

Sermon: “Into Human Hands” *

James 3: 13 – 4:3, 7–8a; Mark 9: 30–37

St. James Presbyterian Church, September 19, 2021

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The church year officially begins with Advent, and in this particular year, our weekly gospel readings come mainly from the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s Gospel is thought to be the earliest of the gospels, written around 70 A.D., give or take a few years. In many ways it is also the plainest and least elaborate of the four gospels. Matthew and Luke draw heavily on Mark, almost all of which shows up in one or the other of these gospels — or both.

Mark might be the shortest and least literary of the gospels, but it does have an overall plan. The first half of the gospel is taken up with Jesus’s ministry as he heals and teaches “with power,” and it takes at its setting Galilee and the areas around it. In this section, as we have seen over the last many weeks and months, Jesus calls his disciples, tells stories, encounters resistance and controversy, and performs miracles. While so much of what Jesus does in this section attests to his unique identity as Messiah and Son of God, that identity is largely hidden. Jesus so often tells those he heals or feeds or teaches to tell no one what he has been doing that scholars sometimes refer to the “Messianic secret,” or the “Markan secret.”

The second half of Mark’s gospel moves from Jesus’s ministry to his suffering — from Galilee to Jerusalem. His healing and teaching continue in this section, but his identity, which will bring him to the cross, is no longer a secret. Rather, it is a catalyst, provoking opposition, resistance, threat. Before Jesus turns his back on Galilee, however, and turns his face toward Jerusalem, he must prepare his disciples for what is to come. At the crossroads, as it were, between Galilee and Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his own passion, the suffering and death but also the rising from death that are to come. Whether because Jesus’s passion prediction is so important or because it is so hard to understand, Jesus delivers it not once nor even twice, but three times. The one we are read-

* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

ing this morning is the second of the three. It follows the pattern of the other two, but it is the shortest, as well as the most sweeping.

And as the scene begins, we are still in Galilee.

Jesus shows care for his disciples' understanding by teaching them in private (setting aside the needs of the people for a while). And well might he do this: as one writer points out, in Mark's gospel the disciples are so dense that the light bends around them. Whereas others whom Jesus encounters display a deep and ready faith, the disciples are never shown as faithful. After they rise from their nets to follow, they are relentless in their inability to understand Jesus. At times they even obstruct him, trying to argue him out of the cross and the resurrection, or shooing away the little ones whom Jesus wants to welcome. In this episode, too, they "did not understand what Jesus was saying" to them — and were afraid to ask.

But it's worse than that: left on their own, talking among themselves, their behaviour has been, as one commentator puts it, wildly inappropriate. The only good thing that can be said on their behalf is that at least they are embarrassed about it. Jesus has just laid out for them how far he is prepared to go for them, not to mention what he must endure. He has not only predicted the traumatic events to come, but he has laid out a way of costly and selfless service. But in response the disciples have become embroiled in questions of not of self-giving but of self-advancement: "Who is the greatest," "How can I get ahead?" Jesus goes high, and they go low.

Or to put it another way, Jesus goes low and *they* go high. Jesus takes the lowly path, the path of radical humility. Jesus bends low into human life, with all of its consequences. This low road was unforgettably captured in Paul's letter to the Philippians: though Jesus came from God, he "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (*Philippians 2: 6–8*). Jesus sets aside his own welfare, radically, for the sake of the world. And the disciples, who are part of the world, just keep

climbing over each other to reach the dubious heights of achievement, success, and fame.

Some scholars think that there might be a historical circumstance behind Mark's devastating depiction of the disciples. After Jesus's death, the disciples' various missions led to the formation of various early churches, which in Mark's day may have been squabbling and competing with each other in a destructive way. Perhaps they as well as the disciples needed to be taken down a peg, to be reminded of the way of the cross that they were meant to be walking.

In any case, this episode is painful: painful to read about and painful to hear. Our hearts hurt for Jesus, for his difficult journey, for his harsh treatment, for his suffering. And they hurt for the disciples too, for they are so blind and bumbling, so disappointing. And maybe the story is especially painful because we recognize ourselves, maybe at quite a distance, in the disciples. It is so hard for us to be truly selfless. Worrying about our position, taking offence at the supposed slights of others, trying to achieve success or value, protecting our reputation, competing with others: these are worked into our culture and may be encoded in our DNA as well.

Last Tuesday evening, I attended a worship service marking the 200th anniversary of the Presbytery of Prince Edward Island. The prayers for the service were thoughtfully drawn from prayers written at the time of that Presbytery founding, and although the language of course was a bit musty, I was surprised at how the concerns of our time and our lives seemed present even in these old prayers. Sometimes I imagine that in earlier days Christians were much more sure of themselves, more definite, somehow, firm in their faith, unwavering in their piety. But these prayers expressed no such thing. They brought together a spirit of hope, humility, and faith with a touching inner awareness of the ways, even then, people of faith wavered, or were distracted, or indulged those self-serving instincts that give nobody any credit. If we worry about these things, if we add a layer of self-recrimination to all our other worries, maybe it will be a consolation to us to know that we are not unique, and never have been.

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands," Jesus tells his disciples, "and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." The word *betray* can mean so many things: to deceive, to be disloyal to, to let down, but also to disclose or reveal. The Greek word *paradidomei* (παραδίδωμι) has its own range of meanings: to hand over, to hand on, to entrust, to commend. Jesus will be handed over to his enemies on a Thursday evening in Jerusalem, but in his whole ministry he is handing himself over, commending himself to the care and keeping of those around him, those all too human hands.

Which human hands are safe for Jesus? The hands of his uncomprehending and disappointing disciples? Our own hands? Are we able to welcome Jesus as we welcome a little child, as we care for the weak and the vulnerable, as we tend to the little ones whom God has put into our path? Are our own hands safe for Jesus?

The disciples: they're a bit of a mess, it's true. They're disappointing, to be sure. Yet uncomprehending, inadequate, and faithless as they may be, Jesus continues to walk with them. He walks alongside them and goes on ahead, leading where they will follow. And it is not they themselves who have power to save, but Jesus. So it is for us. Let us then turn again to Jesus, the one who takes us in his arms, and go out to do likewise.

May it be so.

Amen.