

The Gospel of Mark gets right to the point: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” This gospel is the earliest of the four and the foundational document for Matthew and Luke (the other synoptic gospels, meaning they have a similar narrative style and timeline). It’s a Dragnet-Joe Friday style approach, with “Just the facts.” Mark is skimpy on scene-setting details but offers a laser-focus on Jesus as miracle-worker and Messiah.

As a reader, fasten your seatbelt and hold on tight: in these first few chapters, Jesus is baptized, wanders in the wilderness, gathers his disciples, casts out demons, heals lepers, and takes on the Pharisees. But don’t let yourself feel whiplash: remember that this first part of the gospel is all about revealing the nature of Jesus and his ability to defy the earthly powers of imperial Rome and overcome the evil natures of the world. Mark is laying out the case as would a lawyer in court, providing evidence through the life and teaching of Jesus that he is the true Messiah, and through him, our path to salvation.

With this approach, perhaps it’s not surprising that Mark skips over the birth story and jumps right into Jesus’s public ministry, with his baptism by John. The gospel deigns to provide a few telling details about John (he’s dressed in camel’s hair and eats locusts) before showing that John, who some believed to be the messiah, recognizes that “the one who is more powerful” is still to come. When John baptizes Jesus, the heavens are torn apart (as they will be later at his death), and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. But there’s no time to dawdle with crumpets and tarts for a baptismal reception: the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for forty days where he faces—and resists—temptations from Satan.

Upon Jesus’s return to Galilee, he begins to gather his disciples. We see here an urgency that is a common theme throughout Mark. When Jesus says to, “Follow me,” Simon and Andrew “immediately” leave their nets and follow him. It appears there was no weighing of pros and cons, no succession plan for their fishing enterprise. These men followed faithfully and immediately—an inspiration and challenge to Christians today. In the passages that follow, we witness Jesus’s miracles—“a new teaching—with authority!” Jesus casts out unclean spirits and heals Simon’s mother-in-law; he cures many who are sick with disease and demons and makes well both a leper and a paralytic man. The religious authorities start to take note of this unusual man who heals the sick and forgives the sinners. They begin to talk among themselves: “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy!” Throughout the readings for this week and indeed the entire gospel, the religious leaders question Jesus—about who he eats with, who he heals, and how he treats

the sabbath and other laws of the land. Jesus threatens the status quo and upends the power structures of the day. And these leaders do not plan to go gently into that good night.

We end our week with a series of parables that are likely familiar to many Christians today. The sower plants seeds, some on rocky soil and some on good soil. This parable teaches a lesson about fertilizing our soil with prayer, praise, worship, and service so that our faith may grow and flourish. In another parable, Jesus gives us the words to a favorite childhood song, "This Little Light of Mine," imploring us to let our faith shine as a light to the world, not as a lamp hidden under a basket or bed.

The last parable of the week is one of my personal favorites. Jesus compares the kingdom of God not to a beautiful rose or the fruit of a tree but to the mustard seed. Just as this smallest of all the seeds on earth can grow into the greatest of all shrubs, so too can Jesus pierce the darkness, transforming a spark of faith into a shining light.