This liturgical year the passion according to Mark will be proclaimed on Passion Sunday, while, as is the custom each year, John’s account will be read on Good Friday. Two more opposite portraits of Jesus’ passion can hardly be imagined. A preacher would do well not to conflate the two accounts into one coherent story. It is important to appreciate the differing perspectives that each offers.

The Passion According to Mark
Mark’s account is stark. It is sparse in details and in dialogue and depicts a very human Jesus. In Gethsemane, Mark’s Jesus falls prostrate on the ground, pleading with God. Across the Kidron Valley, he can see the temple looming before him, with its officials who want him dead. Roman soldiers, agents of the other force that wants to be rid of him, watch over the temple from the Fortress Antonia to the north. Face-to-face with death, Jesus is in deep distress and terror. He implores God three times to let “this cup” pass by him. There is no discernible response. His disciples, whom he asked to keep watch with him, are sound asleep. He knows if he turned to the east he could slip over the Mount of Olives and into the Judean desert and escape. But is that what God wants? There were many times when he had sure signs of God’s presence and divine reassurance that he was hearing and following God’s will. At his baptism he had tangible signs of God’s closeness: the very heavens seemed torn open (as in Ezek 1:1; Isa 64:1), he sensed the Spirit settling upon him, and he heard God’s voice delighting in him (Mark 1:9-11). In the desert times when he was tempted he sensed again God’s messengers ministering to him (Mark 1:12-13). At the climactic point, the transfiguration, where he discerns that his mission is to go to Jerusalem to confront directly the seat of Roman imperial power and the religious authorities, once again he has the assuring signs of God’s presence: a cloud overhead, just as the Israelites had in their desert journey (Exod 40:34-38); divine messengers, Moses and Elijah; and God’s approving voice (Mark 9:2-7). But in Gethsemane there is no cloud, no heavenly messenger, no divine voice—only silence and terror in the face of his impending horrific death. With

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nothing to go on except all his previous experiences of God’s faithful love, Jesus remains, entrusting himself to God. Without knowing how God would accomplish the divine will for life through his execution, Jesus remains in trust. When the arresting party comes for him, one of his own betrays him with a kiss, and then all flee, leaving him utterly alone (Mark 14:50).

Throughout his interrogation before the Sanhedrin, Jesus says not a word (Mark 14:61) until the high priest elicits a positive response to his query whether Jesus is the Messiah. Likewise, the Markan Jesus makes no response to Pilate (15:1-5) save “You say so” when the procurator asks if he is king of the Jews. The soldiers’ subsequent mocking of Jesus’ kingship is a vivid portrayal of the cruelty and humiliation Jesus endured.

In the crucifixion scene there is no relief from the abandonment that Jesus has felt since Gethsemane. He refuses the wine drugged with myrrh. He is stripped and taunted by passersby, the chief priests and scribes, and even the two criminals crucified with him. There is no “good thief” who speaks up for Jesus’ innocence as in Luke 23:39-43. Jesus has no last words with his mother and the Beloved Disciple as in the Gospel of John (19:25-27). The darkness that descends at midday reinforces the bleakness of the final moments of Jesus’ life. His last anguished cry, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (15:34), seems to go unanswered.

The Passion According to John

The Fourth Evangelist gives us a very different portrait of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus knows everything that is about to happen, and he seems to be the one directing the events. In the garden he does not throw himself on the ground and beg God to let the cup pass. Rather, it is the arresting party who falls to the ground when Jesus declares “I am.” In the interrogations before the high priest and before Pilate, Jesus does not remain silent. In fact, it seems he is the one conducting the trial of Pilate, who is guilty of not deciding for Jesus. There is no anguished cry from the cross; instead Jesus declares, “It is finished,” and hands over the spirit. Mark’s Jesus is a king only in the eyes of his followers; John’s Jesus is already reigning from the cross, a king for all to see.

Preaching Mark’s Passion

In Year B, a preacher has the opportunity to explore profound themes of suffering, God’s will, faithfulness, service, and denunciation of abuse. Mark’s portrait of the deeply human and abandoned Jesus opens the possibility of reflection on those times when we experience what John of the Cross called a “dark night of the soul.” Jesus’ trust in God when he could not see how God would bring blessing and life through his excruciating suffering can help us during our times of desolation. Like him, we are invited to give ourselves over to God, knowing that God is with us and is anguished, too, over our distress. God accompanies us through the pain even though we do not feel tangible signs of divine assistance.

Mark also brings into relief both the frailty of disciples who flee and the constancy of the women who never leave him. Women who anoint Jesus frame the whole passion narrative. First, a woman recognizes the proper time for the anointing of the king. In a gesture that replicates the breaking of his body and the pouring out of his blood, she breaks her priceless alabaster jar and pours out the precious ointment on Jesus’ head (14:3-9). At the other end of the passion account the Galilean women stand at a distance from the cross, they see where Jesus is buried, and three days later they go to the tomb to anoint the body. Their risky actions give us courage to stand in protest, silent or vocal, at the injustices done to the crucified peoples of our world. The women
disciples witness to the possibility that we, too, can be faithful, even though we are afraid or have failed. They urge us to encircle the abandoned ones in our day with signs of God’s faithful love.

Mark shows us, too, that there is no opposition between God’s will and Jesus’ will. Like all human beings, Jesus does not want to die. At the same time, he knows the deadly consequences of continuing to act on God’s saving will, a will he has been seeking and following throughout his whole life. In Mark’s account, it is evident that persecution and death happen not only to Jesus, but every disciple faces the possibility of such when they oppose dominating powers. Jesus had taught his disciples that in following him, they, too, must deny themselves and take up their cross (8:34). As the gospel culminates, it becomes clear that Jesus is not asking persons who are abused to continue to be beaten down. Nor is he asking anyone to accept abuse or injustice passively. Many battered women misunderstand Jesus’ saying to mean that they need to endure abuse as their way of carrying the cross with Jesus. They replicate Jesus’ silence before his accusers, not objecting to the abuse inflicted on them. Mark shows, on the other hand, that denial of self is the willingness to place the common good at the center instead of one’s own desires. It implies that disciples are empowered persons able to make choices to serve others. Mark also shows that “taking up the cross” refers to a very specific kind of suffering, that is, the negative consequences to which disciples are willing to expose themselves, those that come as a direct result of being Jesus’ follower. All through the gospel, Jesus is not silent in the face of injustice or abuse; rather, he denounces it and acts to rectify it. His silence at his trial can be seen not as passive compliance but as silent protest or as a refusal to engage in an exchange with representatives of a corrupt system.

The Ultimate Mystery

Mark ensures that we see that persecution, and even death, is not the last word. The empty tomb assures us that there is life to the full beyond the grave. The Gospel of Mark ends, as it began, on a note of profound mystery and awe. Like the women who are filled with trembling and amazement (16:8), we can never, finally, explain in logical terms the meaning of the passion. Ultimately, all we can do is to abandon ourselves into the unfathomable love of Holy Mystery in the footsteps of the Risen One, trusting in this transformative power at work within us.