

## COMMEMORATION OF ST. MARK, EVANGELIST

2 Timothy 4:11

Get Mark

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, one of our six Lutheran Confessions, explains: “Our Confession approves honoring the saints in three ways. The first is thanksgiving. We should thank God because He has shown examples of mercy, because He wishes to save people, and because He has given teachers and other gifts to the Church... The second service is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter’s denial forgiven, we also are encouraged to believe all the more that grace truly superabounds over sin. The third honor is the imitation, first of faith, then of other virtues. Everyone should imitate the saints according to his calling.”

The writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 13, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” And one chapter earlier, he encourages, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Christianity has roots in history. God through real people at real times did real things. Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor. He died when Pilate was governor. Real people, real times, real things—these are no fables. And so, as Christians, we have a rich heritage, with countless fingers pointing us to the place where countless eyes are fixed: to Christ. For that reason, we remember, or commemorate, those who have gone before us, who have spoken the Word of God to us, who have testified to the truth once for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 1:3).

This past Wednesday was the commemoration of St. Mark, the Evangelist. That St. Mark was an Evangelist means, in this case, that he wrote one of the four Gospels. It’s hard to read the second lesson for this occasion without being struck by the utter and thorough-going humanity of God’s work on our behalf. How merciful our God is that He uses simple men like those rather matter-of-factly listed in this very personal portion of St. Paul’s letter to accomplish the most complicated things! One can hardly read the Bible without marveling at how much those giants on whose

shoulders we stand were just like us—quivering knees and lips all the same. The Patriarchs were doing the dysfunctional family thing long before the dysfunctional family thing was cool. David fell into adultery and murder. The Prophets were often headstrong and uncouth men who lacked backbone at crucial times. When God steps into history, He often wears the most shoddy sandals. Yet beautiful feet are beautiful no matter how you dress them, and through even the pimples of His called servants God's grace and wisdom shines even brighter than it would have through the most exfoliated of skin. St. Mark is no exception to the rule.

The first apparent mention we have of St. Mark is found in his Gospel, and he doesn't paint a very complimentary picture of himself. In Mark 14, after the arrest of Jesus and the cowardly flight of His Apostles, he adds one special note: "And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked." The substantial opinion of the early church fathers says this man was St. Mark, and, if it weren't, it's rather odd for him to include this otherwise inconsequential piece of information.

We do know St. Mark was already closely associated with the church in Jerusalem at that time. In Acts 12, when St. Peter was miraculously set free from jail, "he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying." Evidently, St. Mark's mother was a fixture in the Jerusalem Church. His house was a sanctuary of sorts for early Christian worship, study, and meeting. Later in that same chapter, we are told, "Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark." Like many a WELS mothers, Mary seemingly wanted her son to be a church worker, and so she sent him off to the Seminary with Barnabas and Saul, to learn the ways of a pastor and missionary.

Unfortunately, it would seem that Mark's labor with Barnabas and Saul, later called Paul, as in St. Paul, hit a speedbump, had a hiccup. In Acts 13, we read: "Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem."

Acts 15 sheds some light on what had happened:

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Mark had not merely left Paul and Barnabas on that earlier journey. He'd deserted them. It would seem he, who had been sent off by mommy, missed mommy a little too much. The tutors at MLS could probably have easily diagnosed the homesickness. And so St. Paul considers St. Mark too unreliable for the pastorate, ill-equipped for the hardships of a missionary. It appears from his summary that even St. Luke agrees with his decision. Barnabas, his cousin, however, sees potential underneath the rough edges.

Then we lose track of Mark for a while. Neither he nor Barnabas are mentioned again in the Book of Acts. We have to wait for the Epistles to learn more. But, by God's grace, it's worth the wait. In Colossians 4:10, mentioned above, St. Paul writes, "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions--if he comes to you, welcome him)." Could it be? Could St. Paul be encouraging the Colossians to welcome the ministry of the same Mark he'd refused to take out into the mission field again years earlier? To remove our doubt, St. Paul speaks similarly again in Philemon 24. And not only that, in 2 Timothy 4:11, Paul writes, "Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry."

And there we have proof that God's wisdom is greater than our wisdom, and His plans greater than our plans. Where before St. Paul found cause for complaint, namely, in Mark, he now finds cause to give thanks. God was working through the young man once too timid for the task. Forgiven his temerity and lack of commitment, St. Mark became a blessing to St. Paul and the Church as a whole. By his Holy Gospel, he has become a sort of pastor to us all, preaching the life, language, and love of Jesus to us concisely and clearly, to lead us to the same salvation which he himself now enjoys.

The church fathers, scholars, and strong evidence tells us that St. Mark wrote his Gospel based on the preaching of St. Peter, especially in the church in Rome. St. Peter writes in chapter four of his first epistle, "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son." A good Jewish Christian like Peter wouldn't likely give his physical offspring a Latin name like Mark, so it would seem this spiritual son is the Mark who was familiar to the churches. St. Paul speaks similarly of St. Timothy at the beginning of this letter: "To Timothy, my beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." As long as the Church has been the Church, it's not been uncommon for a pastor to speak of the members he'd catechized and

nurtured in the Faith as his spiritual sons or daughters. In that sense, a young pastor like myself becomes a father of sorts to some much older than myself when placed into the parish.

If St. Mark did record St. Peter's preaching in his Gospel, there's even more cause for comfort, because St. Mark is perhaps the most detailed regarding St. Peter's betrayal of our Lord and Jesus' request that St. Peter especially be told about His resurrection. Surely Peter, who had so much cause for shame in his sin against the Savior, had even more cause for rejoicing in the Savior's forgiveness and renewed call to service after the resurrection!

Some might wonder what kind of sermon this has been today. I hope it's the typical fare, served in a different style. But don't let anyone claim that this has not been a sermon about Jesus. Yes, He hasn't been mentioned that much by name thus far, but He has been in every paragraph. Without Jesus, there's no Mary to raise Mark. Without Jesus, there's no Barnabas to encourage him. Without Jesus, there's no Paul to change his mind about him. Without Jesus, there's no Peter to preach to him. Without Jesus, there's plain and simply no St. Mark, and without St. Mark, there's no Gospel according to St. Mark to tell us all about Jesus. Jesus is the forgiving mover and shaker behind all of this. Jesus is the crucified and risen, sure and sturdy hand molding all these jars of clay. And all He was for them He is for us, that we might be what we are, pimples and all, for Him.

How often don't we look at ourselves and ask, "Why?" "Why would He love me?" "What?" "What could He ever do with me?" "Who?" "Who am I ever going to make a difference for?" "When?" "When am I ever going to get my act together?" We have plenty of questions, but we also have poor eyesight, as did St. Paul, who closed his letter with such large letters. Jesus sees us in Him and in no other way. Mark was a waste of time outside of Jesus, but in Him Mark was a pastor, a missionary, an evangelist, and, many believe, a martyr. And you've been baptized too. And you've been forgiven too. And you've been written in the Book of Life too. So who are you to second guess Jesus? He may pick up trash, but trash turns to treasure in the Savior's pierced hands.

Get Mark today. No, don't bring him here. Understand him. As Lutherans, we don't worship the saints; we identify with them. We look and say, "He was weak, but Jesus was strong. I am weak, and Jesus will be strong for me too." See yourself in St. Mark today, because, when you do, you'll see yourself in Christ, to whom St. Mark points you, on whom his eyes were fixed. Mark may have run naked from his Lord in fear during Holy Week, but our Lord hung naked during that same week to

dress Mark in the most resplendent white robe of His own righteousness so that, far from fleeing, that same youth might run to him for mercy. You wear the same robe. You run to the same Christ. Amen.