

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – July 22, 2018

[Mark 6:30-56](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

(From *Homiletics*; “G-Force” – July 19, 2009)

On first glance, chapter 6 of Mark’s gospel seems to be a series of disconnected episodes describing Jesus’ teaching and healing, John the Baptist’s death and the feeding of more than 5,000 people. Indeed, Mark 6:30-34 and 6:53-56 are two connected passages in the middle of this sporadic chapter, creating transitions between scenes that involve Jesus and the disciples. These passages display some key themes of this chapter, allowing Mark’s audience to learn about Jesus’ ministry to the disciples and the crowds, in resting, teaching and healing.

These themes emerge prominently when we consider these passages in their literary context. As transitional passages, these texts are obviously connected to what has come before them, and they can foreshadow what is to come. Mark 6 begins with a scene change with Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth (6:2). This echoes a previous scene of Jesus teaching in a synagogue, where crowds were amazed at his teaching (1:21-22). Here, however, the crowd amazes Jesus because of their unbelief (6:6a), which limits the power of his healing. After this inauspicious action, Jesus sends out his disciples to teach, cast out demons and cure the sick (6:7, 13). The last time Mark’s audience had encountered the disciples, they didn’t understand the meaning of Jesus’ parables (4:13), nor did they understand who Jesus is (4:41), even though Jesus apparently explains the meaning of his teaching to them (4:33-34), setting them apart (4:10). This mixed portrayal of the disciples continues throughout the gospel, but here we see them at their best. They are even called apostles, which means “sent ones.” They are called apostles only here and when Jesus first calls the Twelve (3:14; cf. 11:1; 14:13), and it’s clear they accomplish a successful ministry in proclamation, healing and exorcism.

In contrast to the apostles’ success, Mark’s audience next hears of John the Baptist’s death. This tragic event is connected to the others in the chapter in several ways. First, Herod Antipas, the tetrarch (though commonly called “king”) of Judea, is frightened, both of John and Jesus. He collapses their roles together under their similarities to the prophets or Elijah (1:6; cf. 9:9-13). At this extravagant banquet, Mark describes the corruption of justice and profligacy that reigns in the king’s court, seeming to make fun of Herod’s spineless character. Mark’s critique is explicit; Herod “feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man,” and yet he was subject to his own ill-advised vow to Herodias (6:18-24). A banquet that should be a celebration ends in a burial (6:29).

Alternating between somber scenes of rejection (at Nazareth and Herod’s palace) and encouraging scenes of acceptance (the disciples’ ministry), Mark seems to confirm both the positive and negative sides of Herod’s realization: “Jesus’ name had become known” (6:14). This increases the crowds around Jesus, as Mark 6 clearly emphasizes, but it also increases the risk on Jesus’ life, as John’s death confirms (cf. 8:31). When the disciples return to Jesus to report on their ministry, however, he doesn’t immediately tell them to go out and serve. Instead, Jesus begins Mark 6:31 with what must have been a welcoming statement: “Come away to a deserted place all by

yourselves and rest a while.” This pattern of refreshment after ministry is one that Jesus himself took in Mark 1, as he went to a “deserted place” and prayed early in the morning, after curing many and casting out many demons (1:34-35). It’s important that the apostles follow Jesus’ entire pattern of ministry, from his proclamation (6:12; cp. 1:14-15) to his actions in teaching, exorcisms and healing to his rest and recuperation. Much like Jesus himself, though, the disciples aren’t given a chance to rest at this point because of the crowd (6:31; cf. 1:36-39). It’s clear that the kingdom of God (1:15) is breaking in, even in seemingly “deserted” places.

At this point in the narrative, we see how the disciples are imitating, or mirroring, Jesus’ own actions in his ministry, as he has asked them to do (6:6b-13, 30-32). The scene shifts, however, in 6:33, to focus on the crowd. This is one of several places in Mark where the evangelist emphasizes the sheer size of the crowd to whom Jesus teaches (6:34; cf. 2:13; 4:1-2; 10:1). The crowd’s size and persistence negate two possible outcomes from the previous episode of John the Baptist’s death. It would have been possible for John’s death to render Jesus’ and his disciples’ ministry ineffective. Apparently, this hasn’t been the case (6:30). Furthermore, John’s death could have made the crowds uninterested in Jesus, or at least more timid around him. Instead, they sought him out from every quarter (6:33, 55-56). While John’s death may foreshadow Jesus’ death for readers of the gospel who keep the end in mind, it’s important for Mark to show that the crowds, at this point, weren’t intimidated or even affected by Herod’s action.

Jesus’ reaction to the crowd is very different from what the disciples’ will be (6:35-37). First, he has “compassion” for them. This compassion is deeper than mere pity; it’s an empathy that’s felt deep within oneself. Jesus “has compassion” for people three times in Mark’s gospel: once for the man with leprosy (1:41), and twice for a crowd (6:34; 8:2) preceding miraculous feedings. The father of an epileptic boy (9:22) asks Jesus to have compassion so he will heal him. Therefore, it’s clear that this compassion is connected to various actions of Jesus. In Mark’s gospel, having compassion on someone can mean healing them physically, but it can also be providing for their needs, whether in teaching (6:34) or in food (6:41-44; cf. John 6:48-51).

Jesus’ compassion for this crowd isn’t based on their actions, for all they have done is recognize him (6:33; cf. 6:54; 2:8; 5:30). Instead, his compassion for them is grounded in the fact that they are “like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34). This statement is an echo of various places in the Old Testament (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:8; Zechariah 10:2), where prophets critique kings or rulers for their lack of appropriate leadership. Indeed, God says through the prophet Ezekiel, “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down” (34:15; cf. Zechariah 11:7). This allusion, coming immediately after Herod’s banquet, is a subtle critique of this “king’s” lack of leadership for the people. Jesus’ leadership comes in the form of teaching (cf. 1:27), as well as in a miraculous feeding that’s reminiscent of the manna from heaven (Exodus 16) that God sent to feed the people of Israel in the wilderness. This is a very different kind of “banquet” from Herod’s; this is a banquet where all people are fed.

Jesus’ disciples, however, remain ignorant about how they should interact with this crowd. One even begins to wonder how the disciples’ ministry was so successful when they seem so clueless here. Jesus still has much to teach them, just like he teaches the crowd (6:37), even when they don’t understand (6:52). Indeed, Jesus’ ultimate teachings for his disciples are his Passion predictions, which are yet to come (e.g., 8:31; 9:31). Despite their successful ministry (6:30) and their mirroring of Jesus’ actions (6:31-32), the disciples don’t understand God’s ways in the wilderness, nor do they recognize Jesus on the water (6:49), even though crowds have recognized him on land (6:33, 54). However, neither the disciples’ nor Jesus’ journey is over.

The final four verses, Mark 6:53-56, are a summary passage very similar to what Mark’s audience would have heard earlier, in 1:32-34 (cf. 3:10-12). This particular passage connects back to 6:33, as we have seen, where the crowd recognizes Jesus. People bring their sick on mats, reminding the audience of Jesus healing the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). Begging for healing is a common trope in Mark as the leper, Jairus, the crowd around the deaf-mute and a blind man all plead for healing (1:40; 5:23; 7:32; 8:22). This “healing” is closely connected to the word for “salvation,” as the same verb can be used for both meanings. Even the detail about the sick “touch[ing] the fringe of his cloak” (6:56) reminds one vividly of the bleeding woman who had been healed by just touching Jesus’ clothes (5:25-34; cf. 3:10). This summary of Jesus’ healing ministry is all the more important here because Jesus’ actions are about to undergo a subtle shift. From this point on, there will be fewer healings and more teaching. The roles the disciples play with respect to Jesus and the crowd will continue to be tested, and the disciples will end up siding with the crowd and deserting Jesus (14:50). As this bookended passage shows, however, the disciples’ misunderstanding or inaction isn’t the end of the story. God, through Jesus, acts in mighty ways, in compassion (6:34), to teach, to feed, to heal and to save.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?