

# MIND THE UNDERSTANDING GAP!<sup>1</sup>

Mark 1: 29-39

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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~~%~~Mind the gap,+repeats the ubiquitous voice on the London Underground. And if you miss the voice, you can~~d~~ miss the signs. They are everywhere. The warning, as we all know, is a utilitarian safety warning for the passengers, and it has been picked up in other forms in other places. The New York City commuter rail has a voice recording that says, ~~%~~Watch the gap,+and not many people are aware that it is the recorded voice of Al Roper of The Today Show.

The phrase, ~~%~~Mind the Gap,+however, has taken on a life of its own. It has been used as the title of at least two music albums, a film, and a novel, the name of a movie production studio and a theater production company, and has been used in the video game ~~%~~Bortal.+ For a while it was the name of a TV game show in Great Britain. You can buy all kinds of ~~%~~Mind the Gap+items, such as T-shirts, cuff links, posters, and even doormats. The phrase has become a cultural icon!

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## I

So, we might as well use it as part of a sermon title! It comes as no surprise for us to realize that much of what we do is minding the gap.

There is always a gap between income and expenditures; a gap between investments and returns; a gap between vision and reality; a gap between resources and programs; a gap between knowledge and wisdom; a gap between promises and fulfillment; and we could go on and on. But there is one gap today that I want to underline: we can call it the understanding gap.

Let's say you have lost someone you love from a tragedy. Imagine the unthinkable: you have lost a child, or you have lost a brother or a father in war, or you have lost a loved one in some terrible tragedy like a plane crash. Incidentally, I found out that one of my own extended family was in the plane that landed on the Hudson River recently. Emails to family members bring home the miracle on the Hudson and make it personal.

Or suppose that something has happened to you that is a complete surprise. You have received news from a biopsy that indicates you have cancer, or you have discovered that you have some disease that has no cure. The list can be long, but the point is that things happen to us all that defy understanding. Always, there is the question, "Why?" Always, there is

the impulse to think that God works on a *quid pro quo* basis, that if we follow the rules and do what is right, then we will escape tragedy.

But every generation must learn anew that no one is immune, and that we must learn to mind the understanding gap until the day we die. To live at all is to mind that gap. If we can't manage to mind the understanding gap, then we can't live at all, for we are all human, and humans never fully understand. This is what the Apostle Paul was talking about in the famous *1st* *Love Chapter*: *Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*<sup>2</sup>

This year's lectionary texts are taking us through the gospel of Mark. For three weeks now we have been on one chapter, reading story after story. It is important as we read these stories to remember that the writer of Mark has an agenda, and one way to think of that agenda is to imagine an early congregation of Christians that has endured tremendous, unexplained tragedy. They are experiencing persecution, and it appears that some of their best leaders have been singled out for torture and death. The congregation has been scattered and many are hiding in the hills around Rome. They wonder how this can happen to their best leaders? Why me? Why us? Why now?

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 12.

Now how does a congregation handle this? Mark seems to be written from that context, and what we get is a clear message that comes very early in the gospel (within the first eleven verses) that Jesus really is the Son of God, the Beloved. That message comes at his baptism. But as we read, we discover that that message is not clear at all to those who hear him, who are attracted to him, and who are just curious about him.

## II

The story today is a good example of Mark's ploy in keeping us a little bit confused. He tells about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. Now all mother-in-law jokes aside, this event attracted a large crowd. The text says in what has to be an exaggeration that *the whole city was gathered around*. If Peter's mother-in-law could be healed, then maybe my child with the cleft palate can be healed! If Peter's mother-in-law can be healed, then maybe my leprous brother can be healed. Word of a possible cure spreads quickly!

Then comes the shock. Instead of meeting these people and doing what we would expect him to do, we are told that Jesus sneaks out of town before dawn, and goes to a deserted place to pray. And when his disciples find him and tell him of all the people waiting to get help, he says, *Let's get*

out of here and go into the neighboring towns where I can preach, because that's what I came to do!+

To get the impact of this, imagine that a physician in Worcester discovers a cure for heart disease. Imagine that she lives just down the street from our church, and she can dispense a guaranteed cure for heart disease from her front door. One pill and you're cured! And it's free! No more cholesterol tests; no more heart attacks; no more pacemakers; no more by-pass surgery. It's all over! The greatest cause of death for men and women is cured!

That news would travel quickly in any city. I can imagine our streets completely clogged when the evening news broadcasts this. People from all over the world would show up. And then comes the shocker: this doctor is not at home. She slipped out in the middle of the night because she felt called to preach, and she can't take any more patients!

### III

That seems to be the kind of impact Jesus had! Why did he do such a thing? Why would he abandon the very people who needed him most in order to go off to a secluded place to pray, and then tell his disciples that they need to leave for other towns so that he can preach? I haven't the slightest idea. Mark certainly does not tell us. All we know is that we are

left with more questions than answers. We are intrigued by Jesus, but we can't explain Jesus. Years ago a famous New Testament scholar, C.H. Dodd, identified this characteristic of Jesus in Mark's gospel as the "Messianic secret." It is as if Jesus had a secret that no one could fathom. He had a drawing power, a magnetism, a wonderful appeal, but no one could truly understand everything about him. Mark seems to be saying, "You will love this Jesus, but you will never fully understand him."

Does that ring true? We live in a multi-cultural world that has a lot of different opinions about Jesus. Some reject him altogether, and some think they have got it all figured out. Beware of the latter. I am less concerned about understanding everything about Jesus as I am about following Jesus.

We certainly identify ourselves as Christian, not because we understand Jesus, but because we have decided to follow him as best we can. His way of sacrificial love seems the best for us. His inclusive caring for all people seems to us to be the best way to live a life. His emphasis on non-violence and active peacemaking, his honesty in the face of hypocrisy, his belief in the ability of ordinary people to act morally and for the good of all, his care for the poor and the sick and the hurting of the land remains an inspiration for us and has led to far-flung mission enterprises that help humanity and which we gladly support.

These are things we understand. Much about Jesus we do not understand. We live in the understanding gap. But in the long run, the point is not to have all the answers, but to have his life-giving presence among us to inspire us and strengthen us.

#### IV

C.S. Lewis had an argument for the existence of God that he called the argument from *desire*. We are all familiar with the old standard argument for the existence of God called the argument from *design*, most notably from the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is the argument for the existence of God based on the order, purpose, and design of nature.

However, C.S. Lewis said that our most powerful argument for the existence of God is not from *design*, but from our *desire* for God, our yearning, our longing for God. Here is the direct quote from Lewis: *“Just as the fact that we experience thirst is proof that we are creatures for whom the drinking of water is natural, so the fact that we desire an object that our natural world cannot supply suggests the existence of another, supernatural one.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Markos, *Lewis Agonistes: How C.S. Lewis Can Train Us To Wrestle With The Modern And Postmodern World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), p. 12.

You could say that our homesickness proves the existence of a home. So we can say about minding the understanding gap: to mind it means that somewhere there is understanding. To mind it is to recognize it, accept it, and to live with it until we *understand it better by and by*.