

More Mark

Because Mark is the lectionary gospel for 2018, Pastor Charlie encouraged us to read Mark in January, and we were given opportunities to study and reflect on the Gospel of Mark through a Bible class Jeff and Clara taught, daily devotional meditations written by Covenant members, and Sunday discussion classes.

For those who are interested in delving deeper into the Gospel of Mark in 2018, the Covenant library has an excellent resource: *Mark: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, by William C. Placher. Placher leads one through Mark, beginning to end, focusing on major themes that emerge as Mark's narrative proceeds: "Good News!", "Healing the Rejected Ones," "Parables and Deeds of Power," "The Inclusive Banquet," "On the Way to Jerusalem," "Challenge to Authority," "Arrest, Torture, Death," and "Afterword" (Jesus' Resurrection).

I have read through Placher's book, Bible in hand, during January, and found insightful, provocative comments on virtually every page, such that I am tempted to go back to write notes or photocopy pages. Placher draws connections between different passages in Mark to show the gospel's unity and overall message. He presents Old Testament references and allusions in Mark that enrich one's understanding of this gospel in its Jewish context. He helps one appreciate the drama in Mark's narrative. He draws on and cites prominent Christian theologians – Augustine, Origen, Calvin, Luther, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and many others -- as well as New Testament scholars, Shakespeare, Dante, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Elliot, and various literary critics. He makes connections between Mark's world and our world; for example, by comparing the treatment of prisoners at the Iraqi prison camp, Abu Ghraib, and the treatment of political prisoners by the Roman Empire.

Placher's style is clear, not turgidly academic. He even has a sense of humor: "Most scholars now agree that the original text of Mark ends at 16:8. Verses 9-20, considered part of the Gospel for most of Christian history, do not appear in the earliest surviving manuscripts . . . Dropping these verses loses the only biblical reference to snake handling, but that is a price most scholars seem willing to pay!"

And Placher admires Mark's literary style: "Anyone who studies Mark in Greek soon learns that he did not write very well. One writer cites over two hundred 'harsh constructions.' . . . It is with some hesitation, therefore, that I propose that Mark was a literary genius, admittedly of an odd sort, emerging as he did from the ranks of the little educated. Even his 'mistakes' –the long rows of sentences, each beginning, 'And immediately . . . ' the shifts to the historical present uncharacteristic of good Greek style – make the story dramatic."

I recommend this book to anyone who wants a better appreciation of the portrait of Jesus presented in the Gospel of Mark.

Eric Wendorff