

**THE CONFIDENCE TRAP – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF MARK  
MARK 1:9-18  
SEPTEMBER 11, 2016**

One of the books I read this summer was *The Confidence Trap* by David Runciman. David Runciman is a professor of political theory at Cambridge University. This 2013 book was about the merits and missteps of democracy. In this book, he lays out the uncertain future democracies will face and how they are both well-equipped to overcome and succumb to them.

Here is a short synopsis of this book. Runciman makes the case that democracies are the best form of government, but because they are large, unwieldy and occasionally tethered to the tyranny of the majority, they end up steering one of two directions, recklessness or resignation. Because it all seems too big to fail, people embrace recklessness in our economic, ecological and geopolitical actions because we always bounce back. There is nothing to fear but fear itself because America always recovers.

The other end of the spectrum is resignation. Because we are so big and unwieldy and because we always seem to go up and to the right, then malaise founded on fatalism creeps in. The ship is going down the river one way or the other. It's best to just keep your nose down and hold on for the ride.

Recklessness or resignation, all of this built on what Runciman calls the confidence trap. Because of the things we think we know, it can lead to ideas and behaviors that are wildly divergent from what this country was not meant to be, reckless. Or because we have little confidence in the ability for change, we sit on the sidelines and do very little; resignation.

I was reading all of this while I was reading the Gospel of Mark this summer. I could not come up with a better way to read this gospel. This book is riddled with confidence traps. People who are reckless because of what they think they know. People who are resigned because of so little confidence in what God can do. The theme of misplaced confidence in

the Gospel of Mark became glaring to me as I read it because of the composition of the book.

It begins with Mark 1:1, the introduction of Jesus as the Son of God. It ends with a centurion claiming Jesus as the Son of God. Everything in between is people getting it wrong. People questioning who Jesus is. People say, "What is this? A new teaching?" Pharisees react and say, "Why does this fellow talk like that?" Disciples say, "Who is this man? Even the wind and seas obey him." Priests ask Jesus by what authority he does what he does. The Pharisees think Jesus is in cahoots with Satan. Herod thinks he is John the Baptist resurrected. Some people think he is Elijah.

It begins with a statement of who he is. It ends with a statement of who he is, and everything in the middle is wrong answers and misunderstandings. Even right in the middle after declaring Jesus as the Christ in one breath, Peter completely unravels and rebukes the man he has called king in the next. In comparison to every other gospel, Mark is by far the one filled with the most mess and mystery, the most exposition of people swinging for the fences and striking out.

I think it all hinges on a confidence trap. People who are far too certain of what they think they know. And people who have little to no confidence in God and what he can do. It leads to the same results, recklessness and resignation. From now until Christmas, we will be studying the first half of the Gospel of Mark. We are going to explore the spectrum of the confidence trap because some of you here today need to be stretched and challenged. You have a certainty about God that borders on recklessness. You are adamant about what you know and how it applies to politics, relationships and finances. Your worldview is nice and tidy and everything has a home and an answer. I think Jesus has some questions for you. Some of you are teetering on the brink because your experiences or your mind have sapped any inkling of a trustworthy and powerful God. You have a hard time believing in the audacity of a risen savior. You have trouble believing in miracles. You have trouble believing in an active God who cares about your life, and you might have veered over into resignation. I think Jesus has some questions for you.

The great beauty of SFC is the eclectic faith landscape of our church. We have people whose faith is in all different seasons and on all points of the theological spectrum. My hope is to offend all of you. My hope is that wherever you are, Jesus gives you whatever you need. For some of you, in the best way possible, I hope your confidence is shaken. For some of you, I hope your confidence takes off. I hope we find answers and discover new questions. I hope the sun shines brightly and clarity beams through. I hope the fog of doubt rolls in and makes you wrestle with whom God really is.

Football season is kicking off today and one thing is certain. Nothing is certain. Unlike other sports, football has some of the best parity because of a few things: the salary cap is designed to not let one team outspend all others, injuries regularly happen that change teams trajectories and there are only 16 games, many of which hinge on one or two plays that can change the scope of a season. All of this to say, it is one of the most unpredictable sports. Let me ask you a question, “Does that keep people from making NFL predictions?” Goodness no. It’s not just sports. Economic markets that can quickly plummet or spike based on weather, corruption, innovation and chance. It is wildly unpredictable but people still try. In a recent book, *Chaos Monkeys*, the author who previously worked at Twitter and Facebook says that we like to envision Silicon Valley as a place of meritocracy and genius, but it is often luck, happenstance and countless attempts that often yield success.

Yet we are drawn to those who pontificate and prognosticate, those with great certainty who can make sense of our world for us. Those who can speak boldly and loudly about who will win, what stocks to invest in and what company to back. But hindsight proves it is often luck, often wrong and misguided, yet like a moth to the flame, we keep going back. Seeking certainty. Seeking someone who will fill in the blanks for us and offer us the answers we seek. Why do we keep getting sucked into the confidence trap? Why are we lured in with the promise of certitude?

### *Mark 1: 9-13*

In quick succession, John is introduced and then Jesus is introduced. Things move quickly in the Gospel of Mark. Over 40 times, the word “immediately” is used. It pivots from one episode to the next. John is baptizing people in the desert for a baptism of repentance. He is watching as one ne’er do well after another is confessing their sins and being washed clean. People in town who everybody knows are sinners are coming and getting washed and then his cousin shows up, about whom he has heard the stories. He heard about the birth in a manger, the flight to Egypt, the wise men, the temple at age 12 and countless things in between. He refers to Jesus as one who will come after me who is far more powerful, one whose shoes he isn’t fit to tie, one who will baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Then that guy comes to him for baptism. After this long line of prodigious sinners, comes the guy John has proclaimed is powerful and will baptize with the Holy Spirit. You can see the problem here, right? In other gospels, John questions Jesus here. He says. “You should be baptizing me. Why am I baptizing you?” Jesus only gives a vague answer about it fulfilling righteousness. He doesn’t say why really. Thus beginning for John what I am sure was a long journey of questions for Jesus, a long series of subverted expectations. Not long after, John is imprisoned by his arch nemesis, Herod. Later he will be executed by this man. You have to imagine him sitting in prison wondering why Jesus doesn’t do something. Why his life turned out this way. At a later point, he sends people to Jesus to ask him straight out, “Are you the messiah? Give me certainty on this.” Jesus does not answer yes or no. He says, “The lame walk. The blind see. People are being healed. Report that back to John.” That’s not the answer to the question.

Right after this, Jesus is tempted in the desert for 40 days. We have this story in hindsight, but you have to imagine it then and there. If I were telling the story of a God-man incarnate among us, I wouldn’t paint him as one who would vaguely even be able to consider the temptation of power, glory and a shortcut to earthly rule. And yet, Jesus sat in that space. Wrestled with his mission. Wrestled with what it meant to follow God. It would not be called temptation if it didn’t have some type of appeal.

Right off the bat, I want you to see the challenge in these passages. This man who is introduced as the Son of God, is seemingly doing some very ungodlike things, being baptized and counted with sinners. Being tempted with things like power and earthly glory. And then we come to this.

*Mark 1:14-15*

In quick succession, Jesus begins his ministry by preaching. Twice it says he is proclaiming the euangelion. Gospel. Good news. You might be quick to say, "That's not strange or subversive, Gabe." That's the whole point. Jesus came to bring the euangelion, and that's right, but let me point something out. Jesus has not died or been resurrected, yet he still feels confident in proclaiming the gospel.

If you asked a large group of evangelicals, "What is the gospel?" They will have been trained to say, "Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again so that I can be made right with God, or Jesus died in my place so that I can be forgiven." This is all hinged upon praying a prayer and inviting Jesus into your heart, or something along those lines. So what in the world is Jesus doing proclaiming the good news when he hasn't done those things yet. Shouldn't he be saying, "Hang around and watch everything I do and then you can accept me into your heart."

If there is anything we should be certain of, it's the gospel, the good news of Jesus. The problem is we have distilled it down and turned it into something small and systematic and transactional and strictly personal. All things it was never meant to be. And yet millions of people are confident that they have received the gospel because they prayed a prayer and they believe Jesus is the savior. It's something they know. Can you find a passage where Jesus says this is the gospel? The problem is now that all churches and resources are highly dependent on teaching people this gospel. God is going to send you to hell, but Jesus died in your place. If you believe that he saved you and agree to these theological tenets, then you

will be saved and have eternal life. Jesus never said to pray a prayer. He never talked about inviting him into your heart. What did Jesus say to do?

*Mark 1:16-20*

Follow me. Say what I say. Live like I live. Love like I love. Give how I give. Heal like I heal. Forgive like I forgive. That's the kingdom; a place where all people are trying to look like Jesus and that makes it look down here like it does up there. As we go through this series, we will keep coming back to this. Faith is not an invitation to right belief. It is an invitation to follow. So how did following a revolutionary Messiah become so mundane? How did living a wild generous life for the kingdom get distilled down to praying a prayer that saves you after you die?

Let me give you a quick history lesson on salvation understanding. Starting thirty years after Jesus, four different men, two of whom were not a part of the 12 disciples, wrote what they saw in the life of Jesus. In the early church for the first 200 years or so, people were tethered to following Jesus living like Jesus. When the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325 AD, things began to change. The human institutions and human power structures began to normalize and sterilize the gospel. As the centuries passed and the Roman Catholic Church grew in power and cash, the church became more important than Jesus. The church turned faith into a system. Following Jesus was hard, and they made it easier. If you sin, do these acts of contrition and be restored. Before long, it was like the Old Testament sacrificial system in new clothing. In the middle ages, a debate about the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus leads to something called the atonement theory. This leads to some verbiage we know today of Jesus dying on the cross to pay for our sins. Then the Reformation takes place some 500 years ago. Martin Luther pushes forward with his solas and promotes the idea of grace and not the cyclical system of sacrifices. Since the Reformation, the Catholic Church has continued and the Protestants have subdivided into thousands of denominations. This is based upon different ways of believing about Jesus. This is based on liturgical practices. This is based on certainty of who

Jesus is, and it has led further away from the following of a wild messiah in love and generosity and further into quibbling over minutiae and biblical interpretations.

How did Christianity start as an audacious radical revolution and end up today with thousands of people arguing about certain beliefs? It's the certainty trap. It is trusting in theology and not a savior. It's putting your faith in what you know and not who you belong to. Let me show you a quick video that shows you our error in brief.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHJS6Kaxv9g>

For millennia, we have been falling the wrong way. Trusting in theology and belief and not Jesus. Why would anyone put their faith in theology and belief over Jesus? It's the certainty trap, the allure of seeing the whole journey without having to go on it. It's the appeal of having certainty without having to take risks, without having to wrestle or struggle. Jesus' invitation was simple, follow me. But who knows where that leads. He might lead you to love people you aren't comfortable with. He might lead you to give away more money than you are comfortable with. He might lead you to forgive more than you are comfortable with. It is much easier to distill faith down to a singular proposition; the good news is that Jesus died on the cross for my sins and rose again so that I could go to heaven. What if the good news is much bigger than that? What if it is an invitation to follow? To discover more and more of who God is? To have more and more chances to see him and do his work in this world?

Some of you may have noticed a new insert into the worship guide. I hope you like it because it will be incredibly short lived. This will be the first and last time I offer a fill in the blank study guide. While I know some may like this as a pedagogical tool, I think it is insufficient for spiritual endeavors. If you were listening and trying to follow along today, I'm sorry, but I don't have all the answers. If we are honest, no one knows exactly what the baptism of Jesus means. If we are honest, we don't know exactly what the temptation of Jesus means. If we are honest, the Gospel of Jesus is much bigger than one fill in the blank. I

will do you a favor though; I do have the answer for the last blank. Faith doesn't always work nicely by filling in the \_\_\_\_\_. The answer is blanks.

I grew up with pastors who filled in the blanks for me. There are pastors here in town that thrive with fill-in-the-blank preaching, and it is done with no malice. But I don't like it because it reinforces the certainty trap. Answers about God are fill-in-the-blank. He is small and manageable. It can lead to recklessness for those who are intractable and immovable because they have already filled in the blank on a spiritual topic and no further growth is needed. I prefer to accompany my sermons with questions, to leave you a chance to wrestle and grow. To occasionally doubt and have to dig deeper. Richard Rohr says it well:

*Whenever I think there's a perfect pattern, further reading and study reveal an exception. Whenever I want to say "only" or "always," someone or something proves me wrong. My scientist friends have come up with things like "principles of uncertainty" and dark holes. They're willing to live inside imagined hypotheses and theories. But many religious folks insist on answers that are always true. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking that we are people of "faith"! How strange that the very word "faith" has come to mean its exact opposite.*

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6631954>

At the conclusion of *The Confidence Trap*, David Runciman summarizes the predicament of democracy, which could easily be the predicament of faith, by comparing our journey to traveling down it as a fast moving river.

*We are afloat on a rickety raft. The river is wide and fast moving, but it is also hemmed in by the banks on either side. It is heading out to sea, but the sea is a long way off and no one is thinking about that. The waters are choppy and there are hazards ahead. How do you steer? If you fix on a point on the shore, you risk losing sight of what is in front of you. If you fix on the eddies and currents in front of your craft, you risk losing sight of where you are heading.*



*There is no easy way to do it, just constant back and forth. Without the back and forth, the ship will eventually go down.*

There are some wild waters in front of us. I hope you are ready for the journey.