

Jesus groans: Mark 7:24-37

Jesus does not serve the vague “God of everybody.” He serves the scandalously particular God of Israel.

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

Nearly four decades ago, Duke Ellington teamed up with master bassist Ray Brown to record *This One's for Blanton*, a live performance anthology of Ellington standards. The original vinyl disc has become a prized collectible among jazz fans, not only because of the legendary status of the musicians and the inescapable power of the music but also because the microphones were positioned so close to the performers that one can actually hear the sounds they make in the physical effort of creating the music. One enthusiast described the experience: “Ray Brown is right there across the living room fighting with the bass to get out every note. You hear grunts and fret board buzz. You can hear Duke moving around in his chair and even breathing.”

Something similar is at work in the Gospel of Mark. Mark records the compelling music of the gospel as performed by Jesus, but positions the microphones close to the action, perhaps too close for some dainty tastes, and along with Jesus' teachings and deeds, parables and miracles, he captures the brute physicality of the gospel being performed. In Mark we hear the tone of anger rise in Jesus' voice on occasion. We hear him heave a groan when he heals a deaf man and a deep sigh when he confronts the Pharisees. At Gethsemane, beneath Jesus' prayer there are unmistakable rustlings of distress and agitation, and on the cross Jesus does not go quietly, but with a loud cry and a violent expelling of breath.

These guttural sounds are evidence of work being performed, of hard physical labor. The ministry of Jesus is no mere mental exercise. Like a carpenter forcing a plane across the resistant grain of a plank or a mechanic muscling a wrench against a stubbornly rusted bolt, Jesus groans as he throws himself into doing God's work.

The groans and sighs are also the sounds of combat. The Markan Jesus is not a debonair sage who putters around Palestine uttering savvy bon mots to delight the peasantry and confound landowners. This Jesus has a larger and more urgent mission, namely to do battle with the demonic powers that rage against human life, to defang the snake coiling itself around God's creation and all of God's people. It is no exaggeration to say that every story in Mark is an exorcism, a casting out of the demons infesting people and institutions. In every encounter Jesus perceives humanity as terrorized by the demonic, and with the groans and cries of trench warfare he takes up the cause of liberation.

When, for example, the disciples wake Jesus to tell him they are frightened by a storm thrashing the sea around their boat, Jesus knows that this is no mere storm, so he does not simply "still the storm"; he "rebuke[s] the wind," he exorcises it—that is, he literally denounces the hell out of it. When the Markan Jesus heals a deaf man with impaired speech, he does not caress the man's face but thrusts his fingers into the man's ears, spits, groans and orders the old serpent to unblock the man's hearing and to liberate his tongue.

In Mark, Jesus is God's human being in pitched battle with forces whose "craft and power are great." Not every contest goes Jesus' way; he sometimes loses the fight. When Jesus goes to Nazareth, the hometown crowd is so full of offense and unbelief that "he could do no deed of power there," and Jesus limps off, on that day at least, without a victory.

Defeat looms as a possibility in the story of the Syrophenician woman too. The woman's little daughter has a demon, the woman begs for help, and Jesus is strangely resistant. Many are offended by this story. Why is Jesus reluctant to heal a gentile? Why is he rude to the woman? Some say that the woman teaches Jesus a lesson in tolerance, that she wins her healing by opening his eyes to a larger vision of diversity. But the truth is deeper. Jesus does not serve the vague "God of everybody." He serves the scandalously particular God of Israel. He can be faithful to Israel's God only by being loyal to God's Israel, and if Israel's Messiah is to cast out this demon from a gentile girl, it will take not enlightenment but a miracle. This gentile woman perceives that Jesus is pushing with all his might, groaning against the rusty bolt of the demonic, but when it comes to her daughter, his strength alone, as it is in Nazareth, cannot break it loose. So she speaks a frail, desperate human word that by God's grace becomes *the* word. By doing so, the woman, unlike the unbelieving Nazarenes, joins in faith the work of Jesus. She places her hands

alongside his, and together they push with all their might. The old bolt breaks free, and the healing power of Israel's God joyously flows to the bedside of a gentile girl.