



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church and Student Center

1309 R Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 (402) 474-1979 [www.stmarks-episcopal.org](http://www.stmarks-episcopal.org)

**The Rev. Deacon Ryan Hall, Curate**  
**Sermon for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15**  
**Revised Common Lectionary Year C**  
**Sunday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

Old Testament	Psalm	New Testament Epistle	Gospel
Jeremiah 23:23-29	82	Hebrews 11:29-12:2	Luke 12: 49-56

### *“The Lion in the Courtyard”*

Ever wondered why we have a Lion in the Courtyard, and a winged one at that? I love that lion, sort of reminds me of Aslan from the Narnia Chronicles. But have you ever wondered what it means?

As I was preparing for the sermon this week, I found myself a little stumped. I have to admit I wrestled with the readings this week. From the snippet from the Gospel we got today, we get a saying from Jesus that isn't one of the comfortable standards, in fact it's almost frightening. “I came to bring fire to the earth...Do you think I come to bring peace to the earth? No! But rather division!” (Luke 12:49-50)

I was initially uncertain how exactly to preach on this Gospel passage. As I sat in my office with fifteen different open books on my desk trying to come up with an angle to preach on, I found myself staring out my window and looking at the Lion in the Courtyard. Combined with the fact that I had the opportunity to preach on Jeremiah, the Old Testament's version of Oscar the Grouch, I was tempted to not touch the gospel reading at all. But, something needs to be said.

What started off as a daydream about the Winged Lion got me to thinking about the meaning of it. The winged Lion has for most of Christian history been a symbol of the Evangelist, St. Mark, whom tradition tells us is the writer of the Gospel according to St. Mark. We have not been reading through St Mark this year because the way the three year lectionary cycle works is that every year, one of the Gospels is read through pretty much in sequential order. This year, we've been reading through Luke. Last year was Mark. When Advent comes around this year (Advent begins the Church year), we will start reading from Matthew. John is interspersed throughout the 3 year cycle.

The reason we take time through each year to read through one of the gospels is because each of the Gospels had its own take, or spin if you will, on the person of Jesus. Each gospel portrays Jesus differently. Just as if I were to ask 4 of you to write down your “take” on, say, Father Jerry's ministry here at this church, we would likely end up with four similar but different perspectives. That's not to say one of them would be “right” and the other three are “wrong.” They are just different perspectives of people who have had different experiences.

In that same way, when the early church was debating what books were going to be included in the “New Testament” canon there was, in fact, a later gospel which had combined and unified all 4 gospels into one coherent and non-conflicting account of Jesus. It was the early church's wisdom to include the 4 gospels and not a single unified gospel so that the subsequent Church through the ages would get a deeper and multi-faceted look at this Jesus of Nazareth whom the Church believes to be the Messiah. A one dimensional look at Jesus can't fully capture a person who is fully man and fully divine.

From the earliest days of Christianity, the 4 Evangelists (the authors of the 4 Gospels) have been depicted in icons and artwork in a very interesting way. Sometimes you will see these depictions on altar frontals or stoles, or maybe if they have a really ornate altar book (evangelarium). I couldn't really find a good example in the sacristy, but if you look at this icon that I misappropriated from Jerry's office, it demonstrates what I am talking about. The four creatures in the corner of this icon represent the 4 gospels.

The images originated from the earliest years of Christianity because they are derived from a passage from the book of Revelation (4:6-8) which, despite what our fundamentalist brothers want to tell you, is a message of hope. It's not a crystal ball where you can take out the newspaper and try and figure out who the Anti-Christ is like the Tim LaHaye “*Left Behind*” Novels. Nor is Revelation the rantings of some weird old 1<sup>st</sup> Century Hippie who's eaten too many psychedelic mushrooms. But that's a sermon for another day...

The reason why I bring this up is to re-emphasize that each gospel tells its own story about Jesus, which helps us interpret passages from the lectionary like we have today. If I am preparing for a sermon and get stumped on one of the passages, one of the first things I do is look at the snippet of the gospel in the context of the whole book, especially if it is one of the gospel readings.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the synoptic gospels because they share a lot in common and share a similar storyline. Then there is the gospel of John which is, as they say, a special case. The gospel of John really came into being from a different strand of 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity. John does its own thing with much more poetic prose and “I am” statements from Jesus. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus doesn't even teach parables in John because John portrays Jesus as a much more Socrates-like character, if you are familiar with the Greek philosopher Plato.

John doesn't tell much of a linear story, so for that reason, readings from John are interspersed among the 3 year lectionary cycle, especially around Easter and various other times. John is always portrayed at the Eagle for a very interesting reason. John is the only gospel that makes reference to Jesus existing prior to his birth. Thus, the flying Eagle to represent Jesus as part of the transcendent God.

St. Mark is symbolized by a Lion to represent Christ as King. The Lion is the King of the Beasts. Mark makes use of the Lion image several times, starting with John the Baptist preaching "like a lion roaring" at the beginning of his Gospel. Mark portrayed a Jesus who was action oriented. Jesus was always busy doing stuff. If people come to me and tell me they would like to start reading the bible for personal reflection and study, I point them to Mark because it is probably the most accessible book in the bible to read. It's almost like reading a movie script. Mark has this odd habit of using the adverb *immediately*. Jesus immediately healed the sick, Jesus immediately went to Jerusalem, Jesus *immediately* got out of the boat. I never got how you could immediately get out of a boat, but that's just how the writer of Mark wrote.

The Earliest church traditions tell us that Mark was likely living in Rome by the end of his life and aimed his work at Jewish people who lived in Rome. In fact, during the first century, there were more Jews who lived in Rome than the Holy Land itself. These Jews have lived there all their lives, and probably spoke little if any Aramaic. They likely appeared to be your average Roman citizens. Mark is interesting because he includes enough Aramaic words and names to appeal to Jewish audiences, but still portrays a Super-Jesus that would appeal to the Roman who was used to hearing people running around the Empire claiming to be a son of the gods. Mark portrays a Jesus who is the best debater, he's the best teacher, he's the best miracle worker...then the kicker at the end is that he dies in the worst way. He's always keeping his Roman readers from pigeon-holing Jesus as a Socrates-like person or a miracle worker etc., in order to keep their attention. He's the King, the Lion of it all, but the mighty lion who lies down with the sheep.

Then there is Matthew, which we will start reading come Advent of this year. There is a reason that Matthew is the first book in the New Testament. Matthew presents a very Jewish Jesus. The writer of Matthew makes a lot of references to the Old Testament, and really portrays Jesus as a Jewish rabbi concerned with the Torah and the Law. You really tackle Matthew if you have some knowledge of the Old Testament. "Be perfect under The Law, as I am perfect." Matthew portrays Jesus as teaching and debating in a very Rabbinical way - a lot of passionate arguing and answering questions with questions. Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, so Matthew's symbol is a man to represent the human nature of Christ, which is one of Matthew's major themes in portraying Jesus.

Then, there's Luke, which is the gospel for today. We've been reading through Luke since Advent of last year, with occasional Sunday readings from John. Early church traditions believed Luke to be a gentile (non-Jewish) follower of Jesus. Luke was believed to have been a 1<sup>st</sup> century physician, probably a Roman citizen, possibly from modern day Turkey. Luke writes in a very high-handed Roman way. For instance, the first 4 verses at the beginning of Luke are one big, long sentence... "most excellent Theophilus." Luke is very Roman, his audience is the Gentiles.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are believed to be written as companion pieces. Church tradition tells us that Luke was a Companion of Paul. Saint Paul, if you remember was big in the first century debate within the church as to whether Gentiles could become Christian without first becoming Jewish and following the Law. Luke had, very likely, a stake in that because Luke was a Gentile.

Luke was symbolized by a bull or a calf. Why? Well, the story in the Gospel of Luke begins and ends in the Temple. (cite verses) so the Bull symbol of St. Luke represents Christ to symbolize God's power and strength, but also that Luke is presenting Christ as the supreme priest and sacrifice in the temple so that Gentiles can be a part of God's chosen people.

That brings us back to the scripture reading today. What are we to make of this passage where Jesus is saying he wants to bring fire and "not peace, but division"? This passage is not a curse or a vengeful statement...just the opposite. Much like the Ox that the Church often portrays the Evangelist Luke as, Jesus is foreshadowing his own role as the Savior, willing to offer himself for us regardless of the consequences, so that all of us, even we Gentiles who were not born into the promises of God's chosen people, may join in the fire of the Holy Spirit and have a place at God's table.

AMEN.