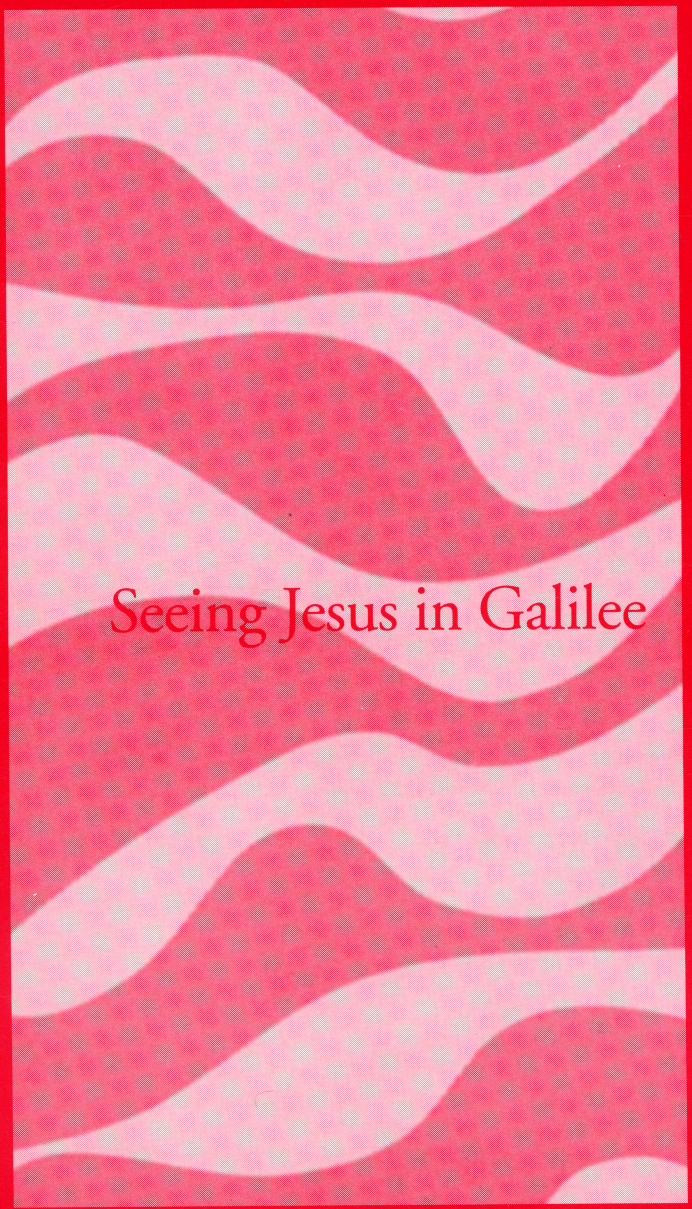
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Seeing Jesus in Galilee

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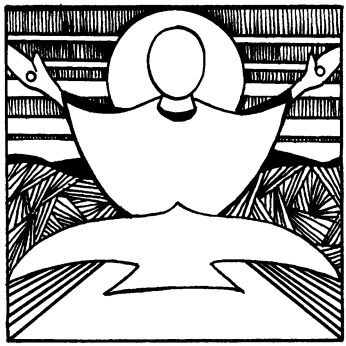
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Seeing Jesus in Galilee

All of us live East of Eden and in third-millennium Galilees. The rawness of life East of Eden has been manifest in my life—World War II and the Holocaust, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and the brothers Kennedy, the long and drawn-out Missouri Synod struggle that led to the necessity of Seminex, played out against the background of Vietnam and the unraveling of the Nixon presidency, 9/11, and the destruction of a jerry-built New Orleans and the incredible slowness of governmental response to human suffering there. Someone once said that if it were not for the water outside, the stench inside Noah's ark would have been unbearable. Thus always, East of Eden.

The Gospel of Mark heads toward its end with these words: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Jesus' ministry had been carried on largely in Galilee. There were the fulfillments, the paradoxes, and the mysteries of the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. There in Galilee—in all the places that you and I have lived—is still experienced the breaking in of the kingdom, rebirth, healing and feeding, catching sight of Jesus, just as he told us. Ahead of us in the 2005–2006 church year, where Jesus has already gone ahead, in the year of Mark, in our sermons, in the transformed lives of our members, in peace-making, in justice-making, in forgiving, and in witnessing, we will see again, sometimes almost as if for the very first time, the good news. As one of our writers puts it: The crucifixion of Christ is the place one looks in order to glimpse what can be seen of the God who remains hidden from us in the stuff of this earth and the unceasing nonsense that goes on around us. There are no resurrection appearances in Mark—only an invitation to head off toward Galilee.

Audrey West points out that Jesus' revelation of the reign of God in Mark is characterized by incongruity, mystery, and surprise. Six mysteries point to the nature of Jesus' identity in Mark: the mystery of baptism, the mystery of teaching, the mystery of power, the mystery of suffering, the mystery of boundaries, and the mystery of absence. The verbal links between baptism and crucifixion remind Mark's hearers that baptism into God's reign is a baptism into death. We too are called to die to the world's ways. In Christ, according to Mark, the people of God have a strong ally in the cosmic battle against everything that separates us from God and from one another. Do we help others lay claim to the power that comes from the reign of God, or do we help

them relinquish their power that comes from the world's rule? A prime mystery: Jesus alleviates suffering but must himself suffer and die. Death on the cross is the result, not the purpose, of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' ministry shatters boundaries and creates frightening new borders of inclusion. In Mark the good news is that Jesus is "ahead of you" in the life that the followers are called to embrace. There you will see him! The messenger at the tomb tells us how to preach: fearlessly, with eyes wide open, with a direction (Go!), and with a responsibility to tell.

Frederick Niedner asks: What, if anything, could we say that Jesus' death accomplished or changed if all we had for clues came from Mark? A ransom for many? Blood poured out for many? A guide for living in hostile or perilous circumstances? Much scholarly discussion of Mark has concluded that Christology, not soteriology, is the major concern of this gospel. The centurion in Mark's account of the crucifixion is the first human being unaided by demons to discern and declare Jesus' identity as son of God. Jesus' identity becomes clear not through all the wonders he did in Galilee but through his dying. The death of Jesus cures blindness, and the cross serves as the "place" for finding life in losing it. In the final baptism with which he is baptized (1:9–11; 10:38–40) and in the cup that he himself drinks new in the kingdom of God (10:38–40 and 14:24–25), Jesus goes to the cross, where God's reign and God's glory appear. The crucifixion of Christ is the place one looks in order to glimpse what can be seen of the God who remains hidden from us in the stuff of this earth and the unceasing nonsense that goes on around us. Daily, we learn through such dying, the heavens are rent for us, and there hangs the Holy One—the ruler, messiah, and beloved, with all us bandits crucified on every side.

Barbara Reid, O.P., offers interpretive moves for preachers to tell the story of the passion in Mark in ways that liberate and that help believing communities conform their lives authentically to the crucified and risen Christ. The passion of Jesus is interpreted by her against the backdrop of the challenges and suffering of Christian women in Chiapas, Mexico. Many of them had accepted the suffering they endured from their husbands, fathers, and others as their way of carrying the cross. Abusers and victims sometimes derive theological approbation for unjust patterns of domination from the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. But in the passion story Mark situates Jesus' suffering and death within God's saving will for fullness of life for all. The cross refers not to suffering in general but to the suffering that is the direct consequence of proclaiming good news to the poor and living in fidelity to the vision of the reign of God. Self-denial is an invitation to resist putting one's energies toward self-aggrandizement. The silence of Jesus at his

trial can reinforce the passive submission of abused persons, or it can inspire silent protest of injustice, a very effective tool to confront oppression. For many women in Chiapas the cross no longer signifies abuse to which they must silently submit; now they understand it to mean the struggles and hardships they endure in order to learn and proclaim the gospel. The story of Mary Magdalene who left her home to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and tomb gives courage to contemporary women to do similarly extraordinary things for the sake of God's mission.

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To *Currents* subscribers:

We deeply regret the mixup in the editorial of the current December issue, which lacks its first page and reprints a page from the October issue! At the same time we greatly appreciate that our Printing company has taken responsibility for this error and agreed to send out at their expense this corrected copy. We all struggle to make *Currents* as attractive and accurate as possible, but accidents do happen.

Blessings on your Advent and Christmas.

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them relinquish their power that comes from the world's rule? A prime mystery: Jesus alleviates suffering but must himself suffer and die. Death on the cross is the result, not the purpose, of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' ministry shatters boundaries and creates frightening new borders of inclusion. In Mark the good news is that Jesus is "ahead of you" in the life that the followers are called to embrace. There you will see him! The messenger at the tomb tells us how to preach: fearlessly, with eyes wide open, with a direction (Go!), and with a responsibility to tell.

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David D. Grafton outlines the Pax Romana, which was the context for the earliest Christian mission, and contrasts it with the Pax Americana that prevails today. The advantages Paul claimed through his citizenship are quite different from the liabilities that come with an American passport in many parts of the world today. If North American missionaries wish to provide a faithful witness to the gospel, they must recognize the challenges and problems that come with their association with an imperial power and begin to develop a new mission paradigm. The story of two short-term missionaries in Afghanistan provides a parade example of how not to conduct oneself on the mission field today.

Carrie L. Lewis offers narrative insights into the crucifixion account in Luke. The apparent vulnerability of Jesus on the cross calls into question how this one whom God sent can possibly save the people. Jesus asks for forgiveness for those who crucified him and shows that he still has power in the last moments of life by offering the promise of paradise to the evildoer on the cross. Jesus did not lose hope but trusted in God even in his hopeless situation. In the moment of his greatest vulnerability, when those with earthly power show that they have the power to condemn Jesus to death, God saves Jesus, and through God's saving of Jesus offers salvation to others.

Ralph W. Klein preached on ministry at the opening service for the Institute for Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso earlier this year. In many ways the vision for ministry outlined in Matt 10:24–42 is in radical discontinuity with the ministry to which we are called today. The gap between the first and the twenty-first centuries is matched by the chasm that separates one ministry in the church from another, or by the differences between ministry now and what it was twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. Ministry today is trust in God and God's future, confession of God's acts in Jesus through word and deed, living toward God's future, letting go of material possessions or of fear of what others might do to us, and placing loyalty to God above all other loyalties. God's "I am with you" in the splash of the font, the tastes of the holy supper, and the liturgical work of the people makes such ministry possible.

Ralph Quere writes an extensive and enthusiastic review of a recent book on evangelism: *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution.* This book has seminary professors and deans calling the church to the evangelistic dimensions of its mission. One essay adds the words "for the sake of the world" to the usual "justification by grace on account of Christ through faith." Practical evangelistic advice includes modeling, mentoring, small-group conversation, and public testimonies in worship services. The call for "a new culture of evangelizing" is a call for a new reformation. A Postscript reflects on the evangelistic power of the sacraments.

nothing of the world so that all might know that no one human being is inferior to others. To disregard, despise, or exploit anyone created in the image of God is an offense against the Creator. For Hispanic Lutherans the nature of the Word made flesh in the life of a *mestizo* and homeless Jew mirrors their own self-understanding in many ways. In serving their neighbors with acts of justice the seminary communities in Austin embody the image of God in the world. Their relationships of care and concern for others are modeled on the life and praxis of Jesus the *mestizo* Jew of *nepantla.*

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Note: Survivors of Herbert T. Mayer include his wife of 54 years, Arline; two daughters, Tedra Britton of Cherokee Village, Ark., and Virginia Pfrimmer of Lewisville, N.C.; a son, Thomas Mayer of Moline, Ill.; and four grandchildren. Oh, what sweet imprisonment to a revolutionary promise! What a rebuke to those who seem to thrive on naysaying, despair, division, and the past, or who are imprisoned by memories of the good old days! In our cells, standing on tiptoes, we wait for tomorrow because. . . .

Preaching the Mysteries of the Reign of God

Audrey West
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

To preach Christ from the Gospel of Mark is to preach paradox and mystery. If it is the case that the gospel creates a world through which we experience the reign of God, this Gospel's world is a strange one indeed: shocking, incongruous, even irrational. Announced by the proclamation of a wild man in the desert, Jesus bursts onto the scene without so much as a visiting wise man or shepherd, or even an angelic host singing glory to God. He is marked by the Spirit at his baptism, only to be set on course to his death. Jesus is called "Teacher," and yet his pedagogical preference for cryptic parables results more often in perplexity than in clarity. His demonstration of power—over nature, illness, and demons—prompts wonder and amazement among his followers but does not give the full story of his identity or his mission. He relieves the suffering of others yet teaches his followers that suffering will be their fate. Even after the crucifixion, instead of appearing at a post-resurrection reunion with his disciples, he is absent from the scene, leaving the women to flee his tomb in terror.[1] According to the Gospel of Mark, at almost every turn, Jesus' revelation of the reign of God is characterized by incongruity, mystery, and surprise.

In this essay I outline some of the mysteries inherent in Mark's picture of Jesus and reflect upon how that picture impacts the task of preaching. Who is Jesus according to Mark, and how might the contours of this image help (or frustrate) those who preach Mark for the church? The sketch offered here assumes that Jesus' identity and purpose, as well as his demands on his followers, are reflected in his initial proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15 NRSV). The challenges for preaching from Mark's Gospel are heightened with the realization that Jesus' ministry in this Gospel reveals the mystery of the eschatological reign of God but does not guarantee its reception. Examination of Jesus' proclamation and practices will show us how preaching that remains true to Mark's depiction of Jesus transforms distinctions between insiders and outsiders, reverses the status quo, and might leave many hearers mystified.

We begin with a brief look at the opening of Mark and how that opening sets the stage for the characterization of Jesus that develops over the course of the narrative. Next, we focus on six paradoxes or mysteries that point us to the nature of Jesus' identity in Mark: the mystery of baptism, the mystery of teaching, the mystery of

1. This assumes the short ending of Mark, at 16:8.

power, the mystery of suffering, the mystery of boundaries, and the mystery of absence.

The following reflections are only suggestive, intended to prompt further questions rather than assert answers. I am dependent upon the careful work of others whose range of vision is wider-angled than mine.[2] I approach the task from my perspective as a seminary professor who, although trained in the arts of ministry, finds herself standing more often in front of a chalkboard than behind a pulpit. Let the reader understand!

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ

My former homiletics professor, David Bartlett, asserts that "the safest—and most daring—way to discern and proclaim God in Christ is to see and proclaim through the lens of specific biblical texts."[3] This means that whenever we preach from the Gospel of Mark, *Mark's* version of the gospel ought to shape our proclamation.[4]

To be sure, we preach Christ, not the text; yet, in every interaction with this (or any) particular biblical text we may experience a fresh encounter with Christ. It makes a difference, for instance, that Mark contains nothing about the preexistent Logos who, in the beginning, was with God and who was God and who became flesh and lived among us (John 1:1, 14). Mark's prelude to Jesus' ministry is silent about Joseph the carpenter and his betrothal to a young woman named Mary; it says nothing about a miraculous birth celebrated by shepherds (only in Luke) or sages from the East (only in Matthew). Instead we are thrust directly into the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (1:1),[5] immediately into a cycle of prophecy and fulfillment, from Isaiah, through John the Baptist, to Jesus—who announces the gospel of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15).

The narrative style of Mark mirrors Jesus' actions in Mark—a singleminded, undistracted urgency of preaching, practicing, and embodying the mysteries of the reign of God. The eschatological battle foretold in Israel's scriptures is already won, even as its final consummation is not yet complete. Of this Mark seems sure. Mark's abrupt beginning illustrates the radical inbreaking of God's *basileia* (kingdom, rule, reign)[6] and emphasizes the character of Jesus' ministry and the good news that he brings: God's rule is established on Earth.

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2. Especially have I learned a great deal from my colleague David Rhoads, whose engaging work on narrative and the oral performance of the Gospel of Mark has rekindled my interest in this Gospel. See David Rhoads, et. al., *Mark as Story*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

3. David Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 151.

4. The lectionary cycle for this year includes several opportunities to preach from sequential passages in Mark's narrative; e.g., Epiphany 3–7 (Mark 1:14–2:12); Proper 11–16, 25–30, 31–33.

5. The phrase υἱοῦ θεοῦ (Son of God) is omitted in some early manuscripts, although many English translations retain it. The text-critical issues are complicated and are not addressed here.

6. The *basileia* is not the place where a king (or queen) rules but rather the reign or rule. When Jesus proclaims the *basileia* of God, he is saying something about the character of God's reign and its establishment on Earth. See, e.g., John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 71; also Brian Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 51.

Six mysteries exemplify this reality and lie at the heart of Mark's portrait of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The mystery of baptism: the baptism of Jesus leads to new life . . . but only through death

Mark's careful composition of Jesus' baptism rivals that of a movie director who wants to ensure that the setup of a shot captures the underlying truth of the scene. The same rapid-fire intensity of events at his baptism and the beginning of his ministry is paralleled by the events with which Jesus' earthly ministry ends. At his baptism, Jesus rises up from the Jordan river and immediately sees the heavens ripped open (*schizo*). The Spirit (*pneuma*) plummets into him, and a heavenly voice declares "this is *my* Son" (1:9–11). This fusion of action and vision inaugurates Jesus' earthly ministry and previews its end. In the end, it is Jesus' voice crying out in agony to the very God who had marked him with the Spirit and appointed him as God's own child. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34) "My" Son; "my" God. The relationship established and affirmed by God at the beginning is sustained by Christ to the end, even in his moment of abandonment on the cross.[7]

With his last breath (*ekpneō*, from the same root as *pneuma*), another rupture occurs. This time, not the heavens but the curtain in the Temple is ripped apart (*schizo*), and the centurion declares "Truly, this man was Son of God" (15:39). The verbal links between baptism and crucifixion frame Jesus' earthly ministry and remind Mark's hearers that baptism into God's reign is a baptism into death.[8] For Mark, to confess Jesus as Son of God is to recognize that Jesus is known most fully when he is known as the crucified one.[9]

Jesus' baptism and the call it represents are a two-edged sword for the preacher, who must discern where to let the accent fall—on life? on death? As dramatic as these baptismal events are, and as much as some may long for equally dramatic experiences of their own, death is a difficult word to preach among those who benefit from their position in a dominant culture of materialism, comfort, and privilege. This was true at the time of Jesus, and it is true now. People find it much easier to refer to "my" God as the God who makes life easier and more comfortable, not the God whose call leads to the cross. Mark reminds his readers that baptism is a radical, countercultural activity, an outward and visible sign that we, too, are called (and empowered) to die to the world's ways. Jesus is claimed by God, marked by the Spirit, and propelled into a ministry that leads inexorably to his death. So, too, are we. At the same time, the events at the Jordan River represent a radical call to *life* within the rule of God. Just as baptism leads to death on the cross, so also does death lead to resurrection: rising from the waters, raised to new life. "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."[10]

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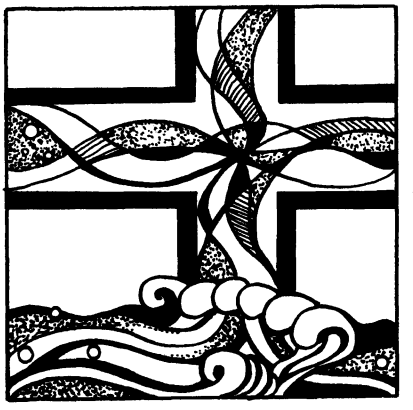
7. "It is not so much that in the cross God sacrifices God's Son for the sake of humankind, but that in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross God knows the suffering that lies at the heart of humankind." David Bartlett, *What's Good about This News?: Preaching from the Gospels and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 41.

8. Cf. 10:58: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

9. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 75.

10. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, rite of Holy Baptism, 124.

The connection between Jesus' baptism and death points to an eschatological future with present implications: now is the time for God's reign on Earth. When the sky is ripped apart, God is no longer confined to heaven. When the temple curtain is torn, God is no longer confined to the holy of holies.[11] Ripped heavens and torn curtain testify that the reign of God has drawn near. *God* has drawn near. For anyone experiencing grief, despair, oppression, or marginalization, this is a comforting testimony: God is in charge; consolation is now. On the other hand, with no barrier between earth and heaven God is no longer confined to the safe places[12] of faraway mountain tops, distant heavens, or secret sanctuaries . . . nor to expansive cathedrals, Sunday mornings, or the park at sunrise. If God's rule is being established in place of earthly rule, watch out! God is in charge, the time is at hand, the judgment is now: keep alert! The good news is that we are no longer separated from God; the bad news is that we are no longer separated from God. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" (Isa 64:1–2)



The mystery of teaching: Jesus has a strong reputation as a teacher . . . but his lessons are veiled and difficult to understand

In Mark, "Teacher" is the address used more often than any other title by those who speak to Jesus: disciples (9:5; 10:35; 13:1), suppliants (9:17; 10:51), and even opponents (12:14,19, 32), the latter with some sarcasm as they attempt to trick him with their legal puzzles. Jesus instructs people within the relatively closed setting of the synagogue (1:22; 6:2) as well as on the shores of the lake or wherever crowds gather around him (2:13; 6:6). No matter where he teaches, people are astonished at his authority (1:22) and surprised by his wisdom (6:2). If teaching awards were given on the basis of reputation alone, Jesus would have won plenty. Reputation, however, does not guarantee results. For example, some in his hometown recognize that his lessons go hand in hand with mighty works of power, but they still view him as the one they've always known—"Isn't he the carpenter, Mary's son?" (6:3). They are stunned by his wisdom but remain unconvinced by his message.

The limited "success" of Jesus' teaching flows out of his unusual teaching style. His favorite mode of instruction, whether to crowds (4:2) or disciples (4:33), is

11. In the cosmology of the ancient world, heaven and earth are separated by a barrier. When the heavens rip open, God is no longer confined to the heavenly realm. We might say, too, that humankind is no longer confined to the earthly realm.

12. Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 59–60.

parables: brief stories or images that conceal/reveal their messages in simile and metaphor. Although they tend to reflect familiar scenes from Palestinian agrarian life (e.g., people sowing seeds, a vineyard owner whose son is killed by wicked tenants), parables defy precise interpretation, both by characters within the narrative and by readers on the outside. Jesus' followers are confounded in their attempts to comprehend what he is trying to teach them, unable to understand unless he explains himself (4:34). Ironically, it is in order to conceal his message that Jesus claims to teach in parables: "To you has been given the secret [or mystery] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (4:11–12). Jesus intends that anyone in relationship with him will (eventually) come to learn the meaning of the parables. Those who insist on remaining "outside" will not.

The multivalent character of the parables in Mark offers promise and challenge to the preacher. The conversation between interpreter and text may uncover a different word on different occasions or to different audiences, and this is even more the case with parables.[13] Donald Juel suggests that preachers might begin their reflections by asking: Does the kingdom of God have anything to do with us in particular?[14] One way to get at this question is to imagine being inside the story world of the parable itself and to ask: With which characters or images do we most connect? Which ones seem most foreign to us? In what ways does this parable challenge us to change? In what ways might we find comfort in its message?

Given their veiled messages and hidden meanings, parables critique a stance of certainty and triumphalism. Developing a spirit of humility may help to remind preachers and other interpreters that those who follow Jesus will likely find themselves, at least on some occasions, failing to understand the will of God. Thus, "if God's self-disclosure takes the form of riddle and enigma, there can be no place for smugness or dogmatism in ethical matters. Those who have the rules firmly in hand are those who suffer from hardness of heart" (3:1–6; 7:1–23).[15]

The mystery of power: Jesus displays boundless power . . . but always within limits

Whenever I teach the Gospel of Mark, I ask students to read the entire book and list the characteristics of Jesus as he is portrayed in this Gospel. Almost without fail, among the first things mentioned when we discuss the assignment is their surprise that "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" is not at all the person they meet in Mark. Here Jesus is a supersized superhero. He defeats Satan in the wilderness (1:12–13).[16] He commands

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13. Although the earliest interpretations of the parables were largely allegorical, interpretive strategies since the beginning of the twentieth century may be divided roughly into two categories: those that attempt to get behind the evangelists, back to "what Jesus really said" (a matter of placing the parables, as much as possible, within their original historical setting) and those that interpret the parables as part of the larger narrative framework in which they appear in a particular Gospel. In my view, both approaches yield interesting results, with insights that may be useful for a particular preaching setting. For a cogent overview of parable research, see David B. Gowler, *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2000).

14. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark*, 129.

15. Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 91.

the wind to "shut up"—and it does (4:39).[17] He shouts down demons (1:25) and sends them on a one-way trip to destruction (5:9–13). He has authority to forgive sins (2:10), and he restores people to wholeness even when he is unaware of their need (5:30). Whatever else is good news in Mark, this most certainly is: in Christ Jesus the people of God have a strong ally in the cosmic battle against everything that separates us from God and from one another. Jesus is empowered by God to do mighty things, and he empowers his disciples to do the same (6:7–13).

However, his superhero abilities go only so far. In the face of their unbelief, Jesus is powerless to do mighty works, with the exception of a few healings, among the people in his own hometown (6:1–5). He repeatedly tries (and fails) to help the disciples to understand his identity and his message; their fear keeps them in unbelief (4:40; 9:32). He does not force the religious authorities to live according to God's rule, and he cannot stop his own crucifixion. He is unable even to predict the "day or the hour" when the apocalyptic Son of humanity will return in glory (13:26, 32).

Through his limits as well as his strengths, the earthly Jesus inverts the world's ways of power, and he calls his followers to do the same (10:42–45). Those who hold positions of authority or who benefit from their status are called to share power in relationships of mutual service. They should become like children (10:13–15), give away their wealth (10:23–30), give up positions of prestige, and be servants of one another (10:42–44).[18] It can be a challenge to the preacher to know how and when to help others lay claim to the power that is theirs in the reign of God (e.g., in the face of suffering and injustice) and when to relinquish their power that comes from the world's rule (e.g., instead of lording over others). Even more difficult, however, may be the reminder that even when we choose correctly we cannot guarantee the outcome: we are called to be faithful, not to be effective. Violence, war, racism, sexism—each of these is evidence that people still prefer the world's way of power rather than God's way. Tsunamis, hurricanes, and drought give evidence that the new life begun in Jesus' resurrection is not yet fully realized. Cancer and heart disease continue to kill the faithful and fallen alike.

Those who focus only on Jesus' miracles in Mark do not see him truly, for "power is not self-attesting."[19] The cross still waits at the end of Jesus' life, no matter how many demons he exorcises or lepers he heals or storms he stills. Indeed, the cross waits precisely *because* he uses his power to challenge the status quo. This is

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16. Despite Mark's spare account of the Temptation, the narrative makes clear that this is a battle Jesus has won. His first public act, after calling the disciples, is an exorcism in the synagogue on the Sabbath (1:21–28). Word gets around, and before long the scribes accuse him of being in league with Beelzebul: "by the ruler of demons he casts out demons" (3:23). But Jesus, the one whom John the Baptist describes as "more powerful" (1:7), reminds them that "if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come" (3:26). Jesus has bound the "strong man" (Satan) and plundered the house; Satan rules no more. The reign of God is here.

17. I am indebted to David Rhoads for this translation of *phimaō*.

18. Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the NT Writings* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003), 227.

19. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 76. Hays has an excellent discussion of Mark's portrayal of Jesus' power as well as the comprehensive "teaching program" that Jesus must undertake in order to teach his followers the character of discipleship that is centered on the cross. See pp. 73–92.

what the world does to those who do not play by its rules. When preaching the Christ whom we meet in Mark, we do well to recall that it is through his death on the cross that Jesus most clearly shows to us the character of God.

The mystery of suffering: Jesus alleviates suffering . . . but he must suffer and die

According to Mark, Jesus is known throughout Galilee for his ministry of healing (1:8; 6:53–56). A man with leprosy, a woman with an unstoppable hemorrhage,[20] crowds in need of cure: they come to Jesus to be made well. His compassion for those who suffer leads him to challenge the pietism of the religious authorities when he insists on healing even on the Sabbath in the synagogue (3:4–6). He feeds the hungry (8:1–10), reassures the fearful (6:45–51), and restores to wholeness those who are tormented, whether their agony is self-inflicted or caused by others.[21]

The first half of Mark's Gospel contains numerous examples of this healing ministry. In the second half, however, the one who offers relief to the distressed tries to focus his disciples' attention away from his abilities as wonder-working healer and onto his own destiny of suffering. After Peter's confession, Jesus begins to teach openly about his impending execution on a cross (8:31; 9:31; 10:33; cf. 9:12). With each prediction of his passion, the details become more gruesome, so that by the last one he is laying out the means of torture: "they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him" (10:34). This man who saves others, it turns out, will suffer more than any of the sick or tormented people he has healed.

Of all the mysteries in Mark's Gospel, the mystery of suffering may be the most difficult to preach.[22] If the reign of God is revealed in and through Jesus, and if he has the power to heal, how does one explain why some people are healed and some not? Why are the lives of some marked by tragedy, while others seem to have a life of ease? In our own day, despite testimonies about miraculous healings, despite accounts of rescue from calamity, despite congregational prayer chains, it remains the case that children still suffer abuse, loved ones still die of cancer, and victims of war still come home in body bags. This side of the Eschaton, suffering persists as a heart-wrenching reality of human experience (see 13:19, 24).

Further, if the reign of God is manifested by the relief of suffering, why does Jesus have to suffer and die? In Mark, as in

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20. In a provocative essay that reads Mark 5:25–34 through the lens of Asian women's experiences, Hisako Kinukawa suggests that the suffering endured by the hemorrhaging woman results not only from her physical condition and failed attempts to seek treatment but even more from cultural norms that call her "unclean" and isolate her from the rest of the community. Further, the words, suffer (*paschō*), blood (*haima*), and body (*sōma*) appear in Mark only in reference to this woman and to Jesus, suggesting to Kinukawa that the woman's suffering, and the suffering endured by Jesus, share the same root cause: human expectations and standards. Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 29–50.

21. On this last point, consider the episode about the man who is tormented by a legion of demons (5:1–20). His agony is so great that he hurts himself with stones and breaks the shackles that have been placed upon him, presumably by people who want to ensure that he cannot get too close.

22. David Bartlett says it well: "If the great puzzle of Mark's Gospel is that Christ's death is the sign of Christ's sonship and God's love, the smaller puzzle is like unto it, human life is most alive when we, too, follow in the way of the cross." *What's Good about This News?*, 42.

all the Gospels, Jesus forgives sins (2:5), calls sinners (2:17), and is crucified by sinners (14:41). But Mark, unlike the others, does not explain Jesus' suffering by explicitly connecting Jesus' suffering and death on the cross with the forgiveness of sins. The cross in Mark does not function as the means through which Jesus (or God) forgives sins. Jesus' blood is "poured out for many" (14:24), but Jesus (in Mark) says nothing about sins here. Perhaps this is why the Gospel of Matthew, while repeating the saying, reads: "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matt 26:28; emphasis added).

In any case, when we preach from Mark, we cannot "make sense" of Jesus' suffering, or even our own, by the claim that Jesus' suffering redeems the sins of the world. Suffering is not redemptive in Mark —not for Jesus, and not for his followers. Death on the cross is the result, not the purpose, of Jesus' ministry; it represents the world's response to the ways of God. Those who "take up their cross and follow" will also suffer, not because discipleship is exemplified by suffering but because suffering is "the tragic outcome of following this kingdom-preaching Jesus."[23]

Nonetheless, the suffering endured by Jesus and his followers is not without meaning. In Mark, suffering is part of the reality of faithful discipleship. But the followers of Jesus—those with him in Galilee and those with him today—are not left to suffer alone. Despite Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, the resurrection proves that God does not abandon him. So, too, God does not abandon us. Even with its early emphasis on deeds of power, in the end Mark's Jesus is not triumphalist but starkly down-to-earth. Jesus' response to suffering in Mark provides both example and empowerment for his followers' response to their own suffering and the suffering of others. People who have the capacity to relieve suffering are called to do so.[24] When they cannot heal, they can accompany. Jesus' ministry demonstrates both of these responses as ways of the reign of God. Simplistic at first glance, their complexity becomes apparent whenever one looks at the suffering around them and faithfully begins to respond.[25]

The mystery of boundaries: Jesus breaks barriers . . . but establishes borders

Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors (2:15). He calls disciples from less-privileged groups within Palestinian society and initiates acceptance of others, even when doing so violates the norms of ritual purity (e.g., the healing of the leper, 1:40ff.) or cultural propriety (4:3–9, the woman who

23. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh,* 60.

24. Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to proclaim the good news and cast out demons (6:7–11): " So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (6:12–13).

25. The Christian witness about Jesus' death on the cross and the call to his disciples to take up their own cross grounds astonishing works of charity and sacrifice for the sake of others, instances of the reign of God on earth. At the same time, some churches and individual Christians have twisted Jesus' call to the cross in ways that perpetuate the suffering of others rather than relieving it, usually by way of "naming" the other's experience as "suffering for the sake of Christ." A couple of examples: (1) when the victim of physical abuse is encouraged to stay with the abuser as a way of demonstrating Jesus' love and his capacity for enduring suffering; (2) when persons or groups who benefit from privileges related to race, ethnicity, gender, age, etc., ignore the suffering of others in order to maintain the status quo.

anoints Jesus). Just as God tears down the barrier that divides heaven and earth, so Jesus tears down barriers that divide people.[26]

The healing of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1–20) is one example. Jesus traverses the physical boundary of the Sea of Galilee to go "to the other side" (5:1; cf. also 6:45; 8:13)—to Gentile territory, outside the borders of the Jewish people. There he encounters a distressing scene. Tortured by demons and separated from family and friends, a man lurks among the graveyard dead, howling against the night. Strong enough to shatter chains that bind his body, he cannot break free from the demons inside. Jesus commands the demons to leave and drives them into a herd of pigs, restoring the man to sanity. As Mark relates the episode, its significance is not simply that Jesus has performed yet another successful exorcism but that the man is reinstated in his community as a result. "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you" (5:19). Rendered an outsider by the demons, the man becomes an insider by Jesus' boundary-crossing mercy.

A ministry that shatters boundaries creates frightening new borders of inclusion. When Jesus welcomes sinners into his circle, those who consider themselves to be righteous and without sin put themselves beyond it. His insistence that God's reign expands the notion of "family" means that his mother and sisters and brothers must share whatever privileges they might have as his relatives.[27] Sometimes the borders are expanded so much that persons will choose *not* to join the circle. During a Sabbath-day encounter with a man with a withered hand, Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" When he answers his own question by healing the man, the Pharisees conspire to destroy him (3:1–6). They would rather kill Jesus than violate the Law—a Law originally intended to help the people of Israel remain inside the covenant with God.[28] Jesus' boundary-breaking mission is too great a threat for them.

Preachers will recognize that not everybody hears the barrier-breaking *euangelion* of Jesus as *good* news. Full inclusion of new insiders as true insiders means that the community will be shaped anew by their perspectives, insights, and

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26. Kinukawa argues that Jesus broke the barriers for women, but only when challenged to do so by them. The paradigmatic episode is Jesus' encounter with the Syrophonecian woman (7:24–30). Kinukawa's argument is beyond the scope of this essay, but her insights from the perspective of Asian women's' experience illuminate a number of significant elements of the Gospel of Mark. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, esp. 51–65.

27. In his account of the episode, Mark describes Jesus' birth family as literally "outside" of the place where Jesus is teaching (3:32–35).

28. Perhaps we should have more sympathy for the Pharisees, particularly because they believed themselves to be offering a faithful interpretation of Scripture: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy . . . you shall not do any work" (Exod 20:8–10). Their concern to get the rules straight may well be due to the tradition that suggests that the penalty for violating Sabbath laws is death (e.g., Exod 35:2). If they were to agree with Jesus that it is better to heal the man than to obey God's stated law, they would have to surrender their certainty about what it means to live as a faithful community of God. As debate and discussion around the ELCA sexuality study attest, it is not easy to agree on what constitutes acceptable behavior and practices within a faith community, even when Scripture has something to say on the matter. It is no wonder the Pharisees were afraid of Jesus and the crowds that he attracted. (See 11:18, 32; 12:12).

actions. Long-established insiders (by virtue of gender, ethnicity, ability, age, education, and so on) may find it difficult to share the power and give up the prerogatives that come with that status. At the same time, cultural constraints can become so internalized that persons who have been marginalized may find it difficult to claim their place inside the circle. Even those who welcome the expanding borders may discover that their assumptions about inclusivity differ from the assumptions of others. It can be scary and difficult to reach across the barriers that divide us from one another. Nonetheless, the preacher's task, it seems to me, is to proclaim Christ's boundary-breaking message and trust the power of the gospel: "The reign of God has come near; repent and believe the good news."

The mystery of absence: Jesus is raised . . . but he is not here

The ending of the Gospel of Mark has no great commission to the disciples (Matthew), no roadside chat with travelers en route to Emmaus (Luke), and no comforting encounter between Jesus and Mary in the garden or nail-hole proof for Thomas's sake (John). Mark ends without narrating any resurrection encounters between Jesus and his followers. Instead, readers are left with an empty tomb, a mysterious messenger, and a group of women who are too frightened to talk. Absent from the scene is the resurrected Christ.[29]

When the women go to the tomb after the crucifixion, they expect to find a dead body.[30] Imagine their shock when they see, instead, an empty tomb and a man dressed in white who stuns them with his news: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." The form of the Greek verb "to crucify" refers to an event that happened with effects that still carry on into the present: "Jesus . . . the crucified one. He has been raised, he is not here." Perhaps one of the greatest mysteries in the Gospel of Mark is the assertion that the followers of Jesus, then and now, must live during a time in which Jesus is absent. The tomb is empty . . . he is not here.

In what way is an "absent" Jesus anything like good news? The other Gospels all have two pieces of evidence that complete their narratives: the experience of the empty tomb, followed by resurrection appearances. Mark also has two pieces of evidence: as in the others, an empty tomb; unlike the others, no appearances, but a promise: "he is going ahead of you." In Mark, Jesus is really absent—no Paraclete as in John; no Pentecost as in Luke-Acts; not even an "I am with you always" as in Matthew. In Mark, Jesus is not "with" you

29. Further, Mark does not illustrate how Jesus will be present in the church after his earthly ministry is completed. In Matthew, Jesus is at hand in the gathered community ("wherever two or three are gathered") and in the mission of the church ("Go, make disciples of all nations . . . I am with you always until the end of the age"). In Luke Jesus is made known to his followers in the breaking of the bread, and the Spirit empowers them to engage in the ministry of Christ until his *parousia* (Acts 2). John's Jesus sends the Paraclete, who will continue to teach the community after Jesus has returned to the Father. Each of the writers deals differently with how Jesus is present to the believing community after his death and resurrection. They offer a word of hope to readers living in the in-between time, a time when the church follows a Christ who has left the earthly ministry behind.

30. They are carrying spices to anoint his body (16:1).

The messenger at the empty tomb tells us "how" to preach (and to live): Do not fear! Look! Go! Tell!

in the ways he is in the other Gospels. In Mark, the good news is that he is "ahead of you" in the life that the followers are called to embrace. "There you will see him."

The Gospel that began in Galilee points back to Galilee. When the followers of Jesus go to the tomb, expecting to find a place of death, they are instead pointed back to Galilee, to a place that has, for them, become the place where they experienced in Jesus' ministry the fullness of life. (The crucifixion took place in Judea; resurrection returns him to Galilee.) The ministry that began with a promise—"the kingdom of God is at hand"—ends with a promise—"there you will see him." The narrative leaves open the possibility that "where" they will see him will be in the very fulfillments, paradoxes, and mysteries they experienced in his ministry. There is absence but not abandonment. He is not, in Mark, "with" them, but he is ahead of them. If they continue to follow after him, any second they might run into him as the reign of God comes into its fullness.

In Mark, the women go to the tomb expecting to find a dead Jesus. They discover that Jesus is not there, but death is not there, either. Death has been stripped of its power to overwhelm the followers of Jesus. If Christ "goes ahead of us *in death*, can there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us?"[31] The good news is that Jesus "will go ahead of us into a new career, a new family, an unexpected change in our physical health, or our financial circumstances. There is no place you can think of, no limb you can climb out on, where Jesus hasn't already been."[32] Further, the defeat of death by Christ Jesus leads us to minister, as Jesus did, to the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, the outcast, the shattered and destroyed lives we otherwise want to keep at a distance. In those places, in those ministries, in those lives, as was always the case in Galilee, we will see Jesus.

Conclusion

The final message of Mark, delivered by the young man at the tomb, offers a series of imperatives: "Don't be alarmed!"—he told you this would happen. "Look!"—there is the place they laid him. "Go!"—away from this place. "Tell!"—his disciples that he is going ahead of you. In the midst of the paradoxes and the mysteries entailed in Mark's narrative about Jesus, as one tries to discern "what" to preach, the messenger at the empty tomb tells us "how" to preach (and to live): fearlessly (do not be alarmed), with eyes wide open (look), with a direction (go), and with a responsibility (tell). Do not fear! Look! Go! Tell! This is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God: a paradoxical, mysterious gospel and a paradoxical, mysterious Christ call us to proclaim and live into the reign of God.[33]

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31. Sally Bates, "Fill in the Words: Mark 16:1–8," unpublished sermon preached for Easter sunrise service, March 31, 2002.

32. Bates, "Fill in the Words."

33. I am indebted to Frank Crouch for his helpful comments and feedback on this essay.

Precious, Inevitable Scandal: Theology of the Cross in Mark

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Of the four canonical narratives we call "gospels," only Mark identifies itself as "good news," or, more accurately, "the beginning of the good news." Ironically, the story of Jesus that Mark tells proceeds more like a rapid descent into tragedy. Especially to those who read or hear the gospels for the first time, Mark's account must seem a message of bad news rather than good when measured against the other three. True, the hero dies in all four, but in the other three he reappears long enough to enjoy a few moments of vindication and to offer both assurance and direction to his tentatively faithful followers. As Mark's tale closes, the women at the empty tomb find their beloved Jesus as absent from them as God had seemed from Jesus himself on that terrible afternoon two days earlier. "You will see him, just as he told you," the young messenger at the tomb declares (16:7), sounding suspiciously like the voice that promises to the battered faithful such things as "Those who love me, I will deliver. . . . I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation" (Ps 91:14–16).

In the shadow of the cross, how does anybody believe either promise? With what shreds of hope should the frightened women at the tomb proceed to Galilee?

Another absence seems to haunt the earliest and briefest of the canonical gospels. Matthew's narrative might qualify as proclamation of good news because it finds a way to show how Jesus' death worked forgiveness. Indeed, two Jesus figures play roles in Matthew's passion narrative: the one who gets released, never to be heard from again, and the other whose blood is spilled and ends up on the people who spoke against him (Matt 27:15–26). In this enactment of the ancient ritual of atonement prescribed in Leviticus 16, Jesus' death accomplishes the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, the cataclysmic events that accompany Jesus' death in Matthew (27:51–54) serve as signs that this particular crucifixion has triggered the sequence of God's salvific, end-time actions promised in prophecies such as Zechariah 14:3–5.

All roads lead to the cross in John's Gospel, too, from the moment John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). In this depiction, however, Jesus maintains tight control over everything and everyone involved in his dying. He gives orders to Judas (13:27) and to Pilate (18:37), both of whom comply. He questions those who would put him on trial (18:19–23, 33–38). In the end he cries out in victory and chooses the moment of his dying (19:30). Like

Matthew, John weaves obvious soteriological themes into his account. By altering slightly the chronology of events common to the synoptic gospels, John introduces paschal imagery to the passion narrative and presents Jesus as the ultimate Passover lamb.[1] The fourth gospel's Jesus is no victim, however, and his death is not by any stretch a tragedy. "No one takes my life from me," Jesus declares (John 10:18). "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." And so he does in John's telling. These themes, plus others in John's complex narrative, make of Jesus' death not only a saving event but a deliberate sacrifice that Jesus himself carefully orchestrated.

How can Mark's grim narrative qualify as good news?

Scholars generally agree that Luke's Gospel does not develop a soteriological image or theory of atonement concerning the consequences of Jesus' death. Nevertheless, Jesus proceeds very purposefully in Luke's narrative, refusing to be dissuaded from setting his face toward Jerusalem and all that inevitably awaits him there (9:51–62). As the day of crucifixion plays out in Luke, it becomes an occasion for Jesus to teach "daily cross-bearing" to a disciple who walks in his footsteps (cf. 9:23 and 23:26–43). Jesus then dies calmly praying a portion of Psalm 31, which already in biblical times was counted among the evening songs. With that simple bedtime prayer Jesus rests himself in God's hands. Following his resurrection in Luke, Jesus goes back on the road (24:13–35) that had served as his place of vocation, until it comes time after several weeks to complete the journey that began back in Luke 9:51. At the ascension scene in Acts 1:6–11, we learn from the two men in white robes that the whole story has been one long "taking up."[2] Moreover, the men promise that the disciples will witness a repeat of the same scenario. In other words, the long journey to Jerusalem, and finally to the cross, is not what it may have seemed to the faithful who initially went home from Golgotha beating their breasts. Rather, Jesus' cross-bearing road serves as the means by which God "takes up" those who follow on that way.

When compared to these treatments of Jesus' death, how can Mark's grim narrative qualify as good news? What, if anything, could we say that Jesus' death accomplished or changed if all we had for clues came from Mark?

Hints and fragmentary images that prompt interpreters' suggestions about this gospel's theological understanding of Jesus'

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1. In John, Jesus' crucifixion occurs at noon on the Day of Preparation for Passover, not on Passover itself as in the synoptic gospels. At that same time the priests in Jerusalem slaughtered the lambs for use in that year's Passover observances after checking them for broken bones and seeing that their blood flowed freely.

2. When the two men refer to Jesus as οὗτος ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ' ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ("this Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven"), their words connect what the disciples have just seen with the sequence that began back in Luke 9:51 with the note Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ συμπληροῦσθαι τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ἀναλήμψεως ("When the days drew near for him to be taken up. . . ").

death appear throughout Mark. None of them, however, seems so fully developed as some of the themes and metaphors employed in the other gospels. The most obvious statement in Mark that asserts a particular meaning to Jesus' death appears in 10:45, when, in response to the other disciples' anger over James' and John's seeking positions of power when Jesus takes over, Jesus contrasts his understanding of ruling and serving to that of conventional wisdom about such things and concludes, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν)." While many scholars find the seed of a soteriological image in this statement,[3] it remains isolated and undeveloped in Mark, as nothing else in the larger narrative seems to link directly to this saying.

Many see another hint of atonement theology in the cup word of Mark's Last Supper scene, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (14:24). Like the saying in 10:45, this brief line alludes to a death that has consequence for "many," but the remainder of Mark's narrative does not develop covenant metaphors nor attempt a way to associate the Passover meal or cup with covenant theology.[4]

Many have been content to let Mark's Gospel serve merely as something of a guide for living in hostile or politically perilous circumstances. In such treatments, Jesus becomes the model of one who dies faithfully and with integrity. He calls others to the way of cross bearing (8:34) and later heeds the advice he gives to those who would follow. "When you get hauled before synagogues, councils, and kings, and when you're abused and reviled, don't defend yourself or make speeches," Jesus told his followers. "Say only what the Spirit gives you in such moments. And those who endure to the end will be saved" (13:9–13, paraphrased).

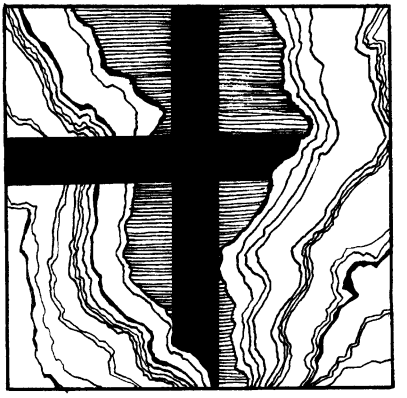
For those who find this the heart of Mark's "good news" for followers in dangerous times, salvation born of such endurance seems to be a kind of peace or wholeness that comes from having a sound model for responding to temptations, fears, and uncertainties, and ultimately resting assured at or near the end of life that the model worked. The cross-bearing life proves the complete and whole life.[5]

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3. So David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982), 113–14. Many discuss the possibility that a redemptive view of a martyr's death derives from martyrdom texts such as 4 Macc 6:29; 17:22; and 2 Macc 7:37ff. Cf. D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 281, and Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 110–14.

4. Garrett, in *The Temptations of Jesus,* proposes that a full-blown soteriology lies implicit in Mark 10:45 when coupled with the cup-word of Mark's Last Supper scene (14:24). She argues that these verses employ a view of priestly atonement developed also in the Letter to the Hebrews (8:1–13). Nothing else in Mark, however, leads the reader toward a priestly interpretation of Jesus' behaviors or fate, nor do these references play a major role in Garrett's understanding of how Jesus' death "saves."

5. Garrett's understanding of Mark's soteriology (see notes 3 and 4) includes elements of sacrifice and atonement (cf. pp. 174–77), but her reading of Mark casts Jesus primarily as the one who perfects and demonstrates how to withstand and resist temptations that would derail followers from remaining on the cross-bearing way. Although Mark I. Wegener, *Cruciformed: The Literary Impact of Mark's Story of Jesus and His Disciples* (New York: University Press of America, 1995), 190–99, focuses more on what Mark's narrative seeks to accomplish in its readers than how it understood the effects of Jesus' life and death, his treatment belongs to some extent in this category.



Crucifixion was nothing if it wasn't political, for it was Rome's way to destroy those whom the empire despised in the most shameful way possible. Accordingly, many see an essentially political soteriology implicit in Mark's understanding of the cross, and some in turn find a primarily political message in the narrative as a whole. While not nearly so elaborate as John's depiction of Jesus ascending to his cross-high throne and dying a death by exaltation, Mark's Gospel also lends itself to seeing the cross as the ironic throne by which Jesus rises to royal power despite rejection, demonic harassment, and even abandonment by God.[6] Such a king stands in stark contrast to the world's ordinary rulers, and his reign ultimately reveals the bankruptcy and failure of prevailing myths about how to gain, keep, and exercise power in the world.[7]

Much scholarly discussion of Mark has concluded, one way or another, that Christology, not soteriology, proves to be its major concern. Hence, the manner of revealing Jesus as the Son of God, as well as the significance of that revelation, becomes the assumed burden of Mark. Indeed, the narrative begins with a dramatic moment of revelation. At his baptism (1:9–11) Jesus sees the heavens ripped open (σχιζομένους), and a voice declares "You are my son, the Beloved."

The content of this revelation then becomes the core of the so-called messianic secret in Mark. Whenever demons, unclean spirits, and those they possess seem near to disclosing Jesus' identity as the son of God, he silences them or swears them to secrecy (e.g., 1:23–26, 34; 3:9–12). Ordinary mortals remain oblivious to Jesus' identity even in the presence of obvious clues. For example, when Jesus exercises authority like the Creator's to control chaos by taming sea and wind, the disciples can only respond with muttered questions (4:35–41).

Two incidents of revelation occur at the midpoint of the narrative. In Mark 8: 22–26 Jesus grants sight to a blind man at Bethsaida, but it takes two attempts before the man can see clearly. Many commentators have pointed out that the two stages of receiving sight in this brief healing story correspond to the larger issues of "seeing" in Mark. No one but demons can discern Jesus' identity through all the exorcisms, healings, and other signs and wonders in the first half of Mark's story. Others, including the disciples, remain at least partly blind. It will take a second effort to open their eyes so that they see fully and clearly.

Immediately after the healing at Bethsaida comes the confession at Caesarea Philippi, where Peter's words demonstrate that the disciples have not yet discerned Jesus' identity as the son of God. In parallel synoptic texts, Peter confesses Jesus as "the messiah, the son of the living God" (Matt 16:14) and "messiah of God" (Luke

6. E.g., Werner Kelber, *The Passion in Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 160–62.

7. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Marks' Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

9:20), but in Mark Peter merely says "You are the Messiah." He "sees" something, but not the full truth of Jesus' identity.

Hard upon Peter's confession (and subsequent confusion over what it may mean even to be the messiah) comes the story of transfiguration (Mark 9:2–9) with its repetition of the baptismal revelation. The voice that spoke first to Jesus now speaks to Peter, James, and John: "This is my Son, the Beloved." This revelation, however, will have no practical effect in Mark until much later, because Jesus "ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead."

This leaves the centurion in Mark's crucifixion scene to serve as the first human being unaided by demons to discern and declare Jesus' identity as son of God (15:39). Two brief revelatory events immediately precede the centurion's confession. One of these the centurion himself sees—namely, the manner in which Jesus died—and the narrator directly attributes the soldier's response to this observation. The other revelation takes place some distance away from the crucifixion scene, in the rending (ἐσχίσθη) of the temple curtain from top to bottom at the moment Jesus dies. Despite all the many meanings this torn curtain might have in Mark's narrative,[8] it surely serves as part of a literary parallel to the baptismal scene in which the rending of a concealing fabric associated with God's dwelling place immediately precedes a declaration of Jesus as the son of God.

In sum, Mark's narrative seems to assert that Jesus' identity becomes clear not through all the exorcisms, healings, and other wonders he had done back in Galilee but through his dying. Hence, Jesus' death accomplishes something. It reveals something about Jesus, but it also uncovers God.

Another, tighter, sequence of revealing acts in Mark begins and ends with the granting of sight to a blind man, and between these two bracketing stories come the formulaic sequences containing the three passion predictions in Mark. This section of the narrative opens in the middle of Mark's narrative with the two-stage miracle described above in which Jesus heals the blind man of Bethsaida (8:22–26). Peter then declares Jesus the messiah (8:27–30), and Jesus responds with the first of the passion predictions: "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Peter immediately demonstrates that he has a very different notion of what a messiah must do or accomplish than the one Jesus seems bound to follow (8:32–33), and Jesus then issues his call to cross-bearing and to losing one's life as the way to saving it and sharing in the Son of Man's glory (8:34–9:1).

After the account of the transfiguration and a discussion of Elijah's coming (9:2–13), another story of a two-stage miracle sets up the next passion prediction (9:14–29). Jesus casts a debilitating spirit from a boy, but the action leaves the child "like a corpse, so that most of them said, 'He is dead.'" Using words that invite association with resurrection language, Mark then

8. Commentaries discuss at length whether the reader is to picture the inner or outer curtain of the temple as the one torn and whether Mark meant to declare the temple obsolete and replaced by Jesus. Among the most promising possibilities concerning the curtain comes from the writings of Josephus, who describes the outer curtain of the temple as a massive blue tapestry covered with gold depictions of the Sun and several constellations of stars.

says that Jesus lifted (ἤγειρεν) the boy, and he stood (ἀνέστη). As Jesus and the disciples leave the scene of this event, Jesus repeats his words about the necessary betrayal, death, and resurrection of the Son of Man (9:30–31), and once more the disciples show that this talk makes little sense to them. They argue about which of them will be greatest (9:32–34), so Jesus issues another call to an alternative way: Strive not to be the greatest, but to be the least and the servant of all, he urges (9:35–37).

Yet another story of partly completed well-being opens a third cycle in this larger pattern. A man comes to Jesus in search of eternal life, and Jesus soon determines that only one thing prevents him from having it (10:17–22). If he lets go of all earthly treasures and follows Christ, he will find what he seeks, but for now, the narrator explains, the man cannot follow. The disciples who overhear this conversation remind Jesus that they have left everything to follow, but instead of congratulating them for reaching a goal the inquirer had for now abandoned, Jesus suggests with somewhat mysterious talk that the disciples still have much to learn about who comes in first or last in God's way of accounting (10:28–31). Then follows the third, most detailed passion prediction (10:32–34). This time Jesus says not only that the Son of Man must be handed over, killed, and raised from death but that he must also be mocked, spit upon, and flogged. The disciples quickly prove a third time how poorly they grasp or believe these things. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," ask James and John (10:35–40). The narrator and reader know what these two don't—namely, that those seats of honor will soon be filled by cross-bound lieutenants in the crucifixion scene (15:27)—and Jesus concludes this third portion of the sequence by issuing a third call to service rather than quests for roles and privileges of domination (10:41–45).

This repetitive sequence in Mark closes with a second bracketing story about blindness, this time involving Bartimaeus (10:46–52). This healing does not entail two stages; rather, as we shall see momentarily, it completes the quest for life that the man who lacked one thing failed to grasp. Bartimaeus appears as one who once could see but now must trust that this teacher and Son of David might restore his sight. Significantly, the gift he asks for and receives is identified with the Greek verb ἀναβλέπω, which can mean "to see again" but also "to look up" or even "to look to the heavens," as Jesus does while preparing to distribute bread and fish to the crowd of 5,000 (Mark 6:41). Even more significantly, once Bartimaeus can see again, or "look up," he immediately does what the rich man could not: he follows Jesus on his way (10:52). In the very next verse, Jesus' traveling company of the partially blind and newly sighted arrives at Jerusalem, ready or not for all that will transpire there (11:1). If we imagine that Bartimaeus understood his own story, he regains his sight just in time to lose his life.

Among all the other points that the narrator has embedded in this portion of Mark, this repetitive sequence of events surely teaches something about the impossibility of humankind's grasping the significance and necessity of the Son of Man's crucifixion. Only Jesus himself, finally, can give to disciples' eyes the capacity to "look up." Moreover, it seems from Mark's narrative that this only happens in Jerusalem, as it were, where and when one finally sees precisely what the seats of power on either side of the Son of Man look like. Or, better, perhaps, one cannot really grasp the significance of Jesus' words about his death until one gets nailed up as a bandit next to

the one mistaken for a bandit and treated as such.[9] Dying with that one holds the only hope for saving one's life (8:35) or having eternal life (10:17, 21).

In God's good time, James, John, and a host of others would find themselves in such ironic places of honor, crucified on either side of the king of the bandits. The list would include the "young man" (νεανίσκος) at the tomb who met the startled women with news of the resurrection, but not before he'd been stripped of his burial garment earlier at Gethsemane (14:51–52), vanished beneath the story of Jesus' death, dispatched to a tomb, and finally given a new, white robe and directions for where the disciples might see the crucified and risen one, even as he'd promised (16:5–7).

Two additional stages of revelation await the reader of Mark at this curious ending point to the gospel that hardly seems a gospel. First, there remains one piece of narrative held in abeyance until this moment. As Jesus and the transfiguration witnesses descend from the mountain, Mark says Jesus charged them to tell no one what they had seen until the son of Man was risen from the dead (9:9). Here at the end of the gospel, then, comes the moment for disciples and reader alike to rehearse and ponder the account of Jesus' appearance in the raiment of heaven—or perhaps the robe of the baptized, like the "young man" also wears—and speaking with Moses and Elijah. Here is Mark's answer to a question all of the gospels needed to answer in one way or another: Where is this Jesus whose resurrection you proclaim? And what is he doing now, if anything? If the transfiguration story is the one we now tell, we profess that Jesus has been seen in the company of Moses and Elijah, two whose journeys to the "promised land" were cut short but who now reside with and work for God.

One cannot really grasp the significance of Jesus' words about his death until one gets nailed up as a bandit next to the one mistaken for a bandit and treated as such.

As for the second revelation inherent in Mark's abrupt ending, the words of the young man at the tomb also prompt the reader and listener to engage in another act of rehearsal. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Today's reader might imagine Peter and the others heading off toward Capernaum, the sea, or the haunts in the mountains where they had conversed so often with Jesus. But how do readers today return to Galilee? Readers who have only Mark for clues must go back to the beginning, which starts, we recall, with Jesus coming to the wilderness from Nazareth of Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan (1:9–11). As Gordon Lathrop suggests,[10] in rereading the whole of Mark's story the reader begins to see the risen Jesus all over

9. "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?" (14:48)

10. *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 27–31.

Mark's narrative says that the fabric of God's dwelling gets ripped open in the moment of Jesus' death.

Galilee. He appears asleep in the stern of the little boat tossed about in treacherous seas but awakes to rebuke the wild winds and to save the bewildered crew (4:35–41). He scatters unclean spirits and restores people to community (5:1–20). He serves up in the wilderness tomorrow's bread today, both to the Jews (6:30–44) and the Gentiles (8:1–10). All these Jesus does, however, not only as the risen one but as the crucified, whose table of fellowship never celebrates the conquering of an enemy or critic (cf. the contrast of two banquets, Herod's and Jesus', in 6:14–44) but the giving of life for many (14:24).

For Mark, therefore, the cross has multiple consequences, though in a sense they amount to a single effect. The death of Jesus cures blindness, and the cross serves as the "place" for finding life in losing it. To wit, the way Jesus died, praying at least part of the song we know as Psalm 22, caused a Roman military officer to make a statement that might have been meant as one more cynical taunt, except that it also declares the full truth of Jesus' identity as Mark understood it. Something about this death also seems to have impacted a member of the Sanhedrin that had earlier voted unanimously, says Mark, to condemn Jesus to death (14:64). Joseph of Arimathea, a member of that assembly who "waited expectantly for the kingdom of God" (15:43), apparently saw something in the scene of Jesus' ascending to his throne as "king of the Jews" that emboldened him to claim Jesus body. Presumably, the women who ran away afraid (16:8) eventually told the disciples and Peter what they had witnessed, and they made their way to Galilee and to the sight of believing. Ultimately, the same thing happens today as readers and hearers witness the death of Jesus in Mark and have their own visions of heaven ripped apart.

In short, Mark's narrative says that the fabric of God's dwelling gets ripped open in the moment of Jesus' death. In that final baptism with which he is baptized (cf. 1:9–11 and 10:38–40), and in the cup that he himself drinks new in the kingdom of God (cf. 10:38–40 and 14:24–25), God's reign and God's glory appear on the cross. What there is to "see" of God appears somehow in this messiah's dying amidst every conceivable discouragement, rejection, and abandonment, including—and this is the ultimate irony—the abandonment of God.

This reading of Mark's Gospel would place it in the category some have called the theology of the cross. It makes the crucifixion of Christ the place one looks in order to glimpse what can be seen of the God who remains hidden from us in the stuff of this earth, the vast distances of heaven, and the unceasing nonsense that goes on around us. In a way, Mark does not do what the other evangelists would later attempt, namely, to explain the cross and to say how it worked, anticipating, perhaps, the skeptical questions from within and without asking, "How exactly can the death of one more Jew be the event that changed things forever?" Mark simply takes us to the cross and says, Look there. Look up, cross-high. In the utter abandonment by

God that you witness there, you see the Son of God, the Beloved. There, too, you see the reign of God, the king of the Jews enthroned among the bandits.

What comfort is this? What kind of "good news?" Frankly, many today have deemed it not good enough. It remains as much a stumbling stone as ever, even among Christian preachers—indeed, especially among Christian preachers and theologians. Many have written that the theology of the cross glorifies violence and teaches an image of an angry God who needs the satiation of bloodshed. Others reject it because they blame it for the ways it has been twisted by those who insist on telling the battered, abused, and suffering that such things are good for them or, at the very least, cross-shaped burdens they must learn to suffer patiently at the hands of their abusers.

Nothing in Mark's Gospel, or in any legitimate theology of the cross for that matter, justifies abuse, oppression, or anything else that traitors, priests, governors, screaming crowds, or brutal executioners perpetrate in this world. However, the deep currents that run through Mark assume that, sooner or later, everyone falls victim to these forces. The moment will come when God seems utterly and completely absent. The darkness of our circumstances, diseases, and sins will overwhelm us and finally kill us. No one escapes, though some evade the inevitable longer than others.

But in the moment that comes finally for every individual, family, and community, and most profoundly in that moment, we find ourselves in the company of the crucified, crying out a bitter song that seems the Spirit's only gift at the time, "My God, my God, why...?" Then we die. Like Jesus and also with Jesus we die without vindication, at least none that we witness, our ears having lost the capacity to hear the startled centurion's words. Our loved ones don't find us or see us when they visit our tombs, though they hear the white-clad speaker say, "Looking for the crucified one? Don't look here, but make your way to Galilee. . . ."

Neither Mark's story nor the theology of the cross seems like good news to everyone, not even to many Christians. Neither offers a practical program for ridding the world of hunger, disease, or oppression, the things we demand that our messiahs do for us or else authorize us to do in their name. Theology of the cross, with its call to finding life only through losing it, doesn't sit well with the wealthy, oppressors, or justice-drunk theologians of prosperity and liberation. Perhaps Mark anticipated rejection such as this in the story of Jesus drawing criticism for finding his place among the wrong people (2:15–17). "Why does this man eat with tax collectors and sinners?" the righteous folks asked. When their question reached Jesus, he allowed as how he had nothing to offer the healthy and whole. Only the sick and dying have any need of what he has to offer. What he offers, of course, is the chance to come die with him.

Many Christian communions spend every third year in the company of Mark. Perhaps that's too much, even with plenty of John as a help through certain parts of the year. Maybe we should reserve Mark until we have need of a physician, and a hospice physician in particular. Then again, the baptized have good reasons to learn how to die, over and over and over. Daily, we learn through such dying, the heavens are rent, and there hangs the Holy One—the ruler, messiah, and beloved, here with all us bandits crucified on every side.

Telling Mark's Story of the Passion

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The story of the passion is a very dangerous story. It is the culminating point of a gospel meant to free us, but often it has been used to keep the crucified peoples of our world,[1] particularly women, on their crosses. Many people have internalized a spirituality in which they identify their suffering with that of the crucified Jesus. This has given them the strength to survive immense suffering, but at the same it has fed attitudes of acceptance of abuse and oppression as normal rather than empower them to confront abuse and to mobilize energies for transformative action toward their well-being. Many women are taught from their youth that their whole purpose in life is to serve and to sacrifice for others, most especially their husbands and their children. They believe that whatever suffering they endure is God's will and is merited for their sins.

In this essay I aim to expose such interpretations as inconsistent with the gospel and offer interpretive moves for preachers, teachers, and catechists to tell the story of the passion in ways that liberate and that help believing communities conform their lives authentically to the crucified and risen Christ.

The distinctiveness of Mark

In the same way that believers conflate in their memory and imagination the differing infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke at Christmastime, there is a tendency also to meld the varying details and theologies of the four evangelists into one coherent version of the passion. While there are many similarities in the four accounts, there are also significant differences. The aim of the evangelists is not so much to tell what happened to Jesus as it is to help believers grapple with the question: What does Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean for us? Each evangelist makes meaning of the events in a slightly different way.

Preachers, teachers, and catechists would do well to attend to the particular theological emphases of each account. In the 2005–2006 liturgical year it is Mark's passion account (14:1–15:47) upon which we reflect on Palm Sunday and Mark's version of the empty tomb (16:1–8) that we ponder at the Easter Vigil. Mark's story of Jesus' passion is distinctive for its stark portrayal of an anguished Jesus, deserted by his disciples and seemingly abandoned by God as well. He is the silent lamb led to the slaughter who opens not his mouth. I want to elaborate a few of the theological emphases that are prominent in Mark's passion account, warning of some of the pitfalls they present and proposing ways

1. This expression is from Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 580–603.

that the story can engender hope for believers today.

Crucified women of Chiapas

To illustrate how powerful, both for good and for ill, are interpretations of the passion in the lives of suffering peoples of today, I begin with a description of life for a typical woman in rural Chiapas.[2] As in many parts of the world, women in rural Chiapas belong to men in every way. Typically, a woman cannot voice an opinion, much less make any decisions about her life. From age twelve she is obligated to comply with all the demands placed on adult women. She is married off by her father with no consultation and is handed into the control of her husband as his possession. From her earliest days she is taught that her whole purpose in life is to bear children and to serve them and her husband. She is first to obey her father, then her husband and in-laws, especially her mother-in-law. Her husband may beat her and insult her whenever he wants, and she can only submit in silence. She has no right to speak up and has no opportunities to speak with other women. She has to ask permission to go anywhere, even to visit her mother, and her husband rarely grants it. Unable to read or write, she accepts that it is enough to know how to cook and sew. She bears the burden of all the housework and works in the fields as well—all without any recompense. Men can spend money as they wish, and many waste it on drink; women are completely dependent on what their husbands give them. Indigenous women carry the added load of racial discrimination.

The worst thing, as one woman remarked, was that women regarded this situation as natural. They believed that this is just the way things are, that nothing could be done about it. Women felt trapped; they never thought of themselves as having value in themselves, or of being capable and free to make choices and decisions about their lives. Sorrowful, solitary, silent, and enclosed: this was the reality of women inside their homes in their daily lives—lives that they did not choose and that they thought they had no way to change. In their prayer they would cry to God asking why he had determined this life for them. Their faith did not help them change anything; they believed that God had decided that it should be so. All the suffering they endured they accepted as their way of carrying the cross.

When asked the question "Why did Jesus die?" the most common response is "He died for my sins" or "God sent him to die." The notion of sacrifice is very strong for them: the sacrifice of Jesus is replicated in their own self-sacrifice for others. And

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2. Thanks to a sabbatical from teaching and other responsibilities at Catholic Theological Union in the academic year 2002–03, and to a Faculty Fellowship from the Lilly Endowment sponsored through Association of Theological Schools, I was privileged to visit a number of Christian communities in the state of Chiapas, México, as well as in Torreón, México, La Paz and Cochabamba in Bolivia, and Lima and Chimbote in Perú. Many were composed of indigenous women of Mayan, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Aymara, and Quecha heritage. The majority of the groups I met were women who gathered regularly for Bible study. My intent was that my study of the passion and resurrection narratives be informed by the perspectives of women whose social situation and culture was significantly different from my own. Many with whom I spoke came from very difficult situations of poverty, violence, and abuse. I was also interested in the perspectives they offered from a strong cross-centered piety. Repeat visits in subsequent years have deepened our mutual learning and ongoing friendships, for which I am most grateful. The description that follows is loosely translated from *Con Mirada, Mente, y Corazón de Mujer*, published by CODIMUJ (Coordinación Diocesana de Mujeres, Mexico, 1999).

their servile obedience to their fathers and husbands is related to Jesus' obedience to his Father. Many of the women spoke of how they identify their suffering with that of the crucified Jesus, especially the image presented in the Gospel of Mark of the silent, suffering servant, who utters nary a word of protest throughout his ordeal, having accepted the cup he is to drink as the will of the Father.

One need not travel to rural Chiapas to encounter such theological interpretations of the cross. Variations of such exist in most Christian communities. Is there another way that preachers, teachers, and catechists can tell the story that can help break cycles of violence and victimization?

Not my will, but yours (Mark 14:36)

As illustrated above, one of the most dangerous scenes is that of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. After having celebrated a last Passover meal with his disciples (14:17–31), Jesus becomes "distressed and agitated . . . deeply grieved, even to death" (14:33–34).[3] He goes apart from his companions Peter, James, and John and begins to pray, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want" (14:36). Christians often understand this scene as a unique moment in the life of Jesus when his own will is pitted against the divine will. Frightening images of God and of Jesus emerge: God seems to will the death of the Son, despite his fervent pleas, and a docile Jesus capitulates in the end to divine desires. Abusers and victims can derive theological approbation for unjust patterns of domination and submission from this scene.

An alternative approach to this deadly direction is to recognize that throughout the Gospel narrative Jesus has been obedient to God's will, and God's will is clearly that no one suffer and that all be saved. Jesus expressly follows God's will as he heals, feeds, and teaches people, restoring them to wholeness, and leading them to faith that both heals and saves. That God's will is to save is especially clear in the stories of the woman who was healed of her hemorrhages (5:34) and the man who was cured of blindness (10:52). Jesus tells them that their faith has "healed" and "saved" them. The Greek verb *sōzein* conveys both meanings. God's will to save does not change when it comes to the Gethsemane scene. God's intent is still to bring fullness of life to all.

Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane is real and intense, but it is not the first time that he has undergone such a trial. At the very outset of the Gospel story, he is tried (*peirazein*) by Satan (1:12–13), but he emerges victorious, clearly focused on his mission to proclaim the good news of the reign of God (1:14–15). In this first trial scene God's presence with Jesus is palpable: it is the Spirit who impels Jesus to go into the desert, and God's messengers (*angeloi*) minister to him during his ordeal. This assurance of God's presence is much less palpable in the Gethsemane scene.

Mark does not elaborate on what the specific trials were; Matthew and Luke relate that Jesus was tempted to feed his own hungers rather than attend to those of God's hungry people, and to place trust in false images of God, and to display flashy manifestations of God's power, and so convince people of his true messianic identity (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). All of the evangelists agree that Jesus was fully human and experienced temptations as all people do (so also Heb 4:15). But it was not a struggle he overcame once and for all in

3. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

those first days before the beginning of his public mission. The evangelists have telescoped into one episode what Jesus faced throughout his life. Like us, he had to make the decision to be true to God's will at every turn. He continually turned to God in prayer (Mark 1:35; 6:46) so as to be centered completely on God's saving will for all of creation. And so, in Gethsemane, the trial (*peirasmos,* 14:38, the same root word as in 1:13) Jesus undergoes is the culmination of a lifelong struggle to discern God's will and to be true to his prophetic mission to heal, teach, and preach good news to the poor. Having lived his whole life seeking the will of God and living it faithfully, he chooses to be true to this mission to the end.

What Mark does in the passion story is to situate Jesus' suffering and death within God's saving will for fullness of life for all. That is, Jesus' death does not occur outside God's saving will and God's power. Moreover, Jesus is not forced or coerced to "drink the cup," but he does so freely. He chooses to do so not because he seeks to suffer or because God wills his death, but as the means to life for God's people. The metaphor of "cup" was used often in the Scriptures to speak of the suffering of Israel (Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15; 49:12; 51:7; Lam 4:21). Jesus takes the "cup" upon himself and offers it to his disciples. At his final Passover supper shared with his disciples, all drink from the cup (14:23–25; see also 10:38–39). It symbolizes not only Jesus' death but also the ratification of a renewed life in covenantal fidelity, recalling the blood, the symbol of life (Deut 12:23), that Moses sprinkled on the altar and on the people (Exod 24:8) to seal the covenant.

Take up your cross (8:34)

In the first prediction of the passion in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus utters the famous saying "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). As exemplified in the stories of many women in rural Chiapas, this saying is the basis for passive acceptance of many kinds of abuse. What is lost sight of in such an interpretive move is that the cross, in the context of the Gospel of Mark, refers not to generalized suffering of all sorts but to a very specific kind of suffering. Historically, crucifixion referred to a Roman form of punishment, inflicted particularly on slaves, fugitives, rebels, and foreign captives. Jesus was executed in this horrendous form because he posed a threat to the religious and political authorities of his day. While some of his followers would also be executed in this manner, not all disciples face such a fate.

We must look, then, to the symbolic way in which every disciple must take up the cross. It is clear in the Gospel narrative that the cross refers not to suffering in general but to the suffering that is the direct consequence of proclaiming good news to the poor and to living in fidelity to the vision of the reign of God that Jesus embodied. Taking up one's cross refers to the willingness to remain faithful even in the face of persecution, in whatever form it takes.[4]

Likewise, to "deny oneself" means not that disciples should allow their identity to be obliterated in subservience and submission, such as the way that many women in Chiapas relinquish their own identity, and give no attention to their own needs or wants. Nor does it refer to individual acts

4. See Joanna Dewey, "'Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take Up Their Cross': A Feminist Reading of Mark 8.34 in Mark's Social and Narrative World," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. A.-J. Levine (Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 23–36.

of asceticism. Rather, "deny oneself" means to live in "a wholly selfless manner,"[5] such that self-interest and one's personal desires are not central.[6] Only one who has a healthy sense of self-worth and giftedness is capable of choosing to live in such selflessness. Mark 8:34 is not a call to self-obliteration; it is an invitation to resist putting one's energies toward self-aggrandizement, and to place one's life in the service of another—of God and the people of God.

Silent suffering servant

In Mark's depiction of Jesus' trials before the Sanhedrin (14:53–65) and Pilate (15:1–5), Jesus refuses to answer and says not a word in his own defense. When the high priest asks Jesus directly, "Have you no answer?" Jesus "was silent and did not answer" (14:61). And when Pilate asks him if he is King of the Jews, he answers "you say so" (15:2). And after many accusations by the high priests, Pilate queries, "have you no answer?" (15:4), but Jesus "made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed" (15:5).

This portrait of Jesus differs greatly from that of the Gospel of John, where Jesus not only replies to Pilate but is the one who seems to prosecute Pilate, who fails to recognize the truth of who Jesus is. In Mark's account, Jesus' silence can be understood as his recognition that speaking truth would be a waste of his breath, since the stated purpose of the investigations was not to seek truth but to find testimony to put him to death (14:55). Or, Jesus' silence may be a deliberate refusal to cooperate in an unjust procedure. On a theological level, Jesus embodies the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

Such an image of Jesus is two-edged. On the one hand, it can be deadly as it reinforces silent, passive submission of abused persons, so that they remain victims of injustice. Breaking the silence is often the first and most dangerous step that victims of domestic violence need to take in order to begin to break the cycle of abuse and take action toward healing and wholeness. On the other hand, collective public silent protest of injustice can be a very effective tool to confront oppression. An example is the silent protests of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who have marched weekly for decades, demanding to know the fate of their disappeared husbands, brothers, and sons in Argentina's "dirty war" of the 1970s. Although they cannot bring back to life the 30,000 *desaparecidos*, their weekly march for human rights has been thought to be partially responsible for toppling the military dictatorship in 1982.

Failure and fidelity

More than any other Gospel Mark highlights the failure of Jesus' followers to understand him and his message. They don't understand the parables (Mark 4:13; 7:17–18) or Jesus' actions with the loaves (6:52; 8:21). They reject the notion of a messiah that suffers (8:31–33) and do not understand what "rising from the dead" means (9:10). They argue over who is the greatest (9:34) and seek places of honor for themselves (10:35–45), not comprehending that "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). When

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5. BDAG, *"aparneomai,"* 97.

6. See Morna Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Black's New Testament Commentary; Peabody, MA; Hendrickson, 1991), 208; William Reiser, *Jesus in Solidarity with His People: A Theologian Looks at Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 152–53.

Jesus commands silence, it is broken (1:44–45; 7:36), and when the faithful women are told to proclaim, they do not fulfill the command (16:8). In the account of the passion, disciples betray Jesus (14:10–11), are unable to stay awake with him in Gethsemane (14:32–42), and ultimately abandon (14:50) and deny him (14:66–72).

Yet, there is a counterpoint in the persistent theme of disciples who faithfully follow despite their fear and unknowing (10:32). The first episode of the passion account is that of a nameless woman who anoints Jesus for burial, correctly recognizing his kingly identity and his approaching death (14:3–9). Her action echoes that of a poor widow who gives her whole life/livelihood (*bios*) to God, as signified by the temple (12:41–44), an action that prefigures that of Jesus. At Gethsemane, although they are helpless either to prevent what is happening to Jesus or to be a source of consolation to their friend, Peter, James, and John[7] do accompany Jesus in his final trial (14:32–42). And while the other disciples all flee (14:50), Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome continue to follow Jesus to the place of the crucifixion (15:40). They, along with many other women, had followed Jesus and had been ministering with him during his Galilean sojourn and had come up with him to Jerusalem (15:41). Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses witness where the body is laid (15:47) and then, with Salome, bring spices to the tomb to anoint him (16:1).

Yet these disciples, too, out of fear, fail to proclaim the good news entrusted to them by the messenger at the tomb. In this Gospel there is no ideal disciple such as the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel. All struggle to understand, all struggle to follow. Yet it is to such that the mystery of God's reign has been entrusted (4:11).



Moreover, Jesus remains faithful to his new family of disciples, no matter their failures.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34)

Mark's passion narrative brings to the fore the paradoxical fidelity of God to Jesus, even as Jesus experiences agonizing silence from the One who had previously assured him he was beloved Son (1:11; 9:7) and object of God's delight (1:11). Jesus' cry from the cross is not one that questions the existence of God or whether God has the power to rescue him from death. Nor is Jesus abandoning hope. What he questions is God's silence in the face of his pleas.[8]

7. These three are depicted as part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples. They are the first called (1:16-20); they are the only ones allowed in the house to witness the healing of Jairus' daughter (5:37); they are the ones present at the transfiguration (9:2), and they, along with Andrew, receive private instruction from Jesus about the end times (13:3).

8. Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library; Garden City, Doubleday, 1994), 2:1046.

The very fact that Jesus is praying witnesses to his continued trust in God.[9] And immediately following Jesus' prayer and his death, the centurion acclaims, "Truly this man was God's son!" (15:39), confirming that Jesus' understanding of his relationship with God was not mistaken.

Jesus cries out the opening words of Psalm 22, praying the prayer of one who has relied utterly on God since birth (22:9–10), yet experiences in the present moment the triumph of adversaries and the anguish of isolation as God seems unresponsive to his pleas. Jesus is not praying to be rescued from death, for that is the fate of all human beings. Nor is he asking to be released from the form his impending death will take; his ministerial campaign has set him on a clear collision course with the powerful, whose violent response was to be expected. Jesus is like the psalmist who does not yet see the concrete evidence of God's power to raise up the afflicted yet knows that God has heard his cries (Ps 22:24). What he has not yet experienced is God's answer to those cries.

Mark aligns Jesus' experience with that of the psalmist, who pours out his heart in grief but then lets go of his complaint and turns to praise of God's yet unseen deliverance (Ps 22:25–31). The psalmist has known God's lifelong motherly care through deathlike ordeals that bring new birth (Ps 22:9–10); just so, Jesus confides in this saving God whose present silence is excruciating. He dies without seeing the fulfillment of the reign of God to which he devoted his whole life in deed and word.

God's reply takes the form of an earth-shattering response as Jesus is resurrected from the dead and goes ahead of the disciples (16:7). God's fidelity to the divine will to save continues in the faithful witness of Jesus' fallible disciples.

A story of hope

The Gospel of Mark can be told in ways that reinforce deadly patterns of violence and victimization, as evident in the above description of the lives of women in rural Chiapas. But such interpretations are not true to the good news embodied in Jesus. With the help of women's Bible study groups that have focused on instructing women about their rights and their status as beloved daughters of God, many women in Chiapas have learned that God does not will for them to suffer abuse. Women have gained self-esteem and have worked with men to help them come to value the dignity of women. They have grown in their understanding that they have choices. They have gained ability to confront problems in their families and in the community and to look for the root of the problems. They analyze reality at the local, zonal, national, and global levels. They are working for changes toward a more just and equal society for women and men, as women's participation has increased in all spheres: social, cultural, political, economic, and ecclesial. They teach their children differently from the way they were educated.

For many, their understanding of the cross has changed. It no longer signifies every kind of abuse to which they must silently submit; now they understand it to mean the struggles and hardships they endure in order to learn and proclaim the gospel. These include things like having to walk six hours to attend the Bible study group or having to get up at 3:00 a.m. to prepare meals for their children and husband to eat while they go to the Bible study groups. Some endure the hardship of gossip and whispers behind their back: "Where is she going? Who's she meeting? What

9. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2:1049.

kind of mother leaves her household tasks to go study the Bible?" Their response is, "If Mary Magdalene could leave her home to learn the gospel and minister with Jesus, so can we."

One example of how domestic violence was stopped was told by a woman whose husband would frequently beat her after becoming drunk. One morning, when her friends saw her bruised face, they decided to act. Some thirty women came together to the house to confront the husband. These women had moved away from emulating the silent suffering Jesus of Mark and become a community of friends who were ready to lay down their lives for their friend. In this particular instance, the result was truly life-giving, as the husband began that day to give up drinking and never beat his wife again.[10]

As we tell anew the story of the passion of Jesus in our communities, it is important to attend not only to the image of Jesus we preach and teach but also to those of the women in the story. As we tell the story of the courage of Mary Magdalene who left her home to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and tomb, and to be the first witness to the resurrection, it gives courage to contemporary women to do similarly extraordinary things for the sake of the mission.

Mark's story of the passion offers profound hope even in the most seemingly desolate times. God's will is always to save. God is present and powerful even when the cries of the poor and abandoned seem to go unanswered. God continues to draw frail yet faithful disciples into greater conformity with the beloved Son, for the transformation of the world.

A resurrection faith perspective

It is important to remember that the gospel story, both as the evangelist relayed it and as we repeat it today, is told from the perspective of resurrection faith. This means not just that we already know the end of the story, like someone who sneaks a peek at the last pages of a novel to see how it ends before reading the middle. Rather, it means that in retelling the story of the passion, we are in a circular process that invites us ever deeper into the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus. Mark's Gospel is not a linear progression of narrated events but an open-ended, parabolic, puzzling story that invites those who hear it to return again and again to ponder anew the profundity of God's love expressed in Jesus and to conform their lives ever more completely to his. It is suspense-filled, not in the sense of not knowing what will happen in the story but in the sense that we do not know the surprising ways in which God will move us this time. We do not know how the presence of the risen Christ with us as we walk again with him through the passion will shatter our illusions about God and ourselves, opening our hearts to be converted more and more deeply to his way of life.[11]

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10. CODIMUJ, *Con Mirada, Mente, y Corazón de Mujer,* 134.

11. For further study see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah,* 2 vols., Anchor Bible Reference Library (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1994); John R. Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark,* Sacra Pagina 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002); Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002); William Reiser, *Jesus in Solidarity with His People: A Theologian Looks at Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000); David Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

Following Jesus in Galilee: Resurrection as Empowerment in the Gospel of Mark

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Mark 16:1–8

The resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Mark is surprising not only for its abrupt ending, which has the women fleeing the tomb in amazement and awe, but also because the risen Jesus makes no appearance. In the earliest resurrection tradition Paul reports that Jesus was "raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time . . ." (1 Cor 15:4–6). Moreover, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which use Mark as their primary source, and the Fourth Gospel, which may also count Mark among its sources, all include appearances of the risen Jesus.

Given the consistent and ubiquitous emphasis on appearances of the risen Jesus in the Gospel tradition, it seems apparent that Mark's conspicuous omission is by design and indeed makes a bold statement about the significance of the announcement "he has risen, he is not here" (16:6) for the Gospel's audiences. There is almost universal agreement now that the earliest edition of the Gospel ended at 16:8 and that the ending served to engage hearers rather than provide closure. The effect of such an ending on an audience can be ascertained only by relating it to the rhetorical strategy of the narrative as whole.

There are a number of distinctive features in Mark 16:1–8 that relate the good news that Jesus has risen to the preceding narrative, suggesting that the consequences of his resurrection for hearers have already been intimated. The presence of the women who come to anoint Jesus' body evokes not only his anointing by the woman at Bethany (14:3–9) but all the women characters in Mark's story of Jesus. There are other details in Mark's resurrection account that also tie it to earlier scenes in the narrative and underline the importance of interpreting 16:1–8 in relation to the rest of the Gospel. It is noteworthy that in the tomb the women encounter a "young man . . . dressed in a white robe" (16:5), and the only other occurrence of the term for "young man" (*nēaniskos*) in Mark is in 14:51–52 where a young man in nothing but a linen cloth is seized and runs away naked. The depiction of the young man in 16:5 is also reminiscent of the Gerasene demoniac living in "tombs" who upon being delivered by Jesus is found sitting there "clothed and in his right mind" (5:15). The episodes are linguistically and symbolically interwoven, and in interpreting them the point is not so

much to see the three characters as one but rather to perceive the connection between the divine power operative through Jesus to heal and restore in Galilee and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The young man exhorts the women to "tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee, there you will see him" (16:7). He is simply reiterating what Jesus told Peter in 14:28: "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Mark's resurrection narrative refers not only the women but also the hearers of the Gospel back to Galilee, the place where the power of the Creator to heal, liberate, feed, teach, and restore was manifested in the ministry of Jesus. In other words, the meaning of Jesus' resurrection in Mark is to be found in recalling his proclamation and enactment of God's kingdom in Galilee.

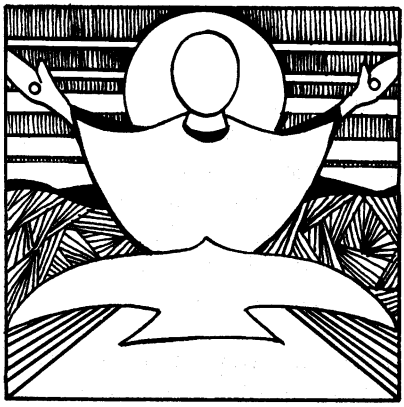
The main theme or *inclusio* of the Gospel of Mark is announced by Jesus in 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Every episode in the narrative is an explication of how the kingdom of God has been either manifested or opposed. Hence the resurrection of Jesus is the climactic demonstration of the sovereignty of the Creator who brings life out of death and prevails over the forces of evil. There is no epiphany in Mark's account of the resurrection because God's power to restore life has been evident throughout the Gospel. So, while the resurrection of Jesus is the climax of the narrative, it is yet another example of the divine power that was at work in the ministry of Jesus. The correlation between God's activity in raising Jesus from the dead and Jesus' proclamation and enactment of the "gospel of God" (1:14) is signaled by the promise that the risen Jesus will meet his followers back in Galilee. The metaphor of the kingdom of God is both temporal and spatial. The audience was informed at the outset that the time for God's rule is now, and in 16:7 (cf. 14:28) Galilee is confirmed as the place where the risen Jesus will meet his followers to continue actualizing the kingdom of God. The ending of the Gospel of Mark is not a conclusion but rather an invitation to consider the implications of Jesus' resurrection for their own involvement in God's kingdom by reconsidering Jesus' Galilean ministry.[1]

The beginning of the Gospel

The Gospel of Mark is the product of an oral culture and was written to be performed dramatically. In interpreting the Gospel it is useful to keep in mind that the audience would have heard the narrative in its entirety, so they would have been impacted by the story as a whole.[2] Moreover, a dramatic presentation would have engaged hearers emotionally and psychologically and beckoned them to contemplate how they might perform Mark's story of Jesus in their own community life. Like any narrative, the Gospel of Mark has a surplus of meaning, so from the very first dramatization the possibility of multiple interpretations and appropriations existed. What people heard would have been influenced by voice inflection and gestures,

1. See Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 70. Kelber, who emphasizes "Mark's oral legacy," observes that "Jesus' entire life and death constitutes a pedagogical paradigm, inspiring the disciples to learn by imitation and participation."

2. On the impact of Mark as a coherent narrative see Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville" Westminster John Knox, 2001), and David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).



which would have varied. Nonetheless, the narrator has used rhetorical devices that serve to guide and direct the hearer's apprehension of the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. As Joanna Dewey has observed, Mark is an interwoven tapestry that employs repetitions, intercalation, echoes, and foreshadowings to correlate the episodes in the Gospel.[3] In part this is accomplished by how the Gospel is structured. However, there are also aural cues in the Greek text of Mark that encourage the audience to comprehend any particular passage in relation to what precedes and comes after it.

The most important and often neglected key to the structure and plot of Mark is the prologue, which includes 1:1–15. Aristotle remarked that the prologue was "a paving the way for what follows" (*Rhetoric*, III.xiii. 14), and ancient audiences were conditioned to listen for the main themes to be expounded upon in the body of the work. After announcing the "beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ," the next words heard are from the Scriptures. The citation ascribed to Isaiah is actually a conflation of a passage from Isa 40:3 with portions of Exod 23:20 and Mal 3:1, which informs the hearer that the "gospel of Jesus Christ" has something to do with the "way of the Lord." The language and imagery of 1:2–3 evoke Second Isaiah's theme of the new exodus and the promise that Yahweh would come in strength to deliver Israel from her bondage among the nations (cf. Isa 40:1–17). In Isa 40:9–10 the verbal form of "gospel" (*euangelizō*) is used twice to proclaim that "the Lord comes with might."[4] John the baptizer is in the "wilderness" where "all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem" come to him, because, as with the first exodus, the second exodus will take place in the wilderness, where Yahweh will again provide for Israel and prevail over the power of evil. The "way of the Lord" (1:2–3) here characterizes the advent of Yahweh who is "great in strength, mighty in power," who "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (Isa 40:26–29). However, it is also used throughout Mark, especially in 8:27–10:45, as a metaphor for following Jesus.

These excerpts from the Scriptures apprise the audience that the hope of God's victorious reign expressed in Isaiah will be realized through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He is acclaimed by John as the "more powerful" one (cf. Isa. 43:16–17). The rending of the heavens at his baptism echoes Isa 64:1–2 and signals

3. Joanna Dewey, "Mark as Interwoven Tapestry: Forecasts and Echoes for a Listening Audience," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 221–36, and "The Gospel of Mark as an Oral-Aural Event: Implications for Interpretation," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Edgar McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1995), 145–63.

4. See Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Siebeck, 1997). Watts makes a compelling case for the influence of Isaiah's new exodus topos on the Gospel of Mark.

the long-awaited new exodus intervention of Yahweh on Israel's behalf: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence . . . to make your name known to your adversaries so that the nations might tremble at your presence."

A voice from heaven, quoting Psalm 2:7, acclaims Jesus as the messianic servant of Isaiah who has been endowed with divine authority to inaugurate Israel's eschatological comfort and deliverance from the hands of the nations (cf. Isa 40:10–31; 51:9–16; 52:10–15).[5] That he has been infused with the very Spirit who hovered over the primeval chaos at the "beginning" of creation (Gen 1:1–2; cf. Mk 1:1) alerts hearers that the divine presence will be mediated through him to restore and reorder creation.[6] The prologue sets out the conceptual framework in terms of which the plot of the narrative is to be grasped. The audience is assured that God's empowering presence will be mediated through Jesus to deliver the people of God, but the means and scope of this deliverance in Mark is contrary to expectations and requires the hearer to contemplate the *modus operandi* of the kingdom of God and its implication for the practices of the covenant community.

Jesus' Galilean ministry

The new exodus imagery introduced in the prologue prompts hearers to construe the exorcisms, healings, feedings, teaching with authority, and other deeds of power as the fulfillment of the promise of God's eschatological victory. The numerous echoes and allusions to Scripture indicate that Mark's depiction of Jesus' ministry in Galilee must be understood in the light of Israel's history and hopes. It begins with a series of conflict stories in which the divine authority and power manifested through him is challenged by other powers that are characterized as working against God's creative and redemptive purposes. In the first act of his public ministry in the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus' authority is contrasted with that of scribes and is also used to exorcise a man with an unclean spirit (1:21–28). The use of divine power to deliver those who are tyrannized by demonic forces or marginalized by illness is what gives rise to Jesus' conflict with the Jewish authorities, which intensifies as the plot develops and he heads toward Jerusalem.

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5. The voice from heaven cites Ps 2:7, an enthronement psalm that was interpreted messianically, and Isa 42:1. Together these references evoke an image of the anointed king who proclaims God's eschatological victory, which implies the shattering of hostile kingship (1:14–15). See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 166.

6. Both the calming-of-the-storm episode in 4:35–41 and the scene in which Jesus walks on water in 6:45–52 identify Jesus with the presence of the Creator who has power over and orders the forces of chaos, which is symbolized by the water. This is especially clear in 6:50 when he consoles his terrified disciples who see him walking on the sea with the words "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." "It is I" is a translation of "I Am" (*ego eimi*), which is a circumlocution for Yahweh. This affirmation of God's presence in the person of Jesus, however, must be understood within the monotheistic framework of early Judaism in which agents of God's activity often have divine qualities. See George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 89–117. Yahweh's victory over his enemies is often expressed in creational chaos-defeating language characteristic of the divine-warrior hymns of early Israel (cf. Exodus 15; Isa 44:27; 50:2; Ps 76:6f.; 18:8–16; 104:7). See Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, 160–63.

The ensuing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities is focused on the character and purpose of divine power. Divine "authority" and "power" are mediated through him in Galilee to deliver people possessed by malevolent spirits (1:21–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29), to "release" them from sins thought to be the cause of physical maladies (2:1–12), and especially to heal and restore to community those who have been disenfranchised (1:29–34; 5:21–43; 6:5, 53–56; 7:31–37; 8:22–26; 10:46–52). Upon curing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath Jesus poses a question to some Pharisees who are waiting for him to break the law: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (3:4) Implied in Jesus' question is a contrast and comparison between the redemptive intent of God's power and the destructive effects of the power wielded by Jesus' antagonists in Mark. Indeed, in 3:6 the narrator informs hearers that the Pharisees, who claim God's authority to interpret the law, "immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to *destroy* him." Henceforth the narrative moves inexorably toward Jesus' confrontation with the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem where he will "suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and *be killed*" (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).

On one level the Gospel of Mark is a study in the difference between the power of the Spirit manifested through Jesus and the temporal authority exercised by those who are characterized as being opposed to God's purposes. It is interesting that scribes who have come down from Jerusalem acknowledge that there is a power operative through Jesus, but they allege that "he is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out demons" (3:20–27). By the same token, later in Jerusalem the real source of the Jewish aristocracy's authority is disclosed in an episode in which they ask Jesus about the origins of his "authority." Jesus replies to their question with a query of his own regarding whether John's baptism came from "heaven" or was of "human origin." After arguing among themselves they are reticent to answer: "If we say, 'from heaven,' he will say, 'why did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'from human origin?'—they were afraid of the crowd . . ." (11:27–33). Although the Jerusalem leaders claim that their authority comes from heaven, the ironic reality from the narrator's point of view is that it is actually subject to the "crowd." Likewise, Pilate, representative of the Roman Empire and the most powerful political figure in the Gospel, is said to have crucified Jesus not in compliance with Roman law but rather to "satisfy the crowd" that repeatedly cries out "crucify him" (15:13–15).

Following Jesus on "the way": kingdom values and practices

From the opening verses of the prologue Jesus has been acclaimed as the "more powerful" one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1:7–8), which suggests to hearers who also have been baptized that they will learn from Mark's story of Jesus what it means for them to be empowered by the same Spirit that imbued Jesus at his baptism. The tearing open of the heavens at Jesus' baptism indicates that he is God's agent of deliverance and redemption, but his enactment of the new exodus in Galilee also requires a reorientation and commitment to the alternative values and practices of the kingdom of God. Mark's depiction of Jesus' Galilean ministry is focused on the beneficiaries of Jesus' deed of power, but in the middle section of the Gospel he turns his attention to the formation of his followers in the "way of the Lord." This

section of Mark is bracketed by the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida in 8:22–26 and the healing of blind Bartimaeus in 10:46–52. The blind man of Bethsaida episode is immediately preceded by the feeding of the 4,000 in 8:1–10.

Both feeding stories are reminiscent of God's provision for Israel in the wilderness.[7] In the first, Jesus instructs the disciples to give the people something to eat (6:37), but they don't apprehend his attempt to involve them in this enactment of the kingdom. After the second feeding he chides them for failing to recognize and trust the "way of the Lord": "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember? . . . Then he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?' (8:17–21)

Blindness and seeing are metaphors in Mark for grasping not only the nearness but the marks of the kingdom of God as "new exodus." Moreover, the Gospel presents the "way of the Lord" not just as something to behold but as a reality in which Jesus' followers have a share. In other words, the "way of the Lord" is also a path, a way of life. Progression from simply catching sight of God's liberating and restorative power to acting on it is signified in the narrative by the counterpoint between the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida and the healing of blind Bartimaeus. Upon receiving his sight, the blind man from Bethsaida initially sees people, "but they look like trees, walking." Jesus again put his hands upon his eyes until he "saw everything clearly" (8:24–25). Bartimaeus, on the other hand, is an exemplar of faithfulness because, when Jesus restored his sight, he "immediately followed him on *the way*" (10:52).

In the middle section of the Gospel Jesus turns his attention to the formation of his followers in the "way of the Lord."

This didactic section of Mark is organized around three passion predictions in which Jesus explains to his disciples that it is "necessary" for him to "suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31–38; cf. 9:30–32; 10:32–34). Although it has been apparent since the conflict stories early in the narrative that Jesus posed a serious challenge to the interests of Jewish religious authorities and therefore would have to be vanquished (cf. 3:6), the disciples are depicted as obtuse and antagonistic in their response to Jesus' premonition regarding his impending fate in Jerusalem (8:32–33; 9:32). The dullness of Jesus' inner circle serves as a foil for enlightened hearers who have been primed to expect a confrontation between Jesus and the Jerusalem leadership. From the standpoint of the audience, the repeated passion predictions are important because they provide the occasion for Jesus to clarify the values and practices of followers who would devote themselves to the "way of the Lord."

Much of the material in Mark 8–10 elucidates the attitudes and manner of life

7. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark*, 177–78.

that befit followers who, unlike Peter, do have eyes to discern the difference between "divine things" and "human things" (8:33), that is, the difference between the way God works and the way religio-political order works.[8] Jesus here instructs his followers, which includes hearers of the Gospel, in kingdom values and practices and assumes that they will continue the ministry he began in Galilee after his death and resurrection. There is more emphasis on kingdom values in the catechesis than on specific practices, and as in Mark 1–8 a key theme is authority and power.

Honor was the foundational Greco-Roman cultural value, and it was antithetical to the values Jesus extolled.

The difference between divine and human power is crystallized in the passage immediately following the third passion prediction where Jesus contrasts his practice with the norms of the Greco-Roman social order (10:32–45). His teaching follows on the heels of an attempt by James and John to secure positions of eminence by riding Jesus' coattails into "glory." Jesus offers a poignant sketch of the imperial pattern of power as contrary to the alternative praxis he exemplifies: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:42–45).

Throughout his Galilean ministry Jesus delivered people from the mostly impersonal forces that exercised control over them, but, as he journeys to Jerusalem, the symbolic center of Jewish religious and political authority, Jewish and Roman leaders will personify this hegemonic power. Already in 8:15 Jesus warned his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Because leaven is a common metaphor for the "evil inclination" in Judaism, Jesus here insinuates their complicity with the inimical powers that oppress the people.[9] In contrast to religious and political leaders preoccupied with their authority and reputation, Jesus is portrayed as one who "served" those in need.

Although early in the narrative scribes and Pharisees debate the interpretation of Torah with Jesus in the conflict stories (cf. 2:23–3:6; 7:1–23), it becomes apparent that the real point of contention has little to do

8. The Greek text of 8:33 uses the verb for moral reasoning (*froneō*) and distinguishes between being intent on "the things of God" and a merely human manner of thinking and acting. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1065–66.

9. See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 510. The "evil inclination" is the "destructive and anarchic impulse within the hearts of human beings that causes them to sin. In Mark "leaven" is associated with a hardened heart (8:17). In the dualistic worldview of early Judaism evil is often seen as the function of cosmic forces. See Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*, 62–75.

with theological disputes, at least from Jesus' point of view. Jesus' only explicit criticism of scribes comes in 12:38–40, and then only after he has commended a scribe who agrees with him that the Shema (Deut 6:4–5) and the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18) are the most important commandments: "you are not far from the kingdom of God," he tells him (12:34). But he then goes on to caution his followers: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogue and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers" (12:38–40). According to Jesus, the problem with the scribes is not their theology per se but their behavior. They are guided by the preoccupation with honor and status that characterized Greco-Roman society, the same preoccupation that motivated James and John's request to sit on Jesus' right and left hand. Honor was the foundational Greco-Roman cultural value, and it was antithetical to the values Jesus extolled like denying one's self (8:34–35) and receiving a child (9:36–37) or becoming a "slave of all" (10:44). Neither children nor slaves had any status or honor in antiquity.

Although everyone competed for honor in the Greco-Roman world, it was by and large something that was enjoyed mostly by an elite minority. The majority of the population paid homage to those who exerted the most influence on their lives and, indeed, were dependent upon them as benefactors. In denouncing the practice of exercising power over others, Jesus emphasized that the "first," or most honored, among his followers must be "slave of all" (10:42–44). This is ironic counsel inasmuch as slaves were "animate tools," nonpersons, with no legal rights and permanently stigmatized as dishonorable. They were at the opposite end of the sociopolitical spectrum from those "who seemed to rule" (my translation) and were honored as "great ones." This contrast sets up the passion narrative in which Jesus will suffer humiliation or dishonor at the hands of Jewish and Roman despots and will ultimately be crucified, a form of state terrorism reserved primarily for slaves.

A confrontation with hegemonic power

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, which is staged as a parody of imperial power in the form of processions in which political and military leaders were honored as they processed into the city, marks the transition from the teaching section to the trials and execution of Jesus. Approximately one third of Mark's narrative is devoted to a graphic depiction of what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem. This part of the narrative is richly textured and full of irony, but what is particularly striking is that Jesus is transmuted from agent of God's power in Galilee to a victim of imperial power in Jerusalem. Although the Gospel depicts Pilate as a rather weak character in order to hold the priestly aristocracy accountable for Jesus' death, one aspect of Markan irony is that Jerusalem operates like any other temple state in the Roman Empire, and the administrators of the Temple act like imperious "Gentile" rulers. In terms of the rhetorical effect on the audience, hearers who would have identified with beneficiaries of God's power to heal and restore in Galilee earlier in the Gospel must now witness the full brunt of "rulers," namely the priestly class and Roman prefect, who "lord it over" the people as they follow Jesus into a downward spiral of tyranny and brutality.

Contemporary readers of the passion narrative are inclined to focus on the theo-

logical significance of Jesus' death, because the passion predictions typically have been interpreted in terms of sacrificial atonement. But Mark's graphic depiction of Jesus' rejection, suffering, and death would probably have had a more visceral impact on an ancient audience hearing the Gospel performed in its entirety. Hearers drawn into a dramatic presentation of the passion narrative must witness the horror of the crucifixion as Jesus is mocked, taunted, spit upon, and then hung on a cross to die. The hearer is not so much invited to ponder the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death but rather is confronted with an epiphany of injustice (14:56–63; 15:315), humiliation, abuse, and violent death (14:65; 15:16–20, 32). The rhetorical force of Mark's vivid portrayal exposes the systemic personification of the power of evil that held people hostage in Galilee.

Hearers have been told that Jesus' death, like his ministry, would somehow be redemptive: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45; cf. 14:22–25). However, the term "ransom" is not a sacrificial metaphor.[10] It is an economic metaphor that denotes the buying back of hostages and was frequently used to refer to the sum paid for the manumission of a slave. In this instance a person is given in exchange for hostages rather than money. Jesus goes into captivity instead of the "many." Jesus is here presented as one who sets people free from captivity to the religio-political system vividly depicted in the passion so that they don't have to live as captives to it, but his death as a victim of its violence does not accomplish anything for hearers apart from their engagement in the struggle that resulted in his crucifixion. The narrator has reinforced the connection between Jesus' rejection, suffering, and death with the values and practices reflected in his continued commitment to God's purposes, even though it entailed the ignominy and agony of crucifixion (cf. 14: 32–36). So it is not just his fate but perhaps more importantly his faithfulness that hearers are to identify with.[11] The Gospel was designed to motivate hearers to live as faithful followers of the "way of the Lord" exemplified by Jesus in ministry and the passion.

Meeting Jesus in Galilee: resurrection as empowerment and practice

Those who have heard Mark's story of Jesus performed have witnessed God coming in strength to heal and restore people in his Galilean ministry, and they have traveled with Jesus to Jerusalem where they have seen him falsely accused and executed as an enemy of the Roman order. The "darkness over the whole land" (15:33)

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10. It is never used in the Septuagint as a sacrificial term. See Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 115. Schüssler-Fiorenza observes that "the image evoked in Mark 10:45 is not that of atonement but rather of the ransoming of a people living under slavery or that of captives of war set free by the death of Christ."

11. In Gethsemane Jesus affirms his commitment to do what God wills (14:36). Although he has stated in the passion predictions that is "necessary" for him to be rejected, suffer, and die, there is nothing in the text to suggest that God deems his death "necessary" or that this is "God's will." Rather, his faithfulness in the passion narrative is expressed in his willingness to endure the machinations of the imperial system that God will triumph over by raising him from the dead. The connection with the faithfulness of his followers was indicated already in 3:35: "whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

and the rending of the temple veil (15:39) signify God's judgment of those who presided over this religio-political order. The subsequent report that Jesus "has risen" indicates to hearers that neither death nor the autocrats who exercise authority over the people are able to thwart God's purposes or prevail against God's life-giving power. More important, by referring the disciples, and hence also the audience, back to Galilee to meet the risen Jesus the resurrection narrative challenges Jesus' followers to evaluate their own commitment to the "way of the Lord." Instead of verifying that Jesus is alive with an appearance story, the narrator engages hearers with an ending that offers neither closure nor reassurance but rather requires them to consider the significance of Jesus' Galilean ministry for their own lives and ministry.

Followers of Jesus who have just heard Mark's story of Jesus in its entirety are in the end referred back to the beginning of the Gospel where "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near" (1:15). The narrative is woven together through foreshadowings and echoes that prompt the audience to apprehend the significance of particular episodes in the light of subsequent or preceding episodes. The resurrection narrative was presaged with auditory cues in several exorcisms and healings during Jesus' Galilean ministry. The first prefiguring of Jesus' resurrection occurred with the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. The text simply says that she "lay sick with a fever" and that Jesus "took her by the hand and *raised* her up, and the fever left; and she *served* them" (1:31). This succinct account of healing may not seem to have much gravity for people reading the text in English, but auditors listening to a performance of the Greek text would be struck by the fact that this is the same verb (*egeirō*) used of Jesus being raised from the dead (16:6). In the light of what Jesus has taught and what has happened to him in Mark, this account of Peter's mother-in-law's being "raised" so that she can "serve" can be taken as a précis of the message of the Gospel for hearers. In Galilee, which in Mark represents the place where God heals and restores, Jesus' followers are empowered by the Spirit to serve (cf. 10:42–45).

The gravity of employing the same verb to describe Jesus' healings that was used to denote his resurrection is corroborated by its repeated use in the first part of Mark. When Jesus heals the paralytic in 2:1–11 he exhorts him to "rise," and then the narrator reports that he was "raised," the same passive form of the verb used of Jesus' resurrection in 16:6. The fact that those who witness this were "amazed and glorified God" (2:12) may also be important, because the women who are told that Jesus has been raised respond similarly with astonishment and reverent fear.[12] Jesus tells the man with a withered hand in to "rise" (3:3) before restoring his hand. All of the episodes in Mark 5 should be construed as resurrection stories. The Gerasene demoniac was living among the "tombs" and had often been "restrained with shackles and chains" when Jesus exorcises a demon named "Legion" (5:1–20). He reacts in a manner that is exemplary for any and all faithful followers: "he went

12. See Marie Noonan Sabin, *Reopening the Word: Reading Mark as Theology in the Context of Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 197–98. Sabin has made a compelling argument for interpreting the women's response of "fear" in 16:8 in terms of reverent awe because it is more consistent with both the other words used in Mark 16, namely "trembling" (*tromos*) and "ecstasy" (*ekstasis*). It is also consistent with people's responses to Jesus' deeds of power in Galilee.

All of the episodes in Mark 5 should be construed as resurrection stories.

away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone was *amazed*" (5:20).

The healing of Jairus' daughter in 5:21–43 is interrupted by a woman who had been "suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years" (5:25–34). The fact that Jesus was "aware that power had gone forth from him" (5:30) underlines that this is a manifestation of God "in strength" come to restore and release from bondage the people of God. Noteworthy, again, is her response to this display of divine power: "knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him" (5:33). The episode with Jairus' daughter anticipates what Jesus tells the Sadducees who query him about resurrection, namely that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is "God not of the dead, but of the living" (12:27). By the time they get to Jairus' house the people announce that the girl is dead, but Jesus insists that "the child is not dead but sleeping" (5:39). He then takes her by the hand and says "'Talitha cum,' which means, 'Little girl, get up'" (5:41). Once more the verb "to raise" (*egeirō*) is used. Those who witness God's power to bring life out of death are yet again "overcome with amazement" (5:42).

Galilee is the setting of the new exodus in which the people of God were liberated, healed, and sustained by the power of God. Just as these "deeds of power" portended that Jesus would be raised from the dead, so the resurrection narrative echoes the divine power active through his ministry and beckons hearers to return to that place, wherever it may be, to engage with the risen Jesus in God's ongoing work of healing, restoration, and redemption. The primary aim of the resurrection narrative is not to convey information but to impel those who hear the story to become faithful followers of Jesus. Those who have been with Jesus in Galilee and traveled with him to Jerusalem and then Golgotha must decide whether they will set their minds on "divine things" (8:33) and perform the "will of God" (3:35; 14:36) or continue to live as captives of the Greco-Roman social order that co-opted the ruling class of Judea. Jesus has shown them the "way of the Lord" in which God's power was active *through* him to address the needs of the dispossessed. In the resurrection narrative followers of Jesus who have been baptized and endowed with the same Spirit are directed to meet Jesus back in the place of his ministry where that same divine power is active through those who embody the gospel of God by serving and bearing witness.

The *Imago Dei* as Embodied in *Nepantla*—A Latino Perspective

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The context

A little self-disclosure is in order. I would like to create a geographical image in your mind so as give you a reference point for this topic on the *imago Dei* and how this life-embodying and life-affirming doctrine of the church might help us to value and affirm the human dignity of the most marginalized among us, specifically the Hispanic and Latin American immigrants of our communities.[1]

I have a particular interest in this topic as a focus of ministry, as I am the son of immigrant parents and grandparents who left Mexico for south Texas during the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920. My family settled in what is now referred to as the Río Grande Valley of south Texas, in the small town of San Juan that is located about twenty miles from the U.S.–Mexican border. As the son of immigrants I inherited the oral history of my family and the experience of social, economic, political, and cultural displacement that now, almost one hundred years later, continues to resonate with the experience of newly arrived immigrants and the many folks who have lived in the borderlands since before the Alamo became the subject of film and fable.

This geographical location of the Spanish borderlands can be described by the Nahuatl word *nepantla*, an indigenous term meaning "the place in the middle." It refers to that physical and psychical space where one experiences displacement as a way of being. In this middle zone one no longer belongs to one nation or another but somehow belongs to both, while being claimed by neither. In this place of ambiguity, one experiences all kinds of disorientation. In this place one often becomes a nonperson and a member of an invisible community that shares the experience of

1. I use the terms Hispanic and Latino/a interchangeably throughout this paper in a partial attempt to reflect the self-understanding of the community. These terms, however, are incomplete descriptors, because they do not reflect the indigenous and African roots of the community that are often denied and suppressed. In the complex history of the Americas the conquered and enslaved other was dehumanized by the use of racial categories. These categories continue to leave their mark of ambiguity on the community. I point this out in order to remind us that all people of whatever origin are created in the image and likeness of God. The term Latin American refers to the many immigrants from throughout the hemisphere who are now our neighbors. Members of my parish from Central America prefer to use their national identity as their primary descriptor rather than to adopt the U.S. term Hispanic that lumps all Spanish-speaking groups into one category.

dislocation, cultural rejection, and economic exploitation. Such is the condition of many of our neighbors in the Southwest and especially among the immigrants who come seeking jobs and a better way of life. The idea that "they don't belong here" or that "they need to go back to where they came from" is a primary subject of public discourse and public policy in Texas and throughout the nation. I believe that the church is called to offer an alternative and critical commentary from a different paradigm.

This past summer I was driving from San Juan in the Rio Grande Valley to Austin, where I teach at the Lutheran Seminary of the Southwest and at the Episcopal Seminary in the Southwest. Not long after stopping at the border checkpoint, which is located approximately ninety miles from the U.S.–Mexican border, I saw three Mexican men walking by the side of the road under the hot sun and in the middle of nowhere, as it were, in the midst of the wild brush country of south Texas. They were carrying the familiar plastic gallon milk cartons that I assume contained water to drink. This is a common practice among undocumented immigrants who cross the border to go north looking for jobs. I was traveling at a high rate of speed—not an uncommon practice in those long stretches of the Texas brush country—and was unable to stop in time to offer them a ride. But at the next turnaround, which was not too far off, I headed back to try to find them. I wanted to offer them a ride to San Antonio or to Austin. I could not find them and turned around again, but, much to my frustration, I was unable to locate them.

I conjectured three possibilities: the men walked into the brush to continue their trek north; someone else offered them a ride; or, more than likely, they were picked up by the border patrol that often looks for the undocumented along those roads. The reason I suspect that these men were undocumented immigrants is that, unlike U.S. citizens who hitch rides by a physical indication of their intent, these men did not. In fact, they were walking straight ahead without bothering to look back at passing motorists. This lack of intent to hitch a ride was a clue that they were not U.S. citizens.

In those long stretches of Texas brush country between the Rio Grande Valley and San Antonio, a distance of some four hundred miles, it is not uncommon for border patrol vehicles to stop and park in hidden nooks along the road waiting for unsuspecting immigrants in order to deport them to Mexico. It is not uncommon along here to see border patrol vans transporting the undocumented in their back seats, behind grated screens. In fact, the image is so familiar along this route that one hardly notices anymore unless prompted to do so. The image forms a part of the natural landscape of the Southwest. These men and women are the nameless nonpersons who form the invisible community that supports and maintains the economic infrastructure of the American Southwest and beyond.

On another occasion our Seminary Program took a group of students to the border for a cultural encounter with the people along both sides of the U.S.–Mexican border. On our return to San Antonio and Austin, and not far from the border cities of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras, we noticed a helicopter not far from the road and close to the land creating a whirlwind of dust in the desert landscape. In our naiveté we initially thought it must be some wealthy rancher herding cattle out of the desert brush. However, we thought it odd that a helicopter should be used for this purpose—until we noticed the distinctive symbol of the border patrol. It dawned on us then that those flying the helicopter were herding not cattle out of the brush but

undocumented immigrants who were using this desolate place as their point of entry into Texas. They were being herded, corralled, and lassoed, as it were, by high-tech means. These undocumented immigrants, unable to earn a living in their native country, had become human targets for the U.S. deportation machine. We faculty and students returned to Austin that day with this graphic image firmly embedded on our minds. It would serve as a basis for our continuing conversation on what it means to be in ministry in the Southwest.

We believe and teach that place is context for theological education and formation. The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest and the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest are located in a highly attractive and expensive part of Austin, just north of the University of Texas campus and very near the capitol. In fact, the capitol dome is visible through the windows of the chapel. Like many other cities throughout the Southwest, Austin is divided both racially and economically by an interstate highway. Historical records indicate that this demarcation was intentional and aimed at separating the downtown business and government district from the lower-income and less-developed Hispanic and African-American communities in East Austin.

I often take my students to the East side of Interstate 35 to have lunch at my favorite Mexican restaurant. I take them there because I want them to see a part of the city that otherwise would remain unfamiliar to them. I also do this because I want them to meet the hard-working people who serve us meals, the waitresses and the cooks who speak to us in limited English but who will gladly converse with us in Spanish. They talk to us about their struggles in their native land and all that they endured and suffered to get to this country. They tell us



about *la lucha*, as Cuban immigrant and *Mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz calls it, the struggle of life on the margins of our communities. I tell my students that many of these folks are undocumented but find here in East Austin a place where they can work and earn a living, which they do by serving us.

Out of curiosity I once asked the waitress who regularly serves me lunch where she came from. She told me Veracruz, México, on the gulf coast. I asked her if she had crossed the border in Brownsville, Texas, or some other border town. She smiled and looked away as she told me in Spanish, "*por allí*," "thereabouts." I took that to mean that she crossed the border with the assistance of a *coyote*, a paid smuggler who helped her to cross the Rio Grande River, or perhaps she swam across the river on her own. This is not an uncommon occurrence in the Texas borderlands. In fact, crossing the river under the cover of darkness was the way my father and his parents and extended family crossed the Rio Grande in 1918 when they fled the Mexican Revolution. Like this waitress who serves me lunch each week in East Austin, there are many others who serve us,

not only in the many fine restaurants and hotels of cities like San Antonio and Austin but throughout the country. Last summer, while visiting Manhattan, I met two waiters who shared similar stories with me while serving me at upscale restaurants in Central Park.

In order to begin to answer the question of how the church embodies the doctrine of the *imago Dei* in the Southwest I felt it necessary to give you this panoramic view of an immigrant reality that we as a theological community and church find difficult to dismiss and that we attempt to address in the preparation and formation of our clergy. We encourage our students to "read" the city as a text for theological study and critical reflection. We assist them to develop critical thinking skills, to ask the difficult doctrinal questions that arise from living in our particular context:

- What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God in the context of the Southwest, where immigrants and many native folk are often not seen at all, even as they construct our roads, build our homes, serve us in restaurants, and live close enough to be our neighbors?
- What does it mean to be a seminary in mission in this context so that all people, regardless of ethnic heritage, immigrant status, or native language, are valued and esteemed as children of God?
- What does it mean for the church to embody a doctrine that affirms the life-creating and life-affirming nature of the Creator who from the very beginning of the creation narrative calls it "very good" (Gen 1:31)?

These and other questions naturally arise from reading the biblical text of the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26) within our context of mission and ministry.

Perspectives on the doctrine of the *imago Dei*

I want to offer some potential insights into these questions that might shed light on how the church might respond to the invisible community and to those who are seeking answers to these and other questions. There have been many and diverse interpretations of the image of God throughout history, but most scholars today generally agree that it refers to the profound value and sanctity of human life as well as the potential for relationship with the Creator. Claus Westermann indicates that to be created in the image and likeness of God does not mean a particular human quality (such as reason, which was especially exalted during the Enlightenment); rather, it concerns the purpose of relationship and responsibility for the creation. He observes that the Creator creates a being analogous to the Creator, to whom the Creator can speak, and who will listen and speak to the Creator. This purpose "remains true despite all human differences; every person is created in the image of God."[2] Further, humanity is given a special task and is gifted with human dignity, a value of high esteem and respect that is intrinsic to human being. This value was of particular interest for the early church.

For Philip Hefner, the human being is created in the image of God as a "created co-creator" with a high destiny. This destiny is essential to the world if the human is to bear the mark of the Creator. For Hefner, the ability to make self-aware, self-critical decisions, act on those decisions, and take

2. Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 10–11.

responsibility for them are characteristics that constitute the image of God in humanity. This includes the freedom to conceive of actions and to carry them out—a freedom that is grounded and finds meaning in a relationship with God. The ability to reflect on this freedom and actions is what allows the human agent as a created co-creator to be responsible for the creation and to discover one's likeness to God and one's origin and destiny in God.[3]

The early church tradition affirmed that the human being was created in the image and likeness of God and construed the *imago Dei* symbol as an inclusive concept that affirmed the human worth, dignity, and nobility of all persons and of the marginalized in particular. Elaine Pagels observes that this interpretation of the doctrine was "good news" for the conquered and enslaved people of the Roman Empire. All of the marginalized—women, children, slaves, and foreigners—were esteemed as members of the human family. They were valued as part of the good creation of God.[4]

Members of the diverse Hispanic and Latina/o theological community recover this perspective of the church in their quest to affirm their own unique creation in the image and likeness of God. These voices offer critical insight and nuances of the image of God that reveal that the concept is not static or confined to the historical formulations of their traditions but is fluid as a live organism and symbol that seeks to express itself in new, creative, inclusive, and life-affirming ways.

Brazilian theologian Vítor Westhelle offers a perspective from the social context of the poor and powerless of Latin America that finds resonance within the context of the Southwest. Westhelle interprets the *imago Dei* as a praxis of love, which was the work of the Christ and his disciples. He maintains that the poor and the powerless

The poor and the powerless of history cannot affirm their creation (of themselves or of the world around them) when they are searching for food in city dumps.

of history cannot affirm their creation (of themselves or of the world around them) when they are searching for food in city dumps. This is a reality that our students at the Lutheran and Episcopal seminaries witnessed when we visited the city dump of Matamoros, Mexico, on the border with Brownsville, Texas, during a January cultural immersion experience.

Westhelle reminds us of the reality of our neighbors in the two-thirds world and observes that to be created in the image of God is to participate in affirming the dignity of those who do not have a vital space to exist. For Westhelle, this justice praxis component of the *imago Dei* reflects the nature and imperative of God.[5]

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3. Philip Hefner, "Fourth Locus, The Creation," *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 325–27.

4. Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1989), 56–57, 100–101.

5. Vítor Westhelle, "Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space: A Latin American Perspective," *Lift Every Voice:*

Hispanic and Latina theologians and ethicists articulate the significance of the high destiny and task of the human agent who is *imago Dei* from within the experience of the community. Isasi-Díaz has identified this special task of the human agent as the historical project of the "kin-dom" of God in which the Latina community participates as historical subjects through the gift and responsibility of moral agency that is exercised in the struggle for justice. She notes that we are all kin to each other when we struggle for a more just and equitable community. To struggle for justice is to be *imago Dei*. She notes that one cannot call oneself a Christian and not struggle for justice, as justice is an inherent principle of the kin-dom of God. One participates in the kin-dom of God not as an isolated individual, a concept that is contrary to Hispanic and indigenous self-understanding, but as highly valued members of a community who share a common life in solidarity with others who struggle against systemic oppression and for the common good of the community. Isasi-Díaz speaks for many who continue to come to the U.S. because of geopolitical and global economic systems. She joins the cause of those who struggle daily not only to survive economically but for a more just social order. She and others from within her tradition understand that many who appear to be invisible are not in fact nameless but have a name, a family, a faith life, and a place of origin that is dear to their hearts.[6]

This is a sentiment shared by Virgilio Elizondo, founder of the Mexican-American Cultural Center of San Antonio. He writes about his experience growing up in this city as a Mexican-American and being the subject of ridicule and of racial stereotypes because his culture and Spanish language were not valued. He has written extensively on the experience of the native Mexican-American population and the many Latino immigrants who visit his church, San Fernando Cathedral, where they find a welcoming place—so welcoming that Rabbi Samuel Stahl of this city has called this historic church "the cathedral of the people."

In his latest book, *A God of Incredible Surprises*, Elizondo writes that "with each newborn child, the image and likeness of God are once again made visible. Or, as our ancient Mesoamerican ancestors would say, Creation is once again renewed."[7] Further, in the man Jesus the truth of God regarding the human is revealed. In Jesus the *mestizo* or mix-blood peasant of Galilee, God became the nothing of the world, so that the nothing and everyone else may know that no one, no one human being, is inferior to others. This, Elizondo observes, is indeed "good news" for everyone, but especially for the "born-nothings" of this world. Because every human being is created in the image of God, to disregard anyone, to despise anyone, and even more to exploit, enslave, and rob the weak and the poor are offenses against the Creator, for everyone is created with equal dignity, value, and beauty.[8]

Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 128–40.

6. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha, In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). For an excellent study of the spiritual lives of an immigrant community, see Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

7. Virgilio Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 42.

8. Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises*, 41.

Ethicist Ismael García, a Puerto Rican of the diaspora, offers yet another perspective of the *imago Dei*. García teaches at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary not far from our campus. He identifies the special task given the human at creation as the creative agency of the human being who is the image of God as a creative agent. This agency empowers the Hispanic community to pursue the vision or historical project of creating a more inclusive and compassionate community. Human dignity and responsibility are exemplified in the ethics of care of the community. For García, dignity (*dignidad*) is a gift in the act of creation. It is relational in character and irrevocable.[9] It can be trampled upon, but no one can take it away.[10]

Historian Justo González shares a similar view when he observes that creation in the image and likeness of God means the exercise of the creative power and love of God after whom we have been created. As love, the nature of God is being-for-others. To be fully human is thus to be for others in a praxis of love and care.[11]

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the *imago Dei* is the language component that characterizes its essence, for it is through language that one participates with the divine in co-creating and naming the world and God. In addition to acts of justice and ethical care and concern for others, to be *imago Dei* gives us the ability to know and to speak to God as *Diosito*/Daddy, the caring and endearing God who knows us intimately and cares for us. This is particularly significant for the immigrant and native Spanish-speaking and bilingual communities that now constitute a majority population in many of our cities including San Antonio. As Westermann indicates, "implicit in being created in the image of God is the capacity for language." The history of a people emerges from a common language that expresses the community's self-understanding and concept of God.

Westermann's observations resonate with the Hispanic perspective on the *imago Dei* for several reasons. First, language, or the ability to speak and name the world, is

Human dignity and responsibility are exemplified in the ethics of care of the community.

derivative of the *imago Dei* as a gift of God.[12] The language of the family of origin is a gift of a historical and theological worldview.[13] The gift of language also confers an identity that is nurtured and affirmed through the culture and history of the family and the community. It allows the beneficiaries of the gift to name the world and thereby to co-create with the Creator and Donor of the gift. It is through the capacity and gift of language implicit in

9. Ismael García, *Dignidad: Ethics through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 130–31.

10. Ismael García, "Ismael García: Speaking of Dignity." *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 114, no. 1 (1998): 19–23.

11. Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 131–38.

12. Westermann, *Genesis*, 11.

13. See González, *Mañana*, 75–87.

The Spanish language for the Hispanic/Latino community is more than a tool of communication. It is central to our identity.

the *imago Dei* and made explicit in our language of concern and care that the community is empowered to be co-creators with God as historical subjects and as agents of love and justice. It is through the language of the people that the ethics of care is embodied. Language as a form of communication allows one to connect with the other who may be a displaced immigrant.

Language also allows the community to worship God in the language of the heart. For the Hispanic community the Spanish language is the language of prayer and of communion with God. Through the Spanish language we know God and hear God in the still small voice and in the *coritos*, the little chorus songs that are popular in our worship.[14] To ignore this gift or to attempt to eradicate it in the interests of national cohesion or church unity segregates and devalues native peoples.

Second, language represents history. The gift of language allows connection to the past. It gives the Hispanic immigrant community its sense of history and specificity within a culture that is not its own. It nurtures the cultural memory of faith and reminds the community that it has a place of belonging in the heart of God.

It also provides connection to the larger Hispanic community throughout the United States so that a sense of solidarity and community arises wherever the Spanish language is spoken. It helps to end the isolation that many immigrants feel when they enter this country and do not speak English. It reminds them that they have a common history and familiar roots. It confers *dignidad,* dignity. Ismael García makes this point when he writes that the Spanish language for the Hispanic/Latino community is more than a tool of communication. It is central to our identity. Furthermore, he observes, "to let it go for the sake of social acceptance and advancement, which are quite uncertain, is to contribute to the process of self-annihilation and of diminishing of our dignity."[16] To deny it is to violate the *imago Dei.*

These theologians remind us that the Hispanic community views itself as a people graced and empowered by a *dignidad* that is a gift of God and affirmed in a communal construct of the *imago Dei.* This symbol is about *familia*, family, which is a fluid and expansive concept for the Hispanic community. *Familia* includes more than blood relatives. It is the wider family of God who commune together around a common table as God has cared for us in and through the life and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. *Familia* includes the displaced persons of the community who worship with us in the familiar language of the heart. This language expresses the dialectic of the human and divine encounter in a relationship of care that crosses *fronteras,* or boundaries, such as the U.S.–Mexican border.

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14. See Edwin Aponte, "*Coritos* as Active Symbols in Latino Protestant Popular Religion." *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 2, no. 4 (1995): 57–66.

15. García, *Dignidad*, 102–4.

In San Antonio and throughout Texas, the distinct language of the people is a *mestizo* dialect known as "Tex-Mex," a form of "Spanglish" that is typical of *nepantla*, that hybrid and liminal place where diverse cultures meet to form a new culture and a new creation. In this city this encounter of diversity is celebrated annually as *Fiesta*, a week-long celebration that occurs every spring and that Elizondo has described as a sign of the eschatological hope of the community.[16] During this week folks of many different backgrounds gather as one big *familia* to celebrate the victory of life over death and to affirm the present hope for a better future when all cultures and peoples will be a part of the great eschatological *Fiesta*.[17] In a similar manner, when Hispanic folks hear their own native language and dialects spoken in our churches and seminaries, as we do in the streets of San Antonio and Austin, and hear our God-talk in the special *coritos*, prayers and confessions of the church, as we do at our seminaries, then the church will indeed be a sign of that welcoming place where difference and diversity are valued and where identity is affirmed and celebrated as embodied *imago Dei*.

Putting flesh on the *imago Dei*

To answer the questions raised by this doctrine in our context of ministry the *imago Dei* must be enfleshed—that is, embodied in a way that does not do violence to any culture or tradition but that affirms all cultures and traditions. Language is key here. To embody in the Spanish language means to *encarnar*, literally, to put on flesh. Our scriptural tradition sheds light on this notion of embodiment. John 1:14 reminds us that "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." This, I believe, is John's way of saying that the Christ of faith put on particularity. The Word, or *Logos*, put on social location, specifically marginality as a Galilean Jew. As the son of peasants, Jesus of Nazareth experienced the plight of immigrants who flee their countries of origin to escape all kinds of persecution. To put flesh on the *imago Dei* in our context is to see God *encarnado*, made flesh, in Jesus the homeless Jew and in those who come to us in like manner. Our context beckons us to examine his life from the perspective of the *fronteras*, the margins and middle zone where Jesus lived and ministered. Immigrants and native folks relate well to this image of God as Jesus the immigrant and homeless Jew because their experience is similar.

Jesus was born in *nepantla*, a middle zone where cultures and peoples met and intermingled. He probably spoke a form of *mestizo* Greek and Aramaic similar to our own hybrid language of the borderlands. For Lutherans, whose confessional mantra is *sola gratia, sola fide*, and *sola scriptura*, the confession of John serves to highlight not only a Christocentric statement of faith but also a cultural embodiment of divinity made flesh in the person of Jesus the Galilean *mestizo*. For Hispanic Lutherans in particular, the Word made flesh in a *mestizo* and homeless Jew is both meaningful and affirming, for his life mirrors their own in so many ways. In *nepantla*, the Word puts on flesh in the lives and experience of the immigrants and native peoples who have lived on the margins of the *frontera*, the borderlands of the United States and Mexico.

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16. Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), 48–50.

17. See, for example, Justo L. González, "*Credo*," Hispanic Creed, in *Mil Voces para Celebrar: Himnario Metodista* (Abingdon, 1996), 70.

To put flesh on the image of God that is the church in *nepantla*, I want to point to some signifiers that I observed in the praxis of my own ministry while serving a parish in San Antonio several years ago. In borderland regions where we find ourselves, the church embodies the *imago Dei* in acts of service to the stranger, in hospitality that welcomes all people to our sacred spaces, and in acts of justice for the poor and the voiceless. While serving as a pastor of a predominantly Anglo community, I took part in forming the South Side San Antonio Alliance, an organization of area churches that sought to serve the neighbor in visible and tangible ways. Churches of various traditions and confessions acted together to serve our community in such ministries as meals on wheels, youth advocacy, gang prevention, and advocacy for the undocumented and those without a voice. We took steps to make our worship culturally relevant and to incorporate the language of the people of our community in small but significant ways. We made hospitality a primary focus of our self-understanding as a church in mission.

We also took part in the annual Thanksgiving Day service and meal for the community that the Jiménez family of San Antonio holds annually for anyone and everyone who may be homeless or without family during the holidays. Along with many volunteers we served hundreds of meals to the homeless and the undocumented, the poor, the lonely, and the forgotten. Everyone was served. No one was asked for documents. In this *fiesta*, citizenship status or the green card was of no consequence. This was table fellowship at its best and a sign of the kin-dom of God among us. It crossed denominational and cultural differences, ethnicities, social classes, political affiliations, and language barriers. This was a *fiesta* of the citizenship of the kin-dom of God, where borders and barriers do not exclude anyone, where everyone is invited.

In Austin, one sees the *imago Dei* visibly embodied in acts of service and hospitality, such as at St. John/San Juan Lutheran Church, where both Anglo and Hispanic laity serve by offering their gifts of worship and leadership. Central Americans who fled the war in El Salvador years ago find in this predominantly Anglo community a place of cultural affirmation and a safe place of belonging. Their unique gifts and leadership are valued and recognized as gifts of service in the kin-dom of God. Our seminary students also offer their gifts of service and talents at Iglesia Episcopal San Francisco de Asís in South Austin and at Casa Marianela in East Austin, a community house for the undocumented. In these and many other ways the church embodies the image of God as a sign of hope and care in the community.

At ETSS and LSPS we live out our call to common mission in ways that embody a spirit of cooperation. We have worked together for 28 years in an attempt to make theological education contextually relevant and challenging. We have done this by actively listening to the other, at times offering suggestions and correctives and at times receiving them. Most recently we have made concerted efforts to reflect a strong sense of contextual relevance in our curriculum. With the assistance of a grant, ETSS invited Latino and Latina faculty from other seminaries to partner with the faculty in a curriculum-review project so as to ensure that the voices of the Hispanic community were reflected in each discipline. At LSPS, our faculty composition reflects this commitment. Many of our students, especially those from underrepresented communities, have appreciated the intentional effort of the seminaries to

allow their distinct voices and experience to be heard and celebrated. Together we have celebrated these voices in liturgy as well as in theological reflection, praxis, and proclamation. Though at times not without struggle, the experience as a whole has proved to be rewarding, enriching, and transforming. We have enriched each other as we have learned to celebrate our own unique gifts and traditions with a strong sense of respect for the goodness of the other who is in the image and likeness of God.

The *imago Dei* as embodied *esperanza*/hope

To conclude, the questions that the symbol of the *imago Dei* raises for us in the context of theological education in the Southwest leave us with both a challenge and a hope for a more dignified present and future for all people. We are invited to see and hear our invisible neighbors as the other for whom Christ lived and died and rose so that, in serving them in acts of justice, we as a seminary community and as a church might embody the image of God in the world. We are challenged to enter into relationships of care and concern for the other such as those modeled for us in the life and praxis of Jesus the *mestizo* Jew of *nepantla* so that those who are on the margins of our communities might have hope for a more dignified and abundant life and ministry. We ourselves are challenged to go to the *fronteras*, where Jesus told his disciples that they would find him, and there to enter into and experience the ambiguity of life lived in the middle zones. We are challenged to see the other, to really see and hear and serve the immigrant and native other who is our neighbor, so that the invisible ones who have been created in the image and likeness of God might be made visible, and together as *familia en Cristo* we might celebrate the embodied hope/*esperanza* that is our promise in community.

Book Reviews

The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text. By R. T. France. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. xxxvii and 719 pages. Cloth. $55.00.

France, retired principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, has prepared this important contribution to the series titled The International Greek New Testament Commentary. As intended by the series designers, this is indeed a commentary on the Greek text of Mark. Although the text has not been printed, the exegetical comments assume that the reader has a working knowledge of Greek and has the text at hand.

In recent years there has been a tendency to read Mark as story (often with thanks to David Rhoads of Lutheran School of Theology, pp. 9–11, 15–20). France understands the story as a drama in three acts: the first in Galilee (1:14–8:21); the second on the way to Jerusalem (8:22–10:52); and the third in Jerusalem itself (11:1–16:8; pp. 13–14). Because Mark is a story the reader cannot actually discover a single purpose for the writing. A first-century writer simply would have told "a personal story about the prophet from Nazareth, and explain what it meant to be his follower, and inspire others to play their proper part in the movement he founded" (p. 23). The Greek of Mark reflects that oral nature of the storytelling (p. 16).

Because Mark is a story, France does not press hard for any particular reading. He discusses various positions and cautiously suggests his preference. To be sure, the series itself has a conservative bent, but France does not always opt for what might be considered conservative or traditional. For example, eschewing the documentary nature of the Synoptic Gospels in favor of oral transmission, France proposes a process of "cross fertilization" rather than the too-simple two-document hypothesis (pp. 42–45). On the other hand, France is unabashedly historical in his perspective. He considers 1:14–15 the key to the Gospel: the sovereignty of God is made present (not future) with the ministry of Jesus. That is, Mark has a realized eschatology (pp. 91–93). I find it fascinating that France never mentions his countryman C. H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom*), who could be considered the champion of "realized eschatology." Apparently the ahistorical Platonism of Dodd has no place in a historicizing reading. In another example, the so-called messianic secret is not a later editorial intrusion designed to explain why the pre-passion Jesus was not known as a divine being. France argues that Jesus perceived himself as the Messiah but protected his identity until the disclosure in 14:61–62 (p. 331).

This commentary is a useful resource for a serious study of the Gospel of Mark. Most readers will not likely be upset by the historical approach, even the historicity of Jesus.

Graydon F. Snyder
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I Am . . . : Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories. By Athalya Brenner. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. xviii and 228 pages. Paper. $13.00.

This is not your grandmother's book of stories of the lives of biblical women. This is edgy, forceful, insistent, angry. This is the liberation of suppressed women, marginalized by biblical authors, editors, and redactors, finding their own voices in today's world.

The literary context is a conference at which the invited presenters are biblical women who "do not die in the text—that is, no mention is made of their death and burial, hence they have been made immortal by the same text that doesn't pay them the tribute of decently and naturally disposing of them" (p. xiv). Twelve autobiographical stories are told: Adah and Zillah, Dinah, Madam Potiphar, Zipporah, Rahab, Ruth and Orpah and Naomi, Rizpah, Tamar and Tamar, Zeruiah, Huldah, the anonymous woman from the Song of Songs, and the medium of Endor. Each presenter retells the biblical narrative and

highlights insights from commentators through the ages, thereby remedying the male abuse of the text. As Madam Potiphar voices, " And the world intervened, and the story was re-written. And I got the bad press, and Joseph escaped almost unharmed. Everything in order: the female side of the story suppressed, misunderstood, or condemned" (p. 56).

This is not the typical sociohistorical embellishment of the stories of biblical women (à la Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* [St. Martin's Press, 1997]). These presenters call a spade a spade: date rape, lesbian lust, sexual abuse for political gain. If this book is used in a Bible study group, be prepared for some uneasy feelings among the participants. Oh, yeah, and close the door—this could get very interesting.

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Our Gifts: Identifying and Developing Leaders. By David P. Mayer. Augsburg Fortress, 2002. 112 pages. Paper. $14.99.

At just over one hundred pages, *Our Gifts* does not intend to be an exhaustive reference for all change to be made in a parish. Rather, it functions more like a workbook, guiding the reader step by step in introducing concepts that are briefly referenced or explained.

Part of the Congregational Leader Series from Augsburg Fortress, this volume often references other volumes from the series, suggesting that the entire program would have good continuity.

Our Gifts is written in a clear, straightforward, easily understood style. The tone of the book is very positive, even optimistic, as it moves from defining Christian leadership and the leadership dilemma (20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the ministry) to chapters titled "How to Mobilize Everyone," "Leadership Styles and Motivations," and "Developing Leaders." Tools for implementing each chapter are provided both in the book and online. They can be customized and reproduced for local use.

The author, David P. Mayer, has worked more than thirty years in the LCA and ELCA, focusing on areas including leadership and organizational development, initiating change, and dealing with conflict. He gives brief explanations of several leadership theories and for terms and concepts he uses. For instance, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is explained in slightly more than two pages and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in one. The reader who is familiar with the referenced concepts would have them brought to mind, and those unfamiliar with the concepts may determine which areas to research. A list of resources is provided.

Mayer suggests that this book is most effectively used as a retreat but could also be used as a series of workshops or as a leadership development piece at, for instance, church council meetings. A sample retreat agenda is included.

Our Gifts is a nonthreatening way to teach leadership concepts to people who may not identify themselves as leaders, and it provides some resources to develop and support those who are ready to take the next step. It is a good synthesis and application of a broad array of ideas and issues, focused on real application rather than theory. With reinforcement, this could be a very gentle step in raising up and developing leaders in a congregation.

Dorothy Wilcox
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Handbook of Christian Theology. New and Enlarged. Ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price. Nashville: Abingdon, 2003. 552 Pages. Paper. $38.00.

This volume will prove its worth for the busy pastor, professional theologian, thoughtful lay person, or student. It runs the gamut from "aesthetics" to "worship." It contains more than 160 articles of varying size, many of them of substantial length. The articles aim for clarity and accuracy. Written by 150 experts, including some of the leading theologians of our time, they are accessible to lay readers. In fact, the wealth of information here proves that even professionals have lay status when the whole panorama of theological method and content is seen. Given the fact of pluralism in both method and confession, as well as the impact of globalization, this

volume is indispensable for the study of Christian theology.

This handbook is an updated edition of the 1991 version of this classic theological handbook. It carries 26 new articles, a 20 percent increase. Most of the essays published over a decade ago are retained. The original was published in 1958 with 101 essays with the purpose of introducing students and laity to basic theological terms as they are understood in the academy today. This present volume carries on this work admirably. Compared to the 1991 edition, more attention is given to Roman Catholic theology, women, minorities, the Holocaust, civil rights, Vietnam, the Second Vatican Council, feminism, and ecology. Additionally, one finds strong articles dealing with Black, confessional, death of God, deconstructionist, liberationist, Marxist, narrative, postmodern, process, and Womanist theology. More than anything, this volume provides a helpful map through the vast expanses of current theological reflection.

Not much attention is given to Lutheran theology per se. However, Patrick Keifert's article on law and gospel and Gerhard Forde's outstanding article on justification are both gems in this book.

Abbreviated encyclopedias such as this are not always effective, due to the unevenness of the quality of the articles. This is not the case here. The volume offers a little library of knowledge, all at one's fingertips. It is highly recommended.

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Des Moines, Iowa

The Context of Scripture. Volume 3: Archival Documents from the Biblical World. Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. Leiden: Brill, 2002. xvvii and 403 pages. Cloth. $129.00.

This third volume brings to completion a replacement for *Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET), the previous standard translation of Egyptian, Hittite, Syro-Palestinian, Mesopotamian and other ancient documents thought to be parallel to or to shed light on the meaning of the Hebrew Bible itself.

This volume begins with essays on Hebrew and Egyptian military texts, Hittite and Israelite cultural parallels, the "contextual method," the impact of Assyriology on biblical studies, and Sumer and the Bible. But its main value lies in the fresh translations of ancient documents that fill out the rest of the volume.

One of the principal finds in ancient archives has been letters, and these are richly represented in this collection. There are only four of these in Hebrew, but the forty-two from Ugarit, Israel's Syrian neighbor, show the kind of communication that was going on in the royal court and among commoners about the time Israel entered its land. The 14th-century Amarna letters are from Palestinian and other rulers that report to the Pharaoh what is going on in their territory and/or their need for government aid. Letters from the Jewish community at Elephantine in Egypt discuss the Passover and the need to rebuild their temple. One Assyrian letter describes—a little obscurely—the murder of Sennacherib. A Sumerian letter from a feisty housewife defends herself against charges of waste and mismanagement.

But other documents were also dug out of the ruined archives by archaeologists. Some are contracts about slavery, loans, manumissions, the purchase of beer, or marriage agreements. There are court cases, too—the conspiracy in the harem against Ramesses III, a lawsuit about a Syrian slave, a slandered bride, and a trial for adultery. In the latter case the wife was charged with breaking into a man's granary and opening his pots of sesame oil in addition to her unfaithfulness. Some accounts describe tithing at Ugarit or an Assyrian wine list. There is even a will from Alalakh.

A center column on each page lists possible parallel passages in the Bible, and nineteen pages at the end list all the biblical references cited in this three-volume work.

While these documents may not have the glamour of the Babylonian creation or flood stories, they tell us very much about daily life, also daily religious life. The editors and contributors deserve our profound thanks.

Ralph W. Klein

Preaching Helps

The Nativity of Our Lord—The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Series B

Don't Mess with Christmas!

In an effort to more evenly distribute the pages of Preaching Helps among the six yearly issues of *Currents*, I moved The Nativity of Our Lord from the October to the December issue. I also hoped that pairing Christmas with Epiphany and The Baptism of Our Lord rather than the Sundays in Advent might help us to consider both Advent and Christmas in new ways. I did not realize that including the Preaching Helps for Christmas in the December issue could make them too late to be helpful to our overseas subscribers. I do apologize.

I know better than to mess with Christmas. I learned that lesson well in early January of my internship year. The pastoral staff received a letter from some musicians in our congregation that slammed us for the Christmas Eve service. They condemned us for doing the same thing we did every year and called upon us to take advantage of the church's rich treasury of Christmas music and liturgy. Now, I was an eager seminarian who fancied myself somewhat of a liturgist. So I prepared a Christmas Eve service that was very different and presented it to my supervisor a few days later. He smiled knowingly and took me and my Christmas Eve service to the next meeting of the Worship and Music Committee. Those gentle souls patiently explained to me that many people come to church on Christmas Eve to do what they have always done—to sing the same carols, to light the same candles, to look at the same chrismons hanging in the same places on the tree, to hear the same story of angels and shepherds, Mary and Joseph (substitute John 1 as the Gospel reading for Christmas Eve at your own peril! But that's another story), and to receive God incarnate in bread and wine. Rather than doing something new, they suggested, help us to see and hear and experience what we have always done in new ways. Help us to look deeply into the Christmas story. "Really, Craig," one committee member concluded, "don't mess with Christmas!" My innovative order of service was respectfully returned to me, and the committee decided that Christmas Eve worship would remain the same.

As I contemplate Christmas months before the stores start playing Christmas carols and even longer before the church gathers to sing them, it occurs to me that, this Christmas, anyone who gets to do what he or she has always done is

quite fortunate. Troops will be far away from home. Thousands in Louisiana have no home to go back to. Many homes will be different because they have been touched by death since last Christmas. As we look deeply into our Christmas worship through the lenses of our lives, what do we see?

As I look deeply into Christmas using the lens of these Preaching Helps, I am struck by the way the manger and the baptismal font are both the meeting places of the human and the divine. In the manger, God took on our flesh and joined us in our life. In the baptismal font, we take on God's Holy Spirit and join Christ in the life of Christ. At Christmas, Jesus was born into our world. In baptism, we are born into Christ's world. If Lutherans can have patron saints, mine is Ambrose, the fourth-century bishop of Milan whose feast day is December 7. Ambrose preached that, in the blessing of the water in the baptismal font, the Holy Spirit comes upon the font, or those receiving baptism, in the same way that the Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary. As the Holy Spirit brought forth a miraculous birth in the womb of the Virgin, so too in the womb that is the baptismal pool the Spirit brings forth the birth of a new creation in a miraculous way. (Ambrose of Milan, *De mysteriis* 9.59; Craig A. Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* [Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002], 170.)

I am thinking about the baptismal pool in the Augustana Chapel here at LSTC. In case you have not seen it, water flows continuously from the stone font into a pool in the floor that is large enough to kneel in. I wonder what would happen if, come December, I put a creche smack dab in the center of the pool. I want to think that folks would understand that, indeed, baptism is our Easter, when we are raised to new life with Christ. But baptism is also our Christmas, when God incarnate takes on human flesh in us. I fear they would want to know who messed with Christmas.

Our first contributor this issue is **Kristin Johnston Largen**. In 2002, Kristin received her Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Systematic Theology, where she studied with Ted Peters. After serving three years at King of Glory Lutheran Church in Arvada, Colorado, she moved to South Carolina in June of 2005, after marrying John Largen, Pastor to the Seminary Community at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia. Currently she is a Teaching Fellow at Claflin University, an historically black college in Orangeburg, South Carolina. **Timothy V. Olson** and **Carrie L. Lewis** round out this issue—and get us back on schedule.

I pray that you will make time to look deeply into Christmas and behold the Christ being born anew!

Craig A. Satterlee (csatterl@lstc.edu)
Editor of Preaching Helps

The Nativity of Our Lord December 25, 2005

Isaiah 52:7–10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1–4 (5–12)
John 1:1–14

First Reading

Perhaps we could term the theme that suggests itself in this morning's texts "Salvation in plain sight"—the proclamation that God has come down to us in human form that we all might "taste and see" that God is so very good to us. One of the great blessings of Christmas, and at least one of the reasons why Christmas Eve services are always packed, is that at Christmas time we are privileged to receive God's revelation "in plain sight." So many other times of the year, God comes to us in mystery, working in ways we cannot understand, working through pain and disappointments we wish to avoid; thus many times it is hard for us to "see" God at work in our lives. But at Christmas, with the beautiful image of Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, so vividly before us, we cannot fail to appreciate and rejoice in God's great love for us, love that took on our humanity to free humanity from sin and death. At Christmas time, the whole world is reminded that God is at work for good in the world, that God has not turned God's back on creation, that miracles do still happen. This is a message that we sorely need to hear.

The Isaiah passage proclaims the joy of a people delivered, a people who have seen exile, a people who have seen the destruction of Jerusalem and their forced diaspora. Where earlier in Isaiah the prophet spoke of judgment and exile, now God has words of comfort, rescue, and restoration. As Christians, we too hear with joy God's message of the Lord's salvation. Walter Brueggemann, in his excellent two-volume commentary on Isaiah, describes the similarity between how Israel has experienced God's deliverance in their own history as God's chosen people and how Christians have understood God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Brueggemann writes,

> That claim [that is shared by both Jews and Christians] is that both Jews and Christians have seen in their own history, in quite particular ways, the capacity and willingness of this God to *do something new through suffering*. This claim, verified for Jews in the restoration of Zion and for Christians in the life of Jesus, is a deeply inscrutable claim that speaks powerfully against common worldly insistencies that *suffering is a dead end with no future* and *that there is no newness,* only endless derivations. Newness through suffering is the gospel that attests to *the power of God* at work *through human weakness* to bring to fruition God's intention for the world. (Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 144; emphases added)

The reading from Hebrews also emphasizes this connection between the two traditions, linking the words God spoke to God's people through the prophets "long ago" and the words God speaks to us "in these last days" in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is God-made-flesh, "the exact imprint of God's very being," and therefore Jesus himself is the embodiment of God's promised deliverance. Jesus does not just speak the word of God; Jesus himself *is* the Word of God, as testified by John, and therefore he personifies the continuation and further unfolding of God's cosmic plan of salvation for the world in his very flesh. How beautiful indeed are the feet of the one who announces the coming of the Lord into creation!

Pastoral Reflection

Today will be an interesting Sunday. Most of your parishioners will have been in church last night for Christmas Eve services, per-

haps even to a late evening candlelight service, so there is a chance that your pews might be a bit emptier than normal today–which is ironic, of course! I think the challenge of today's sermon is to move beyond the manger, beyond the shepherds, into an appreciation of the abiding presence of Christ that fills our lives not only today but the other 364 days of the year as well.

With that in mind, there is one theme in particular in the reading from John that I'd like to lift up, and that is God's ever-present nearness to us. One of the most beautiful revelations about God in this text is that while God could have chosen to remain distant from us, God did not. Instead, in Christ, God has drawn near to us and now resides closer to us than we are to ourselves, with us at all times and in all places. God could have chosen to love us from afar, but God did not. In Christ, God chose to love us not as a benevolent ruler loves her subjects from the safety of her castle but rather as a parent loves her beloved sons and daughters. God could have chosen to let us fend for ourselves on this earth, wandering around lost in the darkness, but God did not. In Christ, God chose to walk right next to us, holding our hand and lighting our way, keeping us safe and warm from right close by. It is really quite amazing, and quite miraculous, to have a God who loves us and cares for us like that. In Christ, God comes to us not just in Word and Spirit but in flesh and blood, becoming one of us to save us. KJL

The Name of Jesus
January 1, 2006

Numbers 6:22–27
Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4–7 *or* Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 2:15–21

First Reading

I want to take as my starting point a quotation from Marty Stortz's new book, *A World according to God.* In her chapter on baptism, she writes,

> The most important name conferred in baptism is not the family name . . . but the name "Child of God." With baptism we receive a new identity, an identity that does not come with passport or ID card but with relationships. Within the horizon of baptism *who* we are depends decisively on *whose* we are, and baptism signals new relationships of belonging to God and to Christ. (Marty Stortz, *A World according to God* [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004], 40)

We all have different names, and those different names define in different ways. We name ourselves through our relationships as mother, daughter, friend, godparent. We name ourselves professionally as pastor, teacher, mechanic, contractor. And we name ourselves by interest and hobby as athlete, reader, quilter, cook. All of these names are important in how we see ourselves and how we see each other; but, as Stortz points out, only one name strikes at the very core of who we are, and only one name is foundational for our identity, the name "Christian." This more than any other proclaims to the world who we are, and this more than all the others put together gives us our worth and our purpose.

How is this illustrated in today's readings? First, let's look at the Old Testament text. There are very few readings from the book of Numbers in the church lectionary, so the inclusion of this passage is certainly

important. In this reading, "name" is bound up with "blessing," and, indeed, the LORD makes clear to Moses that the name of the LORD is one and the same with God's blessing. In the act of the priest blessing the people with the blessing of the LORD, they also receive the name of the LORD. In bestowing upon the Israelites God's blessing, God also gave them the name of God's people. The Israelites are who they are because they are God's chosen people; and they are blessed and become a blessing to others in and through that fundamental name. Therefore we who stand in this tradition also are blessed with the name of God and also have been made God's people through the bestowing of God's name. After all, it is in the name of the Triune God that we are baptized and marked with the cross of Christ, both physical signs of the name we bear, the name that makes us who we are.

In the Gospel text, we read the story of how Jesus receives his name, the divine name preordained while he was yet in Mary's womb. Much can be said about the name Jesus itself, but what I would rather emphasize is the way this specific name Jesus emphasizes his humanity and his particularity. When we celebrate the central mystery of our faith, the incarnation, we proclaim the God who truly *became* human, not just a God who looked like a human. When we worship Jesus Christ, we are asserting our belief that God did not just put on an indiscriminate human costume and dwell among us as one masquerading as a real person, did not assume the guise of a human being and pretend to be human all the while maintaining God's divine nature untouched and uncontaminated by human nature. Instead, we confess that God chose to become one of us, a real live flesh-and-blood human being, and that one was Jesus—a genuine, individual boy born from a human womb, a boy who grew into a man, a man who suffered and died a human death. The incarnation was real, not God's playacting, not an illusion. This one man who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, who changed water into wine, who healed the sick and raised the dead, who wept in the garden of Gethsemane and was crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem, this one man is our Lord and Savior; and because of his humanity, our humanity has been redeemed.

Pastoral Reflection

There is such an abundance of rich themes in today's texts that perhaps the most difficult problem will be choosing one and resisting the impulse to preach on too much! For my reflection, then, I want to pick out the Galatians text for special focus, and the theme of adoption. For more and more people in today's society, adoption is no longer a theological category but a fact of life. Increasing numbers of individuals and couples are choosing adoption for a wide variety of reasons, not simply because they cannot conceive children biologically. Thus we find that in most communities adoption is no longer seen as "the next-best thing" to having "your own" children. This outdated interpretation of adoption does not do justice to the ontological reality that is created when a child is adopted into a new family. As all of us who are adopted know, we do not have "real" parents and "adoptive" parents; our adoptive parents *are* our real parents, although some of us have a little information about our biological mothers and fathers, too. For most of us, there is no question who our "real" families are, even though sometimes we might go through periods of questioning or wondering about our biological families.

Adoption, then, is one place where Christianity and culture come together very nicely and complement each other well. Those who adopt and who are not part of a

Christian community might well be pleasantly surprised to hear that, two thousand years before they were even born, early Christians were articulating the reality of their new family that had been created through Christ using the language of adoption. And today, just as they have made a new child their son or daughter for life, with ties of love that are stronger than mere flesh and blood, so too have Christians been made children of God through adoption, again through ties of love stronger even than life or death. Similarly, a Christian who has grown up all her life hearing passages that talk about our adoption into God's family might well find that she understands those passages in a much more profound way once she adopts a child of her own. Those of us who are adopted resonate strongly with the texts that promise us adoption into God's family: we know the depth of the new identity adoption gives us.

Kristin Chenowith, singer and actress, recently wrote a magazine article about being adopted. She talks about emotions most of us who are adopted have experienced at some point in our lives: recognizing that we don't physically look like our parents, realizing that we don't have the same talents as our parents. Kristin, for example, is 4'11" and blond, while the rest of her family is tall and dark-haired. She also has an exceptional operatic voice, while no one else in her family can sing. Sometimes people who are adopted go through periods of feeling isolated or alone when confronted with these differences. Do I really belong in this family? Where did I get this nose? Why do I hate sports, when everyone else in my family is athletic?

But here in these moments of doubt and confusion is another place where the gospel message of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion into God's family really hits home and speaks a word of grace to all of us. What makes us a Christian family is not physical resemblance or shared likes and dislikes or anything inherent in us at all. Instead, God has made us God's family through God's unconditional love for us in Christ Jesus. We are a family because God calls us beloved sons and daughters and because we call God our beloved Father. And those divine bonds of familial love and tenderness are unbreakable.

Kristin ends her article this way: "Last September I gave my first solo concert at Carnegie Hall. Amazingly, it sold out. As I walked onto the stage, people leapt to their feet. I thought about all the women who'd stood there before me: Judy Garland, Julie Andrews, Bernadette Peters. I looked into the footlights and saw my parents just beaming. I performed a surprise song I'd written for my father, called 'The Ride Home' about the countless ballet classes and piano lessons he'd driven me to and from. Though my father is not a crier, when I finished the song he stood up and blew me a kiss—and I saw big, fat tears rolling down his face. I remember thinking, if *that* isn't my father, I don't know who is" (Kristin Chenowith, "Getting over being 'the adopted one,'" *Glamour* [September 2005], 241).

All of us who are Christians know that feeling. When we open the Bible and read story after story of all God has done for us in Jesus Christ, how much God loved us and continues to love us, in spite of our faults and sinfulness, is it any wonder that we, too, think: If this is not family, what is? KJL

The Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2006

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12

First Reading

The theme I want to lift up in today's texts is "reconciliation and the creation of new community." We see this theme illustrated in different ways in all three texts. First, in Isaiah, we read that families will come together again and be reunited: "your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms" (v. 4). This is perhaps the "first circle" of community, the community of family.

The holiday season is usually a time when families come together, and this can be both a blessing and a curse. While some families rejoice at being together, others are fractured, and it is a time of stress and conflict. For those whose families live far apart, those whose families are estranged and no longer speaking, and those who have no more family, this time only increases their sense of isolation and loneliness. But in Isaiah, we have the vision of a family all coming together in radiance and in joy, brought together in harmony in the light of the Lord. This is a vision that still touches us today.

In the Ephesians text we have perhaps the "second circle" of community, the promise that not only kin will be included in God's family but also those traditionally thought by the Hebrew people of Jesus' time to be "outsiders"—the Gentiles. Paul writes, "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 6). Thus we are reminded this season that, in Jesus Christ, God calls us to a much wider understanding of "family" than we are traditionally accustomed to and demands that we include those outside our communities in our church families of love and grace.

Finally, the gospel text reveals to us yet a "third circle" of community, one that includes people not only of other nations but also of other faiths, as holy men/kings from other countries come bearing gifts to honor Jesus Christ with their homage and their treasure. In this text, then, we are given a vision of a God who, in Jesus Christ, casts the net of salvation widely, including those we sometimes revile and even damn, bringing them to the manger to stand with Mary and Joseph, bowing together before the Lord. I want also to mention that December 28 is the feast day of the Holy Innocents, the young children who were killed by Herod when he was trying to find and destroy the baby king Jesus. This is another theme that could be brought into today's sermon.

Pastoral Reflection

Most of us are surrounded by light all the time: street lights, stop lights, house lights, lights in tall office buildings—even late at night, we are hardly ever "in the dark." At no time of the year is this more true than at Christmastime. During the season of Christmas, house after house is decorated with lights on the lawn, lights on the trees, lights on the rooftops; it is almost impossible to find a single block without at least some houses lighted for Christmas. We take light for granted, mostly, and don't even think about the lights that brighten our skies day and night.

In this context, then, what is to separate the light of Jesus Christ from all these other lights? Even thinking about light metaphorically, we often think about all those other things in our lives that bring us light

and joy. In dark times, we have the light of family and of friendship. We have the light of health, of optimism, of work, of play, of knowledge, of travel. There are so many lights, in fact, that sometimes we ignore the light of Christ and don't prize it the way we should. But the presence of all this "light" does beg the question: "So what's so special about the light of Jesus Christ? What makes his light different?"

There are many good ways to answer this question, but I'd like to provide an illustration from one of my favorite books instead. *The Return of the King* is the final volume of J .R. R. Tolkien's excellent trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, which was made into a successful movie series the past few years. If you don't know the story, it is about an unlikely band of friends who team up to rid Middle Earth of evil by destroying the ring of power. It is a wildly entertaining saga, with lots of Christian themes intentionally woven through the story by Tolkien, who was a strong Catholic. In this, the final chapter of the trilogy, two small hobbits are finally making their way up Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring and all the evil it represents. They are tired, hungry, and in terrible danger. The success of their task is called into question every moment. In one particularly dangerous encounter, Frodo—the hobbit carrying the ring—pulls out a special gift he was given by the elfin Queen Galandrial. It is a light, a special, magical light; and when she gave it to him, she said, "May it be a light to you in dark places when all other lights have gone out" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* [New York: Ballantine, 1954], 423.) "May it be a light to you in dark places when all other lights have gone out."

When I read that, I thought: That is what Jesus Christ is to us, and that is what separates his light from all the other lights in our lives. Jesus Christ is the light that shines even when all other lights have gone out, when other lights have flickered and failed, when other lights vanished or faded away. Even in those black times when we think that we have lost everything and that our darkness is complete, Christ is there, driving back our darkness with the light no shadow or gloom can overcome: not the shadow of depression, the shadow of death, the shadow of addiction, of loneliness—nothing! Christ is the light that continues to shine even when all other lights are taken from us or put out. Christ is that light that shines for us in our darkness and shows us the path, shows us the way. And it is the light that we always carry with us; we are never without it.

Think about that this year, when you are putting away those Christmas decorations, and taking down those lights, and give thanks. KJL

The Baptism of Our Lord January 8, 2006

Genesis 1:1–5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1–7
Mark 1:4–11

First Reading

In her commentary on this Genesis text, Elizabeth Achtemeier notes that these verses have been called the "most consciously theological" in the Bible, rivaled only by the first chapter of John, and it is clear from the first part of the first sentence why this is so (Commentary on Genesis 1:1–5, in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, the first readings,* ed. Roger E. Van Harn [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001], 4–7). The words "In the beginning" are a flag signaling to us the author's intention to tell a story of origins, a

story of why things are the way they are today—in other words, a story of the deepest and most profound meaning. And what comes quick on the heels of those three words is the word "God." This word tells us that this story is not one of chance occurrence or random events. Instead, this story brims to overflowing with intentionality and purpose. This story is going to tell us as much about God as it does about us; in the end, what it emphasizes perhaps more than anything else is that our story is joined to God's story, that we cannot understand who we are without considering who God is.

What do we learn about God from these few verses? First, and most obvious, we learn that God is the creator of the universe. The Bible states unequivocally that our cosmos was not the result of random chance or accident. Instead, our planet was brought into being by the only One who had the power to do so, and we must understand ourselves therefore as "creation," not merely as "cosmos." We exist not through any powers of our own but rather because God chose to create us; without God, there would be nothing—only the chaos of the formless void.

Second, we learn that God is the source of light and that it was in the creation of light that the primordial darkness was banished. The Bible returns to this theme of light triumphing over darkness again and again, possibly because it was so vividly appreciated by the people of that time. Even in modern society, with the power of light at our fingertips, most of us have experienced the fear of the dark night and the longing for the light of day. This light, which wakes us from nightmares, warms us with the sun, and inspires fresh hope in our heart, is the same light that God created on that first day, the first expression of God's love for creation, the first aspect of creation called "good."

Finally, we learn that God alone has the power to name reality. In the entry on "onoma" in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, we read that "By giving someone a name, one establishes a relation of dominion and possession towards him" (Hans Bietenhard, "onoma," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967], 5:253). Thus, in naming the light (as well as the rest of creation), God shows that God is truly Lord over heaven and earth, as we are reminded in Ps 147: "The LORD . . . determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names" (vv. 2–4). This theme will come up again later in Genesis when God names Abraham (from Abram) and Israel (from Jacob), giving them a new identity, again creating something new in them as well.

Pastoral Reflection

Naming is a powerful aspect of God's creative work, one that God exerts from the beginning of time and still shows forth in the sacrament of baptism, when we receive the name "Christian." In baptism, we become new people as we die to sin and are reborn in Christ, and our membership in the church is a sign of our new identity. As Lutherans, we believe that this work of God is a once-for-all kind of activity: our baptism never expires, never wears out, never fades. We never need to be rebaptized, even if we have been away from the church for a long, long time. God never forgets who we are and whose we are, even when we do. The identity God bestows upon us in baptism lasts a lifetime, and when we join the body of Christ we are members forever.

Yet, at the same time, this new identity is always somewhat of a work in progress—thanks be to God! The Spirit continues to work on us and in us every moment, chang-

ing us daily into the people we are called to be. In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther writes that baptism "signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, trans. Timothy Wengert [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996], 37). Daily we are drowned, and daily we are born again.

This is a word of precious gospel to all of us who sometimes feel like we have really mucked things up in our lives and long for a new beginning. In those times of frustration, doubt, and discouragement, Luther reminds us that we do not need to change jobs, cities, marriages, or even churches in order to get a fresh start. Instead, all we need to do is return to the font and remember our baptism. Our baptism guarantees us that our past mistakes, our sinfulness, and our misdeeds will not define us, and we need not carry them around forever. The water of baptism washes those sins away and with them all the accompanying guilt, shame, and grief; thus, the water of baptism is truly life-giving water for us. And because the Spirit of the Lord is at work in the water, it continues to give us life long after the droplets have dried from our foreheads.

Given all of this, today would be a great Sunday to invite the whole congregation into an Affirmation of Baptism service and a wonderful opportunity to spread those droplets around again, offering everyone the possibility of a new beginning in Christ. KJL

Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 15, 2006

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)
Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18
1 Corinthians 6:12–20
John 1:43–51

First Reading

In many ways, this story in 1 Samuel is filled with contradictions. First, the entire story is about God speaking to a young boy—repeatedly, patiently—in a time when "the word of the Lord was rare" and "visions were not widespread." These remarks highlight that what we are about to read is an unusual occurrence, and, for that reason, the events of this story are special and worthy of particular attention.

Second, Eli is a priest of the Lord serving at the temple in Shiloh, at the time when the Ark of the Covenant was located there, but he seems to have lost his power and authority. In 1 Samuel 2 we read about Eli's two sons' licentious and corrupt behavior and their refusal to heed Eli's warning. Still, Eli refuses to punish them, even though their disrespect and contempt will be his downfall as well. Eli's blindness surely is a metaphor for his deeper inability to see the work and will of God at this stage in his life. (This "blindness" is also reflected in the fact that Eli mistakenly chastised Hannah for being drunk in the temple, when all she was doing was praying fervently to God for a child, a child God would indeed grant her, the child Samuel.)

Finally, the message God gives to Samuel is a message of judgment and doom spoken against the very priest Samuel serves. Samuel himself must have been filled with contradictory feelings. On the one hand, here is a sign that the Lord is with him and

that he will be a prophet of the Lord. On the other hand, what a message he must deliver to Eli, the man who had raised him since he was a boy.

This text reminds us that God speaks to us often when we least expect it and with a word we do not always welcome. Often we want to stop our ears and pretend we do not hear God's voice; often, we do not want to follow God's will, preferring instead, like Eli, to do what we want when we want. Yet the promise from God is that when we accept God's word we will see great things, as Jesus promises Nathanael in the reading from John. Being open to receive God's word means that we must sometimes be quiet and stop our words; following God's word means that we must sometimes go where we do not want to go. This is never easy. But if we, like Nathanael, have the courage to listen to God's word and follow God's command, we will come to know the one who knew us while we were still in our mother's womb, and we, too, will see the great work of the Lord.

Pastoral Reflection

What stands out in both the Old Testament and the Gospel readings for today is the theme of "call," the importance of listening for God's call and following God's will. Pastors and other professionals in the church are accustomed to talking about discernment processes and "call," but many lay persons are not used to thinking about their occupations in terms of vocation. Many still tend to think that only professionals in ministry have "calls"; everyone else simply has a job and serves God by teaching Sunday school or assisting in worship.

These two "call" stories, however, remind us that it is not the particular choice of occupation that makes a call; rather, the will of God makes the call. God calls us to a wide variety of ministries in the world. It does not matter how old we are; God calls even the young. It doesn't matter how faithful we are; God calls even those on the fringes of our churches. And it doesn't matter what our past is or where we have come from; God calls us into the future God has prepared for us, a future in which we surely will see God at work in ways we could not have imagined.

Following God's call may take us to places we never dreamed we would go, into relationships we never thought we would have, and into unknown hardships and suffering. There is no use trying to pretend that discipleship does not require some sacrifices. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not write so strongly against "cheap grace" for nothing! But when we are confident that God is at work in our lives and that we are doing the work God is calling us to do, we can rejoice even in the suffering, knowing that greater things are in store for us down the road. Jesus beckons Philip, "Follow me," and Philip in turn says to Nathanael, "Come and see." Two thousand years later, the Spirit is whispering those two commands in your heart as well. Will you listen? KJL

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 22, 2006

Jonah 3:1–5, 10
Psalm 62:5–12
1 Corinthians 7:29–31
Mark 1:14–20

First Reading

As I read these texts, I am struck most by the sense of urgency that comes through. The clock is running on Nineveh, and the people have precious little time to repent before the entire city will be destroyed. The clock is running on the church in Corinth, and they, too, have precious little time before this world passes away and the appointed time of the Lord's return arrives. (They don't yet know that this is a false alarm.) Finally, the clock is running on the disciples. Jesus' public ministry has begun, but he will have only a few years to complete it, and there is no time to waste; follow him now, because you may not get another chance if you dawdle. Don't hesitate, don't reflect, don't take time to get a second opinion; the time to act is right now.

This sense of urgency compels action in our texts. Nineveh does repent, even down to the animals, and the city is spared God's wrath. Simon and Andrew hear Jesus' call to follow him, and they drop their nets in the sea and go with him without a second thought, as do James and John, much to the surprise of their father Zebedee. And the community in Corinth? Well, it is hard to know. Did people take Paul at his word and turn their back on the things of this world, even their spouses? We cannot be sure.

When we read these texts today, they remind us that we do not always have all the time in the world, either; there will not always be a tomorrow on which to choose what we are going to do with our lives, who we are going to follow. Death comes, destruction comes, moments of decision come, sometimes when we least expect them, and then what? The time is now. In Jesus Christ, the word of the Lord has come to us, and the kingdom of God has come near. So what are we going to do about it?

Pastoral Reflection

I have heard it said that in the Lutheran church we do not preach enough on the Old Testament. This Sunday is a great time to address that deficit by preaching on the Jonah text, not only on the passage that is before us today but addressing the entire book. Everyone knows the story, and everyone can relate to it: children, who are fascinated by the idea of a giant man-eating whale, and adults, who are fascinated by a prophet who shows such cheek and disrespect to the Lord God and manages to live to tell the tale.

The thing about preaching on the book of Jonah, however, is that we live in a scientific, technological society, whose advances have greatly improved the quality of life. This is a good thing. Unfortunately, another by-product of this technological society is that we have come to believe in only one type of truth, what might be called "referential" truth. That is, we believe that something is true only if it can be verified by an external source, such as history, biology, or archaeology. Clearly, for a book like Jonah, if we use only this referential understanding of truth, we come up against a dead end pretty quickly, unless some marine biologist has recently discovered a unique type of fish or aquatic mammal that can swallow a person whole and regurgitate her with no ill effects three days later.

There is, however, another type of truth that we might call "symbolic," which recognizes something to be true that speaks to us

about the deepest meaning of humanity and human existence. If we look at Jonah from the perspective of symbolic truth, we learn something profound about ourselves and our relationship with God—something that is as true for us in the twenty-first century as it was for the Hebrew people several millennia ago. We learn how patient God is with us and how God continues to call us and coax us back, even when we are on the run from God as fast as our feet will take us. We learn how God shows mercy, even changing God's mind to save us when we ask for forgiveness. And we learn how God calls even the most reluctant of us to speak God's word and do God's work and how God does great things through us, sometimes even in spite of ourselves.

For more on referential truth and symbolic truth, see Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2005), 30. KJL

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany January 29, 2006

Deuteronomy 18:15–20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1–13
Mark 1:21–28

First Reading

I would like to connect the Old Testament reading with the Gospel passage using the theme "God's authority in word and deed." God's authority links these two readings, reminding us in whose name all authentic ministry is done in Scripture. What is true for the prophets is true even for Christ: God's authority is the only binding authority, and without it, no preacher or teacher can do anything. When someone speaks or acts in the name of God, however, empowered by God's authority, that person's actions and deeds carry divine weight.

Consider the words of the Lord in Deuteronomy: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable." It is very clear that the one who disregards the prophet of the Lord disregards God at the same time, because it is not the prophet himself who speaks but God who speaks through him; he therefore does not speak on his own authority but with the authority of God. And, just in case a prophet should be filled with delusions of grandeur and start speaking on his own, God has a warning: "But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die."

Here in Deuteronomy, where God is reaffirming God's covenant with Israel, and the nature of God's relationship with God's people is reinterpreted and reinforced, God reminds Israel that they are to hearken only to the words of the Lord and not to follow false prophets or false gods. God will be with them, God will speak to them through the prophets God chooses, but the people must listen and must trust God's authority, not the authority of another.

Fast-forward to Mark 1. Here, early on in Jesus' ministry, there is a question about the source of Jesus' authority—not only in his teaching but also in his healing. Who is this that even the unclean spirits obey him? People are amazed and a little awed by him, it seems, and they are not sure what to do: the teaching is new, but the authority is well established. It is the unclean spirit who recognizes Jesus, actually—"I know who you are, the Holy One of God"—but no one else seems yet to understand. Even so, Jesus' fame is spreading, and soon the source of his authority will be known. This is not an unimportant point. Throughout his ministry, Jesus stresses that he does not do his own will but the will of the One who sent him. Jesus embodies the will of God, which guides his ministry. Therefore, Jesus teaches and preaches by God's authority. Jesus forgives sinners and heals them by God's authority. Jesus reconciles the world to himself in his death and resurrection by God's authority. So, against their better judgment, against their desire to throw him out of the region, the people begin to listen to this one who does, indeed, speak with authority.

Pastoral Reflection

"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8:9). This statement of Paul's represents a strong caution to all of us who would try to model a life of faith for others. Often, I think, we shy away from seeing ourselves as "models" of faith, because the whole concept seems fraught with so many perils. To some, it seems arrogant to hold ourselves up as models, like we are trying to say we are without sin. To others, it fosters an already prevalent tendency to boast of oneself and look down on others who seem inadequate by comparison. Recalling the downfall of televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Baker should be a clear warning to anyone who is tempted to boast of his or her "Christian" behavior.

In spite of these reservations, the fact is that many of us are models of Christian faith to others, especially those of us who are in leadership positions in the church and those who have long-time, active membership in our congregations. Other people do look to us for direction on how a Christian should act, speak, and make decisions—and this is a sobering reality! And then along comes Paul with his admonition that, even though we might have insights through experience or wisdom that would justify certain behaviors (eating food offered to idols, in this case), if that behavior causes one who is young in the faith to doubt or question herself, then, for her sake, we must refrain.

This passage reminds us that as part of the body of Christ our lives are not our own. We cannot simply do what we want, regardless of who knows or sees us, because we have a responsibility to the body as a whole, to build it up rather than tear it down. We are members of something greater than ourselves, and we are responsible for the health and well-being of the other members of the body as well.

In their book *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon tell the story of a young man named Joe who agreed to be a Confirmation mentor to a 14-year-old boy

named Max (pp. 108–9). Joe was enthusiastic and encouraged Max to think of him as an older brother and to stop by whenever he wanted. This was all fine and good for a few weeks, until Max stopped by Joe's apartment when his girlfriend was there, and Max realized that they had been in bed together. Max questioned Joe about how he decided that it was OK to sleep with his girlfriend; and if it was OK for them, maybe it was OK for Max and his girlfriend to sleep together, too. This upset Joe, and he told Max to mind his own business. When they had started the Confirmation relationship, Joe didn't really understand what it would mean to relate to Max as a brother, and he certainly didn't dream that Max would be the one challenging him—he thought it would be the other way around!

I do not cite this story to make a point about sexual morality, and neither did the authors of the book. Instead, they, and I, offer it as an example about how we as Christians cannot be strangers to one another, going about our business independently and unencumbered. Instead, the church calls us into deeper relationships, relationships that include accountability before one another, responsibility for one another, particularly for those among us who are the weakest and most vulnerable. Sin against them, says Paul, is sin against Christ. As Christians, we are called to live with care and attention to our brothers and sisters. And when we do, we might be surprised at how we are cared for and attended to as well. KJL

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 5, 2006

Isaiah 40:21–31
Psalm 147:1–11, 20c
1 Corinthians 9:16–23
Mark 1:29–39

First Reading

Chapters 40–55 in the book of Isaiah date from roughly two hundred years after the actual lifespan of the prophet Isaiah himself. The long exile of the Hebrew people in Babylon is coming to an end, and chapter 40 heralds a message of consolation and hope: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." The period of banishment is almost over, and God's deliverance is not far off now.

These verses in today's reading are part of a larger text that might properly be understood to begin with verse 12, with a series of rhetorical questions designed to emphasize God's identity as the creator of the universe. We see in this text similarities to the Lord's speech out of the whirlwind to Job, which also proclaims God's sovereignty over creation. So, for example, we can compare Isa 40:12 with Job 38:4–6, both of which describe God as the architect of the universe, measuring the heaven and earth and establishing their boundaries. Further, we can look at Isa 40:26 and Job 38:31–33, as both of these texts describe God as the ruler of the stars, the one who names them and sets them in their courses. Both texts even use the image of eagles mounting up: compare Isa 40:31 with Job 39:27–28.

These parallels suggest a similar message for the audience of second Isaiah and for the contemporary reader as well: the God we worship is the Lord of heaven and earth, the One who rules the stars and the

seas and gives life and strength to the animals, including humankind. Therefore, as the people of the Lord, we must not doubt God's work in our lives, even when it is unfathomable to us. We must not despair or lose heart in God's providence but trust that the Lord is with us and will deliver us. With faith in the Lord, we will persevere, no matter how great the trials we face, and God will restore us and bear us up. In the meantime, we must have courage and "wait for the Lord," confident that God will act and liberate us just as God liberated God's people from Babylon.

Pastoral Reflection

"In the morning while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." So often, when we think about Jesus' public ministry, we conjure up an image of almost frenetic activity, and with good reason: Jesus crammed an awful lot of pastoring into three short years! Someone always seemed to be calling his name, someone always seemed to be at his door, someone always seemed to be at his heels, and they all wanted something. They wanted him to teach them, to touch them, to heal them, to feed them, to forgive them. And, almost without exception, Jesus obliged. He seemed to be always on the go, always on the way, always "on"—and even when he tried to get away, the crowd always seemed to find him and make demands. Even in today's text, he cannot sneak away for a minute without someone hunting him down.

Perhaps this sounds familiar to you. Sometimes it feels to us like the weight of the whole world is resting on our backs, and we cannot escape the demands of friends, families, coworkers, spouses, and children, all of whom seem to be right in front of us every time we turn around. In this text we are reminded that there is one activity that cannot wait, one practice that cannot be shoved to the bottom of the to-do list, and that is prayer. Jesus, no matter how busy he was, no matter how many demands were placed upon him, always made time to talk with God, even when he had to get up before sunrise to do it.

Over and over again in the stories we read about Jesus' ministry, we see that he made time to pray to God by himself, even if it was just for a few minutes, before he came back to the crowds, back to his disciples, to continue his work in the world. Jesus models for us the activity that nourished him and supported all his other acts of ministry, and in doing so he invites us to do the same. It is easy to get caught up in the pressures of life that bear down upon us from all sides, and so we do not give our own prayer life the attention it requires, thinking that our time with God can wait: wait until we have done just this one more thing, made this one more phone call, read this last report, watched this last news update.

The reality is that our time with God is the most important thing we do in any given day. Taking time for prayer does not take away from our other activities; it actually helps us do everything else better—that is, with more joy, with more patience and care, and with more compassion. God is the fount of living water we must return to again and again to get our nourishment and strength, and we cannot long survive without this water. If Jesus needed to make the time to pray, surely we need to make the time; and if Jesus found the time, surely we can, too.
KJL

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany February 12, 2006

2 Kings 5:1–14
Psalm 30
1 Corinthians 9:24–27
Mark 1:40–45

First Reading

2 Kings 5:1–14 is the first of three scenes in the story of Naaman and Elisha, which comprises all of chapter 5. Scene 1 is Naaman's healing. Scene 2, following our reading, details Naaman's conversion. Scene 3 tells the story of Gehazi's betrayal and punishment.

Perhaps the first exegetical point to make is that this is an example of biblical comedy at its best. While disease of any kind is never a laughing matter, the comedic nature of the chapter pokes fun at the powerful (Naaman and the two kings), unmasking human pretension and greed by using the least likely heroes. A slave girl, a general's servant, and an inferior river move God's activity along. The prophet Elisha is ignored by the powerful and reciprocates by not even coming out to meet Naaman. That the King of Samaria is undone by Naaman's approach is made all the more humorous when we note that, in the preceding material, Elisha has been busily working miracles for some time.

The church at Corinth is reveling in the freedom of Christ—at least that is the way they see things. Paul offers correction to their sense that this freedom is license to do as they please. Paul, in the earlier section of the letter, speaks more of how freedom in Christ is both freedom from the powers that enslave and freedom for loving and serving as Christ has done. Paul's metaphors of athletic endeavors—boxing and running a race—illustrate that the freedom he speaks of still has direction, forward movement. A do-as-I-please freedom makes for boxers that hit nothing and runners who never find the finish line. We have been freed from false futures in order that we might invest all our energy, all our lives, into the future prepared for us in Christ.

The Gospel reading begins a series of stories that Donald Juel says all tell us that Jesus is a "transgressor of boundaries" (*Mark* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990], 23). The leper here approaches—first boundary crossed, for he should be keeping his distance. Mark then clearly tells us that Jesus "touched him." Jesus reaches across the boundary against touching a leper forged by Leviticus 13–14. The "Messianic secret" so prominent in Mark's Gospel erupts as Jesus instructs the man to tell no one but, instead, to show himself to the priest. This action is necessary for full healing. The priest needs to declare the leper clean so that he can return to life in the community. How to explain the secrecy Jesus asks for is the subject of many a commentary. It seems enough here to note that the leper can't contain himself, ignoring Jesus' command out of his pure—now unbounded—joy. We get some hint that the publicity Jesus was trying to avoid restricts his ability to go where he needs to go and brings scores of people seeking the same boundary-crossing health as the leper. Conflict with those who keep track of such boundaries is certain.

Pastoral Reflection

Naaman's bluster, his mountain of goods, his status and power, always indict me. Like many of us who live in the affluence and success of our little worlds, Naaman is sure that he can buy whatever he wants, even healing. If it isn't for sale, surely our might, our status, our connections will insure that we get what we want.

This story cuts Naaman's bluster down to size at every turn. First, a slave girl, an Israelite stolen from her home, shows unexpected and unsolicited kindness by telling the general's household about the great prophet who has been performing all kinds of miraculous deeds. He could cure Naaman. Naaman is too proud or important to seek out the humble prophet. He pursues political connections to a dead end, as the vassal-king of Samaria rends his clothes in helplessness. The forgotten prophet invites Naaman to come. Elisha slights Naaman again by not even bothering to meet him and telling him to simply take a bath in a sorry excuse of a river named Jordan. Naaman's tantrum shows how he clings to his trappings. Again, a slave, a mere servant, rescues him. The mighty are brought low, humiliated by God through the lowest of people.

Then comes the healing. In the cleansing waters that John used to baptize Jesus, Naaman is not just made new (like a baby) but is humbled. The preacher could press on in the story to include his curious conversion. The Syrian returns home with a piece of Israel, where a true God dwells. This leper can't help offering praise any more than the one Jesus encounters in the Mark text for the day; both have had an epiphany.

Boxers who hit nothing and runners who never cross a finish line: what wonderful metaphors for the church of our day. Claiming the "cheap grace" that makes us think that we are free to do what we please as long as we don't hurt anybody else, or knowing that God of course will always forgive, we live lives that look just like everybody else's. Christ "in my heart" often ends up meaning that Christ makes no appearance in my living.

Paul reminds Christians that there is a future that we are drawn into that is to be an all-consuming obsession. Bob Dylan wrote a gospel song called "Gotta Serve Somebody." Paul knows that life comes when that somebody is Christ alone and above all.

Boundaries abound in our world. You can find them all over: just look at the streets of any city, the homes of your parishioners, your own history of broken relationships, prejudice, and self-righteousness. That Jesus comes to smash these boundaries between clean and unclean, leper and community, life and death, is good news if you're on the outs. It is bad news if you like the perceived safety and comfort of the boundaries. The boundary between heaven and earth is rent at the beginning of Mark's Gospel as Jesus is baptized. The boundary between holy and unholy is torn apart as Jesus dies. Jesus is revealed as the one who bridges the distance with his gracious touch.

—Timothy V. Olson

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany February 19, 2006

Isaiah 43:18–25
Psalm 41
2 Corinthians 1:18–22
Mark 2:1–12

"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:18–19)

First Reading

God does new things, but do we recognize them? The texts for today remind us that God has made promises to God's people, but the way that God fulfills those promises may be new and different. Yet, because of God's past faithfulness, we can trust God's present and future faithfulness.

Isaiah offers God's people hope for the future. This hope is grounded in the history of Israel, which remembers God's saving acts. In the midst of Babylonian exile and the devastation of land, community, and family, the prophet commands the people not to remember the "former things," or the "things of old," because God is about to do something new. Ironically, these new things —the way in the wilderness, the river in the desert, the drink for the chosen people— evoke images from Israel's history, especially God's saving act through the exodus from Egypt and God's provision of water for the people in the desert. The promise is that God will continue to be with God's people in the midst of their despair and distress as God always has been, providing for the people so that they might praise God.

Then, the prophet reminds God's people of how they have denied God's presence, not offering sacrifices of praise to God but burdening God with sins and wearying God with iniquities. God has not abandoned Israel; Israel has abandoned God. And yet, God declares, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (v. 25). God remains in relationship with Israel for God's own sake, not because of Israel's merit. Therein lies the hope for all of us.

Again, in Mark's account of Jesus' teaching the word and healing the paralytic, we recognize that God is doing a new thing. In Jesus, God entered into the world in a new way. Through Jesus' authority as Son of God, God now engages with other authorities (in this case primarily religious), and this causes conflict. However, as we find throughout Mark, this conflict is part of "the way" of the gospel in the world. The word that Jesus proclaims is God's very presence and purpose in the midst of the opposition that God's word faces.

Through the faith shown by the friends of the paralytic man, Jesus recognizes the faith that these people have in his ability to provide them with some kind of relief. Because of this faith, Jesus frees this man of his sins, offering him forgiveness. This does not heal the man's physical condition, and it does not mean to imply that the man's paralysis is a result of his sin. Not until the scribes start to question Jesus' ability to offer forgiveness of sins does Jesus heal the man's paralysis—a response to the challenge of the scribes to his authority to speak on behalf of God to forgive sins. The reality of the man standing and walking away is a sign of God's power residing in the "Son of man," God's new way of relating to God's people in the world—a new sign of God's faithfulness.

This portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is also a reminder of God's faithfulness to God's people and of the new way that God is working in the world through their

proclamation. Paul seems to be defending his decision not to come to see the Corinthians again, apparently because of the pain that it could cause everyone in the midst of conflict. As the people of Corinth appear to be concerned about Paul's faithfulness to them, Paul reminds them of God's faithfulness throughout time—that in Christ "every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'" (v. 20). And because Paul, Timothy, and Silas have all been anointed by God through Christ with all of the Corinthians, and through their conversion/baptism have received the Spirit in their hearts, they know that Paul will be faithful to them in the promise of God's glory regardless of what the opposition tells them.

Pastoral Reflection

Psalm 41, in the midst of these readings, is really the song of each of the characters—of each of us. We all have known times when we have felt as though the world is getting the best of us. We feel weak and sick. We know that our enemies are working against us, hoping for our despair, for our demise. We hear the horrible things that others are saying about us, and their desire for the worst to happen to us causes us hurt. Even our friends seem to turn against us, and we feel that we are all alone.

I am sure that is how the people of Israel in exile felt. They were all alone in the midst of enemies. They were even turning against each other at times. Where could they turn? The paralytic was at the end of his rope, and the friends that he still had were willing to try anything to find some healing for him. The people in Corinth felt alone. They were facing the people who were speaking ill will toward Paul and making them wonder whether Paul really cared for them. Paul felt that he had been misunderstood, and others had been undermining his work in Christ in that community.

In times like these, when the world seems to be turned around, we can call to God in faith, "'O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you'" (Ps 41:4). Only in a posture of faith can we receive the transforming power of God, to recognize the new things that God is doing for us in the midst of our pain and our joy, to feel God's presence through Christ bursting forth with new life. We can then respond in faith, receiving the ever-new, transforming power of God's love, enjoying the intimate relationship between God's saving presence and the people's response of faith. As one of my favorite quotes states, "Faith is not believing that God can. It is knowing that God will" (Ben Stein).

—Carrie L. Lewis

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 26, 2006

2 Kings 2:1–12
Psalm 50:1–6
2 Corinthians 4:3–6
Mark 9:2–9

First Reading

Psalm 50 is appropriate on this last Sunday of Epiphany, a season focusing on the manifestation of God's presence in the world, as the psalmist announces the revelation of God's word and purpose in the motif of light. The psalmist's declaration "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (v. 2) focuses us to seek God in our midst as God comes with the light of fire and mighty tempest. God desires to renew the covenant with God's faithful people in the presence of heaven and earth. That covenant is fulfilled through the incarnation of God in Jesus. As we hear of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, it seems only right to hear the story from 2 Kings of Elijah being taken up into heaven as Elisha watches.

In Elijah and Elisha's travels, Elijah's action of parting the Jordan with his mantle so that he and Elisha can pass through evokes the memory of Moses parting the Red Sea in the wilderness (v. 8). Thus, both Elijah and Moses are recalled in the first reading in preparation for the reading of the transfiguration in Mark. 2 Kings tells the story of how God provided Israel with prophets who had power and authority and how, just as Elijah passes on that mantle to Elisha, the spirit of God moved through the prophets throughout the generations.

In Mark's telling of Jesus' transfiguration, Jesus and his followers are leaving their ministry in Galilee and are headed for Jerusalem. During this time, Jesus will redefine his glory through three predictions of his suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection, but each time the disciples seem to misunderstand. However, in the midst of this redefinition and confusion, Jesus is transfigured in front of Peter, James, and John. Through the dazzling brightness and the appearance with Moses and Elijah, God reveals Jesus' authority and Jesus' place in God's plan for salvation history.

Peter does not know what to do with this kind of revelation. In his confusion, he offers to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Was Peter trying to show honor to these great prophets? to preserve the moment into the future? to gain some control over a situation that felt completely out of control by putting God in a box? to find something to say to calm the terror of the situation? It may have been a little bit of all of these, which shows that the disciples did not really understand what God was up to.

So, in an attempt to clarify, God's own voice enters the scene declaring "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (v. 7). The declaration makes clear to all present what God made clear to Jesus in his baptism and what the centurion will make clear after Jesus' crucifixion, when the centurion announces, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39). But even now, the disciples have trouble understanding what this is all about.

But then it is time to come down the mountain and reenter the reality of everyday life. Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone about what they had seen until "the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (v. 9). Although they did not understand what Jesus meant by this, in the midst of all of this confusion, we find the promise of Christ's resurrection.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that God has called light out of the darkness through Jesus. Unlike when Moses had to veil his

face when speaking to the people of Israel, we who are in Christ can approach without a veil. God has "shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). This is indeed good news!

Pastoral Reflection

What I appreciate most about Transfiguration Sunday is the bridge that it builds from the season of Epiphany, the season of light and God made manifest in the world, to the season of Lent, the season of penitence and the journey with Jesus through suffering, crucifixion, and death. In one story of Jesus with Peter, James, and John on a mountain, we see the highest of highs, God's declaration of Jesus' glory and authority, and we begin the journey to the lowest of lows as we join them on their walk back down the mountain on the way to Jerusalem.

When I was in high school, the youth from my congregation went to church camp at Quaker Ridge Bible Camp outside of Colorado Springs, Colorado. The camp itself was on one peak of a mountain, facing Pike's Peak, and on the grounds was a yet higher peak known as Soldier Mountain. One morning, a group of us decided to hike up to that peak before dawn to watch the sun rise. Although it was a dark, wet, and difficult climb, with flashlights and singing, and some complaining about the terribly early hour of the morning, we made the ascent.

When we reached the top, we spread out blankets and sat to watch the sunrise. I had never seen anything so beautiful. As the sun began to rise, the sky turned the brightest blue, and along the horizon was a blanket of pink and red wrapping itself around the peaks of the surrounding mountains. As the sun continued to rise, the pinks became deeper, the reds became richer, and brilliant oranges and yellows joined in the dance, until finally, there it was—the most amazingly bright orangy-yellow ball of fire rising above the horizon. As I looked at the sun coming up, I realized that the cross that marked the top of the peak stood right there in the middle of the sun as if the sun were acting as a spotlight. The waves of pink and orange and yellow and red seemed to flow from the cross and envelop the group of us sitting there. At that moment, I felt the presence of God through Jesus. I experienced the unveiled perfection and beauty of God on that mountaintop that morning.

But just as Elisha had to leave his mourning to carry on God's call as prophet, just as Jesus, Peter, James, and John had to go down the mountain to face what was to come in Jerusalem, just as Paul had to face the realities of opposition to his ministry after the high of beginning the Corinthian church, I, too, had to come down off Soldier Mountain and face the realities of life—life not on the mountaintop but down on the plain and even in the valley.

Jesus walks with us whether we are on the mountaintop or on the plain or in the valley. As we enter the season of Lent we are reminded that Jesus knows our suffering, and we have the promise that Jesus will walk with us through it all. And because of our intimate experiences of God on the mountaintop, our epiphanies, we know that God will be with us on the plain and in the valley.

—Carrie L. Lewis

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