

Week 4:

Mark 5-6

The Markan Sandwich

This week we feature a particular characteristic that is **observable** in the content of Mark's Gospel. This characteristic is what can be referred to as "The Markan Sandwich" or "Interpolations." Essentially it is two stories that are told, but one is set within the other (Story 1 Introduction - Story 2: Introduction and Conclusion - Story 1: Conclusion). These sandwiched stories are literary device that Mark uses to emphasize meaning. At least one other has already occurred earlier in Mark, and this week, we encounter at least two more. This guide will only look at one of the Markan sandwiches concerning Jairus' Daughter and the Woman with Chronic Bleeding, which can be outlined as follows:

Mark 5:21-43

5:21-24 Story 1 intro

5:25-34 Story 2 intro and conclusion

5:35-43 Story 1 conclusion

In your group, consider reading the passage, and engaging in the following discussion prompts (*perhaps even before identifying the Sandwich explicitly, see if anyone observed it on their own*):

Observation: What are the observable similarities, parallels and connections in the two stories?

Interpretation: What might be the meaning intended through these connections?

Application: Given the connections, what kind of application does this have for our life?

As our journey through Mark continues, see if you can find the other narrative sandwiches. There is some debate as to how many of these interpolations there may actually be in the Gospel of Mark, but there is also consensus on the most obvious of these.

What follows is an excerpt from one of our suggested resources in which the Markan Sandwich is observed, and commented on for meaning and application.

Resource Insight:
From Mark For Everyone

Mark 5:21-34

Jairus's Daughter and the Woman with Chronic Bleeding

We really should take this passage with the next one, since in Mark's mind they are all part of the same story. But both are so full of interest that it's worth holding them apart for the moment, provided we remember how closely they belong together.

What Mark has done is to place one tale inside the other, in what is sometimes called a Markan sandwich. (We'll see him do this again in, for example, 11:12–25.) The flavour of the outer story adds zest to the inner one; the taste of the inner one is meant in turn to permeate the outer one. The outer story is about Jairus, one of the local synagogue presidents, and particularly his 12-year-old daughter; the inner story is about a much older woman, who for the same twelve years has suffered severe internal bleeding.

Both stories are about fear and faith, and the power of Jesus to take people from one to the other. Both, singly and together, are worth spending time 'inside', in the sense of meditating on them, imagining you are in the crowd watching it all happen, then—if you dare!—identifying with the various characters at the centre of the drama. That's a wonderful way to turn scripture into prayer—and today, as in Jesus' day, to turn fear into faith.

Let's start the process by identifying with Jairus, the synagogue president (it sounds a grand title, but in a town of at most a few hundred, with two or three such officers, it wasn't that prestigious). Since the time when Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, he can't always have been an easy person to have in the village congregation. Local experts in Jewish law were upset at some of the things he was doing; murmurs around the place suggested that if Herod Antipas got to hear of a new kingdom-of-God movement there would be trouble. Jairus might well have felt he could do without someone likely to land the town in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons. At best, he'd probably want to keep a safe distance. Let others go after this Jesus; sooner or later we'll see if anything comes of his efforts, and for the moment it's better to preserve something like neutrality.

Until disaster strikes. Jairus's daughter, who features as the young heroine in the animated movie *The Miracle Maker*, is twelve years old—almost old enough, in that culture, to be getting married. And now she's very, very sick, apparently about to die. Without letting sentimental imagination run away with us, we can see easily enough the agonized household, the distraught father, hope slipping away like sand through a sieve, and then word arriving that the strange teacher has just come back from across the lake. Jairus pockets his pride and forgets his fears—why worry about religious controversy or political danger when your daughter's dying?—and rushes off to Jesus, throwing himself down at his feet (most undignified! What will they whisper about him

next sabbath?). He gasps out his request. And Jesus goes with him, the eager crowd of course in tow.

Mark now breaks off. The story of the older woman not only keeps us in suspense, as we wait to find out what happens to Jairus and his daughter (we can imagine Jairus hopping from one foot to the other while the conversation takes place); it provides depth and extra meaning.

Jesus is on his way to a house where, as we already suspect, he will find a corpse. Thoughts of sorrow would mingle with the threat of impurity, since contact with a dead body is one of the chief sources of impurity in Jewish law. Here, on the other hand, is a woman who has chronic internal bleeding; one of the other main causes of impurity was bodily discharges and those who had them (especially women). Jairus has asked Jesus to come to his house so that his daughter may be rescued, or 'saved'; the woman says to herself, 'If I can only touch his clothes, I'll be rescued.' 'Your faith has saved you,' says Jesus to the woman. 'Don't be afraid—only believe,' he says to Jairus (verse 36). Clearly Mark intends us to see the stories knocking sparks off each other.

The woman's perpetual uncleanness (with all its consequences in her family and social life) explains her fear both of openly requesting help and then of being discovered after she's received it. But one of the most remarkable things about the story is the way in which Jesus knows at once that power has gone out of him. (This, and the funny little exchange with the disciples that follows—like someone asking 'who touched me' in a rugby scrum—look to me like the sure sign of an eyewitness.)

Healing by touch, not least when the healer wasn't expecting it, is such a strange phenomenon that we probably can't probe much further about how such things work. But they highlight for us the intimate nature of the contact between the individual and Jesus that Mark expects and hopes his readers to develop for themselves. When life crowds in with all its pressures, there is still room for us to creep up behind Jesus—if that's all we feel we can do—and reach out to touch him, in that odd mixture of fear and faith that characterizes so much Christian discipleship.

Then the other odd thing: was it Jesus' power that rescued the woman, or her own faith? Clearly it was Jesus' power; but he says, 'Your faith has rescued you.' The answer must be that faith, though itself powerless, is the channel through which Jesus' power can work (compare 6:5). He is not a magician, doing conjuring tricks by some secret power for an amazed but uninvolved audience. He is (though the onlookers don't yet realize this) God's son, the one through whom the living God is remaking Israel, humans, the world. And faith, however much fear and trembling may accompany it, is the first sign of that remaking, that renewal, that new life. Where are you in this story?

Mark 5:35–43

The Raising of Jairus's Daughter

Right on cue, as the suspense heightens, messengers come to tell Jairus that his daughter has now died. He shouldn't bother Jesus any longer. Telling Jairus not to be

afraid, and just to believe, in that setting must have sounded like telling someone to paddle across the Pacific in a canoe. (Today's newspaper tells me that someone has just done something rather like that. But most of us wouldn't even dream of trying.) But so many extraordinary things were happening in Capernaum just then that Jairus, numb with grief and horror as he must have been, may also have discovered a spark of faith which enabled him to walk with Jesus the short distance (Capernaum was only a small town) to his own front door.

They would soon know they were getting near. As in many countries of the world to this day, particularly where grief is a regular visitor to the average house in the absence of modern Western medicine, there were well-established rituals for beginning the grieving process. Professional mourners would come in weeping and wailing, sometimes with flute accompaniment (Matthew mentions the latter at this point). They made it possible for family members to give vent to their feelings without restraint or embarrassment. As we know today, bottling up grief is extremely unhealthy; better to get on with it, to let it come.

But Jesus isn't having any of it. Having kept the crowds at bay (how did he manage that, we may wonder?) he takes his three closest followers, Peter, James and John, and they go together into the house. 'She's not dead,' he declares; 'she's asleep!' Often in the ancient world, and particularly in Judaism and Christianity, sleep was used as a metaphor for death, and indeed sometimes (as in John 11:11) Jesus says 'asleep' when he means 'dead'. Mark is perhaps hoping that his readers will hear, from the previous chapter, the story of the seed and the plant. It goes to sleep and rises up ... and now that's what will happen to this girl, as a further sign that the kingdom of God is breaking in upon Israel in the unlikely form of a young prophet doing extraordinary things in one little town by the lake. A further sign, too, of how the story will end, with astonished people coming to see the place where a dead body once lay but now lies no longer.

They laughed at him, as they have laughed at Jesus' followers from that day to this; but Jesus got on with what had to be done. The crowd is left behind; six people only go into the room where the dead girl is lying. This time it is Jesus who reaches out his hand; this time he says a word of command, one of the few things to have come to us in the original Aramaic: *Talitha kum*, 'Time to get up, little girl!' Up she got, and walked round the room. And again the eye-witness touch: give her something to eat.

The passage leaves us with all sorts of questions. To begin with, why has Mark told us the Aramaic words that Jesus spoke? It is virtually certain that, though Jesus and his followers would be able to speak and understand Greek, their normal everyday language would be Aramaic. So what's special about these words? Why leave them untranslated, along with only a handful of others (like 'Abba' in the Gethsemane scene, 14:36)? The best answer is probably that the scene, and the crucial words, made such a deep impression on Peter and the others that whenever they told the story afterwards, even in Greek to non-Jewish audiences, they kept the crucial words as they were. It wasn't a magic formula, a kind of 'abracadabra'; they were the ordinary words you might use to wake up a sleeping child. But part of the point of the gospel story, and of

this whole section of Mark, is precisely that the life-giving power of God is breaking into, and working through, the ordinary details of life.

A further question: why did Jesus apparently only raise Jairus's daughter, the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17), and Lazarus (John 11:1–44)? There must have been plenty of other recently dead people whose grieving relatives came to him or his followers for help. Some people, indeed, have objected to these stories not just on the grounds that they're incredible (though actually stories of people being restored to life, however unusual, are known both in the Old Testament and in non-Jewish traditions), but that they're unfair: if God did it once or twice, why not to everybody? This is sometimes even raised as an objection to Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection; why should God treat Jesus as a special case? If God can do that sort of thing, why doesn't he prevent awful things like the Holocaust from happening in our own day?

This question misses the whole point of the larger story that Mark is telling us. Just as Jesus wasn't coming to be a one-man liberation movement in the traditional revolutionary sense, so he wasn't coming to be a one-man emergency medical centre. He was indeed starting a revolution, and he was indeed bringing God's healing power, but his aim went deeper; these things were signs of the real revolution, the real healing, that God was to accomplish through his death and resurrection. Signposts are important, but they aren't the destination. For that we must read on.

This question, though, is related to the point which Mark rubs in here as so often: Jesus tells them strictly not to tell anyone (we've already seen this in 1:34, with the demons, and we'll see it again in 7:36 and 8:30). The point seems to be that what Jesus is doing, as well as what he's saying (hence the parables), is dangerous and subversive. If Herod knew that someone with this authority over death itself was on the loose, at the head of a kingdom-of-God movement, he'd be very worried. If the religious leaders in the Temple, or the self-appointed legal experts, knew that someone was acting in this way, outside the official channels, and claiming to be thereby launching a kingdom-movement, they would do their best to stifle it.

Only if we see Jesus' movement in all its dimensions, including the political one, will we understand that behind the intense and intimate human dramas of each story there lies a larger, and darker, theme to which Mark is repeatedly drawing our attention. Jesus is on his way to confronting evil at its very heart. He will meet Death itself, which threatens God's whole beautiful creation, and defeat it in a way as unexpected as these two healings. This time, though, there will be no command to silence.

- N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*