**Sermon 1/20/19**

**Mark 1:1-45**

There was once a farmer who was a religious skeptic.

He simply didn't believe in the whole Christmas – Easter nonsense.

One bitter cold winter night, the man heard an unusual, irregular thumping

 sound against the kitchen storm door.

He went to a window and watched as tiny, shivering sparrows,

 attracted to the evident warmth inside, beat in vain against the glass.

Touched, the farmer bundled up and trudged through fresh snow

 to open the barn door for the struggling birds.

He turned on the lights, and tossed some hay in a corner.

But the sparrows, which had scattered in all directions

 when he emerged from the house, hid in the darkness, afraid.

The man tried various tactics to get them into the barn.

He laid down a trail of Saltine cracker crumbs to direct them.

He tried circling behind the birds to drive them toward the barn.

Nothing worked.

He, a huge, alien creature, had terrified them.

The birds couldn't comprehend that he actually desired to help them.

The farmer withdrew to his house and watched the doomed sparrows

 through a window.

As he stared, a thought hit him like lightning from a clear blue sky:

"If only I could become a bird – one of them – just for a moment.

Then I wouldn't frighten them so.

I could show them the way to warmth and safety."

After another moment, another thought dawned on him.

He had grasped the reason Jesus was born.

A man becoming a bird, is nothing compared to God becoming a man.

The concept, for a sovereign eternal being, who created the entire universe,

 confining himself to a human body was – and is –

 too much for some people to believe.

But how else could God truly communicate with us?

Why did God come to Earth as a man?

It was the only way God could get through to us.

Mark shows the power of a man who healed the blind with a simple touch,

 and the authority of a teacher so captivating people sat three days straight,

 with empty stomachs just to hear him.

Even after Jesus hushed them, people wouldn't stop talking about his miracles.

Mark also reveals the full range of Jesus' emotions:

 a surge of compassion for a person with leprosy,

 a deep sigh in response to nagging Pharisees,

 a look of anger and distress at coldhearted legalists,

 and then, an awful cry on the cross.

Mark portrays both sides of Jesus – the divine and the human.

The disciples needed to see both dimensions to give their lives to him.

And we, too, need to see both the divine and the human,

 to understand why God came down to us,

 and to live our lives God's way.

Mark wrote a fast-paced Gospel. It reads like the script for an action movie.

Brief introductory credits flash on the screen.

Then the camera pans across an expanse of bleached sand,

 inhabited mostly by scorpions, lizards, and tarantulas.

At last, through the shimmering heat, a lone figure appears: an eccentric,

 wearing camel's hair and crying something in the thin desert air.

It helps to imagine the book of Mark as a concisely edited documentary film. Unlike the other Gospels, this one has little tolerance

 for dialogue and personal reflection.

The author is writing to a restless, impatient audience –

 people more like moviegoers than readers.

Mark deftly controls camera angles, alternately panning

 across large crowds, and zooming in on individual people.

He leaves no doubt about the main character.

After the opening shot of John the Baptist,

 he moves Jesus to center stage, and the camera follows him everywhere.

All the spliced-together scenes defy structure.

Mark shows Jesus scattering miracles like rice at a wedding.

Mark covers three miracles, and a group event in the first chapter.

Mark includes only a sampling of Jesus parables.

It focuses on events, not speeches, or editorial comments.

Mark shows gymnasium-size crowds pressing around Jesus so tightly

 he launches a boat to escape them.

Wherever he goes, the crowds follow.

Action guarantees an attentive audience and

 Mark jams sequences together breathlessly.

At once, the spirit sends Jesus into the desert;

 at once, the disciples respond to Jesus' call to follow him;

The touch of Jesus immediately heals a man with leprosy.

42 times this book uses the Greek hurry-up adverb

 translated several different ways into English:

 just as … immediately .. at once … as soon as …

 then he … while he … as he …

Characters rush from place to place, jostle among crowds,

 are astonished at mighty works.

Mark is a Gospel of exclamation points,

 full of words like amazed, astounded, terrified.

A phenomenon is loose on the earth,

 and the author is determined to capture its impact for future generations.

Its style – simple sentences, without complicated transitions or long speeches –

 makes understanding easier.

We do not need any special instructions to read Mark.

This book's breezy style makes it as understandable as a newspaper.

Events in Jesus' life – birth in a manger, the death on a cross –

 can become so familiar we miss the point.

They are too close to us.

God becoming man, is so amazingly incredible, it is difficult to fully understand.

His death on a cross, is so inconceivable,

 even his closest followers found it all but impossible to comprehend.

The Son of God die?

How could this be?

And Why?

Could the Creator of all things succumb to his creation?

Disciples who had followed him through every other confrontation,

 now deserted him.

It made no sense for Jesus, the Messiah, to die.

Not until later would other thoughts click into place:

 memories of OT customs which hauntingly pointed to a cross,

 prophecies of a Messiah who was King but also a Suffering Servant.

To die was, after all, the central reason Jesus came to earth.

He had insisted on that from the beginning.

Nothing could erase the impact of those fear-filled, final days.

When the eerie darkness had lifted, and Jesus had breathed his last,

 the disciples had learned something profound about God, and about love.

Jesus was born in poverty, and died in disgrace, and thought it well worthwhile.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of Mark's account is its vividness.

It has the feel of an eyewitness account.

Details like these make a story come alive.

Vivid images stick with the reader.

Mark's account of the life of Jesus is so vivid

 because Mark is rushing head long to the Main Thing.

For him the main thing is the empty tomb, and he hurries to reach the climax.

When the women went to the tomb on Easter morning,

 they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe,

 sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

But he said to them,

 "Do not be alarmed;

 you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

 He has been raised; he is not here."

AMEN