Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷ But someone pulled out a sword and slashed off an ear of the high priest's servant. ⁴⁸ Jesus asked them, "Am I some dangerous criminal, that you come armed with swords and clubs to arrest me?" ⁴⁹ Why didn't you arrest me in the Temple? I was there teaching every day. But these things are happening to fulfill what the Scriptures say about me." ⁵⁰ Meanwhile, all his disciples deserted him and ran away. ⁵¹ There was a young man following along behind, clothed only in a linen nightshirt. When the mob tried to grab him, ⁵² they tore off his clothes, but he escaped and ran away naked.

Points of Interest:

- 'My soul is crushed with grief'—Ever since Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah and Jesus predicted that he would suffer and die, Jesus has been calm, peaceful, purposeful, and in control in the face of the fact that he would be rejected and killed. In fact, he has deliberately and unhesitatingly made his way toward the place where he knows he will be killed. Here we see what empowers Jesus to have such resolve. We see him in a private moment, and in that private moment we see that he faces the same anguish we do: he doesn't want to suffer, and he doesn't want to die. But he takes his questions and his weakness to God in prayer. It is prayer which gives Jesus the strength he needs to do what the Father has called him to do.
- 'Couldn't you stay awake and watch with me even one hour?'—In Thursday's passage, Jesus told them that they were to keep alert and watch until he comes again, but they don't even have the strength to watch for one hour.
- 'Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you'—Jesus is tempted to avoid his death, but prayer gives him the power to overcome temptation. Peter will soon face a temptation also: the temptation to deny Jesus. But rather than praying, he is sleeping. He won't have the strength he needs to say no. Peter's best intentions aren't good enough: he needs the Holy Spirit to give his spirit power in prayer.
- 'When he returned to them the third time'—Peter falls asleep three times. A foreshadowing of his three denials.
- 'Am I some dangerous criminal?'—They have come to arrest Jesus, but they are the ones acting like criminals. They are lurking around, doing at night what they were afraid to do during the day when they might get caught.
- 'all his disciples deserted him'—As if on cue, the disciples all run away when Jesus says that the Scriptures must be fulfilled: they are scattered just like the scripture Jesus quotes in yesterday's passage says. They gave up everything to follow him, and now they are giving up everything to run away—one man even leaves behind his clothes.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* If we are really going to follow Jesus, we need the Holy Spirit's power. Otherwise, the temptation to choose a safer route will overwhelm us. Pray that God would give your spirit the strength to overcome your weakness.
- *For your six:* The temple guards try to portray Jesus as a criminal, but the truth is clear that they were the ones who were acting dishonestly. Perhaps your six are being deceived by lies about

Jesus: that he didn't really exist, that he didn't really say the things the Bible reports, that he is only a good moral teacher, etc. Pray that your six would be able to see through these lies.

- *For our church:* The disciples try to save themselves by scattering, every man for himself. That's the worst thing to do: when the sheep scatter, they can be picked off one by one. Ask God to make us a church that sticks together, that stays close to one another and to Jesus in times of trouble. Pray that God would keep us all from the temptation to try to solve our problems ourselves. And ask him to make us able by his Spirit to support one another.

40 Days through Mark's Good News

Week Six

Over the 40 Days 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:

16. **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?
17. **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.
18. **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.

Monday, April 7

Mark 14:53 to 72—Jesus and Peter on trial

⁵³Jesus was led to the high priest's home where the leading priests, other leaders, and teachers of religious law had gathered. ⁵⁴Meanwhile, Peter followed far behind and then slipped inside the gates of the high priest's courtyard. For a while he sat with the guards, warming himself by the fire. ⁵⁵Inside, the leading priests and the entire high council were trying to find witnesses who would testify against Jesus, so they could put him to death. But their efforts were in vain. ⁵⁶Many false witnesses spoke against him, but they contradicted each other. ⁵⁷Finally, some men stood up to testify against him with this lie: ⁵⁸"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another, made without human hands.'" ⁵⁹But even then they didn't get their stories straight! ⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before the others and asked Jesus, "Well, aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?" ⁶¹Jesus made no reply. Then the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the blessed God?" ⁶²Jesus said, "I am, and you will see me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven." ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, "Why do we need other witnesses? ⁶⁴You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" And they all condemned him to death. ⁶⁵Then some of them began to spit at him, and they blindfolded him and hit his face with their fists. "Who hit you that time, you prophet?" they jeered. And even the guards were hitting him as they led him away. ⁶⁶Meanwhile, Peter was below in the courtyard. One of the servant girls who worked for the high priest ⁶⁷noticed Peter warming himself at the fire. She looked at him closely and then said, "You were one of those with Jesus, the Nazarene." ⁶⁸Peter denied it. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and he went out into the entryway. Just then, a rooster crowed ⁶⁹The servant girl saw him standing there and began telling the others, "That man is definitely one of them!" ⁷⁰Peter denied it again. A little later some other bystanders began saying to Peter, "You must be one of them because you are from Galilee." ⁷¹Peter said, "I swear by God, I don't know this man you're talking about." ⁷²And immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Suddenly, Jesus' words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and cried.

Points of Interest:

- 'to the high priest's home'—As you might imagine, criminal trials were not usually held in the middle of the night. They were also not held in the high priest's home, but in the temple. The high council is indeed the proper authority to judge such a case, but having the trial at night and in the priest's home clearly shows that they have something to hide.
- 'many false witnesses'—Falsely testifying is breaking one of the 10 Commandments. They are breaking one of the commandments, by falsely testifying, so that they can break another, by killing a man. Moses says in Deuteronomy 19:16-19 that if a witness is proven false on cross-examination, the witness should be considered guilty of the crime of which he has accused the defendant. These witnesses fall apart even in front of a friendly cross-examination in a kangaroo court, but the council merely moves on to the next false witness.
- 'Jesus made no reply'—The high priest asks him to answer 'these charges,' but no coherent charges have even been made. All he has heard are a series of contradictions and lies. No reply is the most appropriate reply to no charges. Jesus is also fulfilling prophecy here. In one of the most famous prophecies about the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah says, 'He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth' (Isaiah 53:7).
- 'I am, and you will see me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven'—When Jesus finally had a charge to which he could respond, he doesn't hesitate to answer. Jesus doesn't simply answer 'yes or no.' He answers, 'Yes, Yes, resoundingly Yes.' By saying, 'I am,' he is not simply answering their question, he is also making an oblique, but clearly recognizable, claim to divinity: when Moses asks God what his name is, God replies, 'Tell them that I AM sent you' (Exodus 3:14). His further words about sitting at the right hand of God and returning on the clouds are references to Messianic prophecies in Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 (Jesus quotes these verses earlier in ch. 12:36—last Wednesday—and ch. 13:26—last Thursday). With these references, he is telling the priest two things:
 1. He is in fact the Messiah;
 2. and there will come a time when Jesus will be the judge.
- 'tore his clothing'—a sign of repentance or mourning, and the usual response to hearing a great blasphemy.
- 'they all condemned him to death'—They condemn him to death for speaking the truth. The claim itself is enough for them to kill him. They never even bother to assess whether or not it is true.
- 'Who hit you that time, you prophet?'—They mock his claims to prophesy by asking him to discern who hit him. Ironically, by doing so, they are actually fulfilling one of his prophecies: in chapter 10, he said, 'When we get to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans.³⁴ They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.' They think they are mocking a false prophet, but all they are doing is proving him true.
- 'I swear by God, I don't know this man'—While Jesus is on trial in front of the high priest inside, Peter is on trial in front of a serving girl outside. Jesus speaks the truth even though he knows they will kill him for it. Peter lies in order to save his life. In fact, Peter breaks two of the 10 commandments in order to dissociate himself from Jesus: he bears false witness, and he takes the Lord's name in vain. Earlier this evening, Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you.' By the end of the night, he has completely reversed it: 'Even if I have to deny, I will not die with you.' Jesus had spent the night in preparation for his trial in prayer; Peter fell asleep. Peter had enough guts on his own power to sneak into the courtyard of the high priest, but his courage failed when it came to the real test: he needed the Holy Spirit to give him the right words here.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Peter breaks down and cries, because he recognizes that he is not able to do what he wants to do. It is not that Peter was lying earlier in the evening: he did really want to die with Jesus rather than betray him. But by the end of the night, he has gotten in over his head. When Peter hears the rooster crow, he has a flashing insight into his own utter failure to follow Jesus. Have you ever had a heartbreaking recognition of your failure to follow Jesus? At this moment, Peter probably thinks he has lost Jesus forever. The good news is Jesus' words, which don't fade away even when heaven and earth do, last beyond our failures. He has told Peter, 'I will make you fish for people.' He has told Peter that he knows Peter will deny him, but he will still be waiting for him. Jesus is not done with Peter yet; he will in the end make Peter into the disciple Peter really wants to be. Jesus is also not done with you, despite your failures. He has words for you, plans for you, and promises for

you. Bring your failures before Jesus, and turn back to him even in the midst of him. He will give you the power to follow him and find life.

- *For your six:* In many ways, Jesus is still on trial. All sorts of false claims are made about Jesus, and by the power of the evil one these false accusations are still heard and believed despite their contradictions and flaws. People claim that Jesus never claimed to be God (a claim this passage faces head-on). They claim that he was just a good teacher. They claim that he never rose from the dead. And many more. Ask the Holy Spirit to give your six the insight to see through these false claims.
- *For our church:* Like Peter, our church has grand aspirations to follow Jesus. Like Peter, we are far too weak to do it ourselves. Ask God to preserve us by his power and in his mercy from complete failure. Pray that we will always have the strength to turn back when we fall away.

Tuesday, April 8th

Mark 15: 1 to 20—Jesus before the Romans

¹Very early in the morning the leading priests, other leaders, and teachers of religious law--the entire high council--met to discuss their next step. They bound Jesus and took him to Pilate, the Roman governor.

²Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "Yes, it is as you say." ³Then the leading priests accused him of many crimes, ⁴and Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to say something? What about all these charges against you?" ⁵But Jesus said nothing, much to Pilate's surprise. ⁶Now it was the governor's custom to release one prisoner each year at Passover time--anyone the people requested. ⁷One of the prisoners at that time was Barabbas, convicted along with others for murder during an insurrection. ⁸The mob began to crowd in toward Pilate, asking him to release a prisoner as usual. ⁹"Should I give you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asked. ¹⁰(For he realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy.)

¹¹But at this point the leading priests stirred up the mob to demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus.

¹²"But if I release Barabbas," Pilate asked them, "what should I do with this man you call the King of the Jews?" ¹³They shouted back, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴"Why?" Pilate demanded. "What crime has he committed?"

But the crowd only roared the louder, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵So Pilate, anxious to please the crowd, released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to crucify him. ¹⁶The soldiers took him into their headquarters and called out the entire battalion.

¹⁷They dressed him in a purple robe and made a crown of long, sharp thorns and put it on his head. ¹⁸Then they saluted, yelling, "Hail! King of the Jews!" ¹⁹And they beat him on the head with a stick, spit on him, and dropped to their knees in mock worship. ²⁰When they were finally tired of mocking him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they led him away to be crucified.

Points of Interest:

- 'met to discuss their next step'—having already condemned him at night, they now discuss how to implement their plan in the clear light of day. One of the big things they have to decide is how to accomplish Jesus' death. The Jewish council doesn't have jurisdiction to execute someone; only the Romans can give out the death penalty. But their judgment against Jesus, that he has committed blasphemy in the Jewish religion, isn't exactly the kind of thing Rome is concerned about. They could flout Roman authority and kill him anyway, but then the Romans could depose them or even kill them. So, instead they decided to change the charges to something that the Romans would be interested in: that Jesus is an insurrectionist, setting himself as a king outside of Roman authority.
- 'For he realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy'—Pilate is no fool. He recognizes that Jesus is not a political agitator. However, the priests have managed to gather a mob friendly to their cause. In fear of the crowd, Pilate gives permission to execute Jesus nonetheless. This representative of the mighty Roman empire is no more a leader with true authority than the priests are. He too makes his decisions out of fear of the people he is supposed to be governing.
- 'to demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus'—This exchange of Jesus for Barabbas is full of irony. First of all, the priests are pretending to be doing Rome a favor by handing Jesus over to them for insurrection; then, they turn and demand the release of a true political insurrectionist, Barabbas. The second level of irony comes from Barabbas' name, which means, 'Father's Son' in Aramaic. Mark is writing to a Greek-speaking audience, who wouldn't have known this any more than English-speakers would; but he left us hints within his story so that even non-Aramaic speakers would understand the significance. In the entire story of Mark, there are two words spoken in Aramaic and then translated into Greek: in 10:46 (March 28th), we learn that the blind man's name

is Bartimaeus, or the son of Timaeus; in the prayer in the garden, (14:36, April 6th), Jesus says, 'Abba, Father.' All we need to do is put 'bar' and 'abba' together to get 'son of father.' So, when the priests and mob demand Barabbas be released instead of Jesus, they are choosing which Son of the Father they want. The Messiah they want is Barabbas, the murderous political revolutionary, not Jesus, who offered life and the Kingdom of God.

There is further significance to Barabbas' name. On the one hand, we can associate Barabbas and Jesus as two possible 'Sons of the Father,' alternate pictures of the Messiah. On the other hand, Barabbas is an everyman, a father's son. He represents all of us, who are father's sons or daughters. Jesus dies on the cross on which Barabbas was intended to die; in other words, he dies in place of every father's child. He experiences the death that is intended for us.

- 'turned him over to the Roman soldiers to crucify him'—another element of Jesus' prophecy about his future comes true. His death is happening just as he said it would. This accuracy should give us confidence that he will also rise again, just as he said.
- 'Hail, King of the Jews'—while the temple guards mocked Jesus as a prophet, the Romans mock him as a king.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Jesus died on the cross of everyman, a father's child. He took on suffering that was intended for us. Spend a few moments today praising Jesus for his willingness to die for the ransom of many, including you (10:46, March 28th).
- *For your six:* Pilate refuses to act according to the truth he knew about Jesus for fear of the crowds. He doesn't want to cause any trouble with the people around him. Is fear of what other people will say or do getting in the way of your six seeing and acting on the truth about Jesus? Pray that God would protect them from fear of others as they decide how they will respond to Jesus.
- *For our church:* Jesus doesn't engage in a tit-for-tat argument with the priests. He doesn't respond defensively to their accusations and charges. We may very well face false accusations and charges as we try to bring the Kingdom of God to Cambridge, Boston, and the world. Ask the Holy Spirit to give us the grace not to defensively sink to the level of our accusers.

Wednesday, April 9th

Mark 15: 21-47

²¹A man named Simon, who was from Cyrene was coming in from the country just then, and they forced him to carry Jesus' cross. (Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus.) ²²And they brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which means Skull Hill). ²³They offered him wine drugged with myrrh, but he refused it. ²⁴Then they nailed him to the cross. They gambled for his clothes, throwing dice to decide who would get them. ²⁵It was nine o'clock in the morning when the crucifixion took place. ²⁶A signboard was fastened to the cross above Jesus' head, announcing the charge against him. It read: "The King of the Jews." ²⁷Two criminals were crucified with him, their crosses on either side of his. ²⁸And the people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery. "Ha! Look at you now!" they yelled at him. "You can destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days, can you?" ²⁹Well then, save yourself and come down from the cross!" ³⁰The leading priests and teachers of religious law also mocked Jesus. "He saved others," they scoffed, "but he can't save himself!" ³¹Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down from the cross so we can see it and believe him!" Even the two criminals who were being crucified with Jesus ridiculed him. ³²At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. ³³Then, at that time Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁴Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought he was calling for the prophet Elijah. ³⁵One of them ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, holding it up to him on a stick so he could drink. "Leave him alone. Let's see whether Elijah will come and take him down!" he said. ³⁶Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁷And the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁸When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" ³⁹Some women were there, watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James the younger and of Joseph), and Salome. ⁴⁰They had been followers of Jesus and had cared for him while he was in Galilee. Then they and many other women had come with him to Jerusalem. ⁴¹This all happened on Friday, the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath. As evening approached, ⁴²an honored member of the high council, Joseph from Arimathea (who was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come), gathered his courage and went to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. ⁴³Pilate couldn't believe that Jesus was already dead, so he called for the Roman military officer in charge and asked him. ⁴⁴The officer confirmed the fact, and Pilate told

Joseph he could have the body. ⁴⁶Joseph bought a long sheet of linen cloth, and taking Jesus' body down from the cross, he wrapped it in the cloth and laid it in a tomb that had been carved out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone in front of the entrance. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where Jesus' body was laid.

Points of Interest:

- 'father of Alexander and Rufus'—apparently the children of this man became well-known followers of Jesus; they were known to Mark and to the people to whom he was writing.
- 'wine drugged with myrrh'—a painkiller. Jesus refuses to have his senses dulled to the suffering. IN the prayer at the garden, Jesus asks the Father to 'take this cup of suffering away.' But he submits himself to the Father's will. Here, on the cross, he decides to take on the full suffering. As the prophet Isaiah says, 'You have drunk the cup of terror, tipping out its last drops' (51: 17).
- 'save yourself and come down from the cross'—They assume Jesus is not coming down from the cross because he can't save himself. Actually, if he were to try to save his life by coming down from the cross he would lose it: everyone who saves his life will lose it, but everyone who loses his life for Jesus' sake and the sake of the good news will find true life (8:35, March 22nd). Jesus is staying on the cross because it is the way to true life, for him and for everyone else.
- 'Two criminals were crucified with him, their crosses on either side of his'—James and John had asked Jesus if they could be on his right and left in his glory, and Jesus told them that they didn't know what they were asking. This moment is Jesus' glory, and it is two criminals, not two disciples, who are on his right and left. Even though they are not ready to be with Jesus in his suffering and glory now, both James and John will be by the end of their lives; Jesus has promised them both the persecution and the glory.
- 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'—Jesus is truly crying out deeply in his suffering. In his body, he does not want to die. However, this cry of anguish is simultaneously a deep affirmation of Jesus' faith in his father. This question is the first line of Psalm 22. During Jesus' day, the psalms were known by the first line, rather than by numbers; so, Jesus is referencing the entire psalm. It's a psalm that speaks of terrible suffering, astounding similar to what Jesus is undergoing: including mockery by everyone who passes, being very thirsty, wounded hands and feet, and gambling for the clothes of the suffering one. It may be worth reading the psalm to hear how profoundly this psalm describes Jesus' pain. Yet, the psalm doesn't end at the suffering. The psalmist goes on to say, 'Snatch me from the lions' jaws, and from the horns of these wild oxen. Then I will declare the wonder of your name to my brothers and sisters. I will praise you among all your people.' There is a full expectation of rescue from the terrible suffering, and a prediction of joy, not just for the sufferer but for future generations: 'Let all mortals—those born to die—bow down in his presence. Future generations will also serve him. Our children will hear about the wonders of the Lord. His righteous acts will be told to those yet unborn. They will hear about everything he has done.' It's as if Psalm 22 was written precisely to be Jesus' guide and comfort on the cross. It describes his unbearable suffering, his unshakeable faith in God's coming rescue, and his anticipation of the glorious future that will be attained by this suffering.
- 'Truly, this was the Son of God'—in his death, Jesus fulfills his own prophecies and those of the Old Testament prophets and psalmists concerning the Messiah. Yet almost none of the Jews recognizes him. A gentile soldier, however, clearly sees who Jesus is in the moment of his death.
- 'They had been followers of Jesus'—all of the apostles have run away, and when they do it clears the stage a bit and we are able to see that a whole group of women have also been Jesus' disciples. These women remain even when the men have run away.
- 'an honored member of the high council, Joseph from Arimathea (who was waiting for the Kingdom of God to come'—apparently not all of the council approved of Jesus' death. Maybe they were left out of the secret night trial, or maybe they are the ones who pointed out the contradictory testimony, but to no avail.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Meditate for a moment on psalm 22. It is easy for us to pretend our suffering isn't there, to try to avoid it, or to fall into despair. Jesus took a psalm 22 attitude toward his suffering: he felt its terror, but he trusted in God's rescue and redemption. Ask Jesus to give you the ability to imitate him in his suffering.
- *For your six:* The soldier who is crucifying Jesus has a moment of sudden clarity: he sees that Jesus is the Son of God. Pray that your six will have such a moment of clear insight.

- *For our church:* At this climactic moment in Jesus' life, all of a sudden his woman disciples come to the forefront. The woman with perfume and the widow are exalted as examples of faith and devotion, and when all of the men have run away the women remain with Jesus at the cross. It's a pity that in the history of the church, these faithful, devoted, and courageous women have so often been ignored, and women who follow in their footsteps have been suppressed. Pray for our church, that it would be a place where women are consistently called to the front and their gifts, strengths, and contributions are acknowledged and affirmed.

Thursday, April 10th

Mark 16: 1-8—The resurrection of Jesus

¹The next evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene and Salome and Mary the mother of James went out and purchased burial spices to put on Jesus' body. ²Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they came to the tomb. ³On the way they were discussing who would roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. ⁴But when they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone--a very large one--had already been rolled aside. ⁵So they entered the tomb, and there on the right sat a young man clothed in a white robe. The women were startled, ⁶but the angel said, "Do not be so surprised. You are looking for Jesus, the Nazarene, who was crucified. He isn't here! He has been raised from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. ⁷Now go and give this message to his disciples, including Peter: Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died!" ⁸The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, saying nothing to anyone because they were too frightened to talk.

Points of Interest:

- 'burial spices to put on Jesus' body'—Usually, of course, the spices are added to the body at the time of burial. Because of the coming of the Sabbath and the holiday, they didn't have time to add the spices at the time of Jesus' death; so they go to finish when the Sabbath is over. Jesus predicted that the perfume poured on him by the woman in ch. 14 (April 4th) would be the only anointing he would get, and it proves to be true.
- 'including Peter'—Peter might think he was disqualified from being a disciple by his denial; so Jesus includes him specifically in the message he leaves with the angel.
- 'just as he told you before he died'—Jesus' followers must have thought that something had gone terribly wrong when he died. The angel here points out that everything has happened exactly according to plan. He has both died and risen again, just as he told them.
- 'the women fled from the tomb'—Here is where the faith of the women gets stretched. The women have the same choice that the men did when they were in the boat in the midst of the storm (4:40, March 12th): are they going to have faith in Jesus' words and power, or are they going to be overcome by fear? Initially, fear takes the upper hand. The angel tells them not to be surprised and to give the message to the disciples, but they respond with bewilderment and saying nothing. In some ways, Jesus puts the fate of the church into the hands of these women. They are the only ones who know of Jesus' resurrection: are they going to believe it and spread the news to others? Are the apostles ever going to know that Jesus is waiting to re-connect with them in Galilee? Whether or not the story of the good news continues depends on the faith of these women.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Interestingly, in many of our ancient manuscripts of Mark's Good News, the story ends here, like a cliff-hanger. What will the women do? Will they overcome their fear and tell the story, so that the good news of the Kingdom can be spread? Now that they know the truth, will they tell it to others or will it get swallowed by their fear. The implication for the reader is clear: now that you have heard the story, what will you do? Will you tell others so that the story of the Kingdom of God coming can continue, or will it get stuck with you? You have now read Mark's entire story about Jesus. It's all about the fact that Jesus' death and resurrection bring the Kingdom of God near to everyone who hears. The big question for you is, Who are you going to tell?
- *For your six:* The women are left trembling and bewildered over the resurrection. The idea that Jesus was actually, physically risen from the dead is—understandably—difficult for them to swallow. Perhaps your six are willing to understand the resurrection as a metaphor of new life, but they can't accept the reality of a literal resurrection. Ask that the Holy Spirit would give them the faith to believe in the resurrection. Without it, they will never really be able to entrust their lives to Jesus.

- *For our church:* Pray for our Easter service, and indeed all of our services. Ask that God would make us messengers of joy like this angel, giving us the chance to tell many people that Jesus is risen again and is waiting for them. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring many people to our services to hear this good news.

Friday, April 11th

Mark 16: 9-20—Jesus' final instructions

⁹It was early on Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead, and the first person who saw him was Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰She went and found the disciples, who were grieving and weeping. ¹¹But when she told them that Jesus was alive and she had seen him, they didn't believe her. ¹²Afterward he appeared to two who were walking from Jerusalem into the country, but they didn't recognize him at first because he had changed his appearance. ¹³When they realized who he was, they rushed back to tell the others, but no one believed them. ¹⁴Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their unbelief--their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. ¹⁵And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone, everywhere. ¹⁶Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned. ¹⁷These signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak new languages. ¹⁸They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won't hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them." ¹⁹When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. ²⁰And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked with them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs.

Points of Interest:

- As was mentioned in yesterday's 'For you' section, many ancient manuscripts of Mark's good news end with yesterday's passage. Other ancient manuscripts end with what is called the 'shorter ending': 'Then they reported all these instructions briefly to Peter and his companions. Afterward Jesus himself sent them out from east to west with the sacred and unfailing message of salvation that gives eternal life. Amen.' Still other manuscripts end with today's passage, the longer ending, which is today's passage. Most scholars think that the shorter ending and longer ending are epilogues added shortly after Mark's original story to give people a bit of how the story turns out, i.e. how the story got to them. Even though they are not original to Mark, these things have been left as part of his story because they fill out the story and because everything said in the longer version is verified in the other gospels or Acts.
- 'she told them Jesus was alive'—as we all might have guessed, by the fact that we have heard the story, Mary, after her initial shock, does gain the faith to tell the disciples. Unfortunately, the men do not believe her. The disciples are again behaving like bad soil: they don't believe what they are told, and they don't remember his words. For this, they gain a rebuke from Jesus later; but in his mercy he continues to appear to them until they believe.
- 'to everyone, everywhere'—This is not a message that should be given only to the Jews, there is plenty of good news to go around to the whole world.
- 'They will be able to handle snakes'—some sects have taken this verse to mean they ought to handle poisonous snakes intentionally as a sign to people that they are followers. It doesn't seem to me that this is what Jesus has in mind. Rather, he is saying that Jesus his rising from the dead gives his disciples power over death: things that should have the ability to kill them no longer will. He is not telling them to seek out poison, but that they are impervious to poison if they happen to drink it. There are stories of Jesus' messengers, like the apostle Paul, literally being bitten without harm. But even if one does die of poison, the effect is not permanent; they will be raised.
- 'These signs will accompany those who believe'—Most of these signs are simply the ability to do what Jesus did: the experience the twelve had when they went out on their mission is being expanded somewhat and widened to all who believe: all of Jesus' followers should be able to cast out demons, heal the sick, and be impervious to death. The miraculous speaking in new languages is described in Acts 2. The intent here seems to be that they will be given a miraculous ability to tell the story to people who don't even speak their language, as indeed happens in Acts 2.
- 'sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand'—the third reference in Mark to Psalm 110:1: the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet. Jesus' ascension to the Father marks the beginning of the church, the new temple built on him. Jesus will watch the Father, through the work of the church, complete the work of establishing his kingdom.

Taking it Home:

- *For you:* Yesterday's 'for you' section is true: the continuing of the story depends on you telling the stories to others. But today's passage gives the rest of the story: Jesus gives us what we need to have the faith to tell the message and the power to confirm it. Ask Jesus to give you the faith to tell the message. Ask him to appear to the people you tell himself, proving what you say. And ask him for the power to cast out demons and heal. Above all, praise him for passing along to you the power of his resurrection, rescuing us from fear of death.
- *For your six:* Jesus keeps appearing until the disciples finally believe. Ask Jesus to keep working on any of your six who don't yet believe also. Ask him to show the same mercy toward the unbelief of your six as he showed to the disciples.
- *For our church:* Pray for an increase in the signs that are supposed to accompany those who believe in our church. Ask God for more healings, for protection, for more power to cast out demons, and even for the ability to communicate the good news in languages we don't know. Pray also that God will send people from our church everywhere, to everyone with this good news.