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Contents

Preaching Helps

Mark by Heart

Traditionally, the December issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* is devoted to the Gospel for the current lectionary year in the three-year revised common lectionary. This year is no different as we focus on the Gospel of Mark. However, instead of presenting essays on various themes and dynamics of the Gospel, we decided to combine our focus on Mark with the experience of learning and performing Mark by heart.

A number of people are now performing the Gospel of Mark by memory in its entirety before audiences in church and community. To do so involves an extraordinary commitment, and it results in a rather astonishing feat—a dramatic presentation over two hours in length. In addition, many pastors and lay people are now learning the Scripture lessons by heart and presenting them in lively ways in worship each week. Thus we decided to invite two kinds of reflective essays in this issue. We invited one group of authors to reflect on what learning and performing the entire Gospel of Mark by heart has meant for them as scholars, teachers, and preachers, as well as for their lives of faith. We invited a second group of authors to share their experiences of performing Scripture by heart and to reflect, where appropriate, on what they have learned, in presenting Scripture, about the Gospel of Mark.

Our focus on "Mark by Heart" is part of a growing trend in the academy and the church to recover the oral dimensions of the biblical writings in their origins. The biblical world of the first century was comprised of societies that were predominantly oral. Probably only 5 percent of the people were able to read and write, whereas the other 95 percent were non-literate peasants and urban dwellers who lived exclusively in the world of sound. The overwhelming majority of Christians experienced the Gospels and epistles in oral presentations.

Most likely, the early Christians presented the Gospels as a whole before gathered communities. Probably, they presented them by memory, even when a scroll was present, because the nature of the writing (continuous upper-case letters without break or punctuation) did not lend itself to reading with facility and because that is how people told stories in those days. As far as we know, these presentations were lively, emotional, and powerful performances meant to transform people and generate communities of love and commitment. The language was designed to be memorable—with stories, proverbs, parables, sayings with a ring to them, and teachings in patterns easy to learn. Words were understood to be speech-actions that had the power to bring transformation.

This new emphasis is a change of paradigm for the academy. Scholars are rethinking traditional disciplines in the context of orality. New methods are being

introduced to discern oral patterns in the writings and to construct in imagination early Christian performance scenarios as a basis for interpretation. You can learn about this work at the website www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org.

At the same time, there is a movement to recover the oral experience of the biblical traditions by performing these writings in congregations and other public venues. Trained actors are performing Mark and other biblical writings in theaters and churches. Teachers in seminaries and colleges are incorporating performance into their pedagogy of the Bible. Pastors and lector groups are recounting the Scripture lessons by heart in worship. Small groups of storytellers are meeting regularly in congregations to learn and tell stories as a means to deepen their spirituality and discipleship. To learn more about this movement, visit the website of the Network of Biblical Storytellers at www.nbsint.org.

The first four essays in this issue were written by people who have learned—and performed—the Gospel of Mark by heart. Through each of these four essays: "Mark: Forming Disciples for the Way of Peace," by Dr. Tom Boomershine; "Renovating Power: Embodying Jesus' New Way," by Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones; "Follow Me: Reflections on Internalizing, Embodying, and Performing the Gospel of Mark," by Dr. Tracy Radosevic; and "Sixty Miles and Sixteen Chapters: My Journey to Learn the Gospel of Mark and What It Taught Me," by the Rev. Zac Sturm, we are invited into fascinating and illuminating journeys of what learning Mark by heart has meant for the authors' scholarly understandings of Mark, for their practice of ministry as theological teachers and pastors, and—since each essay is a profound personal witness—for their call to be followers of Jesus, convicted and inspired by Jesus' claim on their lives.

The second set of essays: "The Year of Mark: A Year for Performance," by the Rev. Dr. Peter Perry; "Telling the Story," by the Rev. Dawn Silvius; "Gospel by Heart," by the Rev. Clark Olson-Smith; and "Scripture by Heart: Reconnecting Word and Heart," by Peter Olson, all describe what learning and performing Scripture by heart for weekly worship has meant for them, and each of the authors makes special references to the Gospel of Mark. Perry, Silvius, and Olson-Smith are parish pastors for whom the response of their congregations to Scripture by heart is an important aspect of the learning. Olson, Wartburg Theological Seminary M.Div. student preparing to be a pastor in the ELCA, was deeply influenced by a course taken with Professor Ruge-Jones at Texas Lutheran University, and has found the practice of Scripture by heart a way to keep "word and heart" deeply interconnected amid the rigors of his theological studies. "In, with, and under" the paragraphs of all the authors is a pulsing vitality that comes from their experience of performing Scripture in a *community of hearers and co-learners* and their testimony to the Gospel's very present enlivening power.

A culminating essay related to this issue on "Mark by Heart" is a hands-on tutorial by the Rev. Dennis Dewey. Dewey, parish pastor and Vice President of the Network of Biblical Storytellers International, has given over three hundred storytelling workshops. He emphasizes learning Scripture "by heart" because the experience of learning is done as a whole person, not just with the mind, as may happen with "memorization." Also, he clarifies what the word "performance" signifies, and why it is preferable to other descriptors. To practice the tutorial with a precious passage of Scripture in hand that we want to remember is to discover that it is indeed possible, even for those of us who do not have confidence in our memories, to learn—and perform—Scripture "by heart."

We hope you find these reflections informative. We also hope that you are inspired by them. If you have never tried Scripture by heart, we hope you will consider giving it a try.

David Rhoads and Kathleen Billman

Issue Co-Editors

Mark: Forming Disciples for the Way of Peace

Thomas E. Boomershine

President, GoTell Communications
Founder, Network of Biblical Storytellers, International

The invitation to write about my experiences while learning and telling the Gospel of Mark by heart reminds me of an invitation found in "The Godfather": "Let me make you an offer you can't refuse." Since learning and telling Mark by heart has probably been my most significant life-changing experience, I know of no way to respond without also providing some autobiographical context. This, then, is a confessional essay in the tradition of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine about what I have learned about Mark, about Jesus, and about God through this paradigm-altering experience.

The initial impulse to learn Mark by heart came in the research stage of my dissertation on Mark's passion-resurrection narrative at Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York in the summer of 1970. I had been an inner-city pastor in black and Latino churches in New York and Chicago in the mid-sixties and actively involved in the civil rights movement. The spring of 1968 was the spring of the student protests and the occupation of Columbia University across the street to the east, which had a major impact on UTS. Then, in the spring of 1969, I participated in the student protest at UTS in response to the Black Manifesto by James Forman at Riverside Church across the street to the west. That summer I wrote my first published article, "The Rich and the Poor in Theological Education" (*Motive,* February, 1970). These were revolutionary times.

My purpose in the dissertation was to study Mark's passion-resurrection narrative as a narrative. The first stage of any dissertation is to do a survey of other writings on the topic. Most of the previous studies began with a source analysis of the pre-Markan passion narrative. This involved an identification of the seams between the earlier sources and Mark's editorial additions. However, the more I read, the more I was discouraged, because I was not learning anything about Mark as a unified narrative. In fact, many of the books I was reading clearly had as their goal the deconstruction of Mark's story. One day, surrounded by all of my books on Mark, I asked God what to do. I heard what I experienced as God's voice, "Put away the books. Get your guitar, learn the passion narrative by heart in Greek, and chant it." Whether or not it was God's voice, it was certainly a radically new methodological approach to Mark that I had never previously conceived.

It took me most of a month to learn the story in Greek, in part because there were so many questions that the whole process raised. How should I pronounce the words—in the Erasmian pronunciation I had learned in my initial study of Greek or in modern Greek pronunciation so that someone who spoke Greek could

understand the story? I finally decided to learn it with the pronunciation I had already mastered in order to save time. What rhythms and tones should I use for the chant? I consulted the tropes of Hebrew and Byzantine chant, and they gave me some guidance. In the end, however, I improvised my own chant. Learning two and a half chapters of Koine Greek by heart proved to be a formidable task.

That experience changed my perception of Mark. First, I learned almost immediately that Mark was structured for learning by heart. There were verbal threads that linked the story together: parallel beginnings and endings to subsequent episodes; words that were repeated in later stories such as Jesus' prophecy of the disciples' flight and Peter's denial and the subsequent stories of those events; and words from earlier stories in the Gospel such as the passion prophecies, the feedings, and Jesus' dialogues with his disciples. Furthermore, I found that the stories were structured in what I came to call "episodes," units of two or three periods (sentences) in Greek. Recognizing those features of the story was immensely helpful in learning the story.

I also learned that the passion narrative was a truly passionate narrative that evoked strong emotions and intense dynamics. The contrast between the way in which the story was usually read and what emerged from the recital of the story by heart was huge. There were times when I was simply overwhelmed by the feelings that the story expressed. I would find myself weeping or engaged in deep self-examination. The internalization of the story completely changed my relationship with the story. Instead of being an outside observer studying the story in the text on my desk, the story was a vivid, living experience. The psychological distance between myself and the story disappeared so that the story was no longer an object that I was examining but a subject examining me. Instead of my asking questions of the text, the story was asking questions of me.

Another dimension of the experience was the contrast between the way in which I had previously heard the story and what emerged from learning and telling it by heart. I had heard stories from Mark's passion narrative read in worship services. There was even a worship service on Good Friday when I had heard the whole story read at one time. That had been a moving experience. However, the contrast between that story and the story I was learning was enormous. The earlier readings I had heard were emotionally detached and objective. There was little or no passion in the voices. The story was initially interesting but, after a time, boring. It was inconceivable that the whole Gospel could have been read in this manner and that it would hold an audience's attention for more than two hours. The readers read well, but I had little sense of their own engagement with the story.

This story I was learning and telling was raw by comparison. In the story of Jesus' crucifixion, there was restraint in the description of the details of this execution but the sheer scandal of what was happening was shocking. Throughout the story, I found myself feeling implicated in Jesus' death. This story touched nerves and exposed the radical alienation from God that was implicit in the action of Pilate, the chief priests, and the people. The disciples with whom I identified were fully complicit in Jesus' dying alone. It was as if I had never heard the story before, even though I was intimately familiar with it. In fact, I had written my master's thesis on the use of Psalm 23 in the passion narratives of the Gospels. However, this was a new thing.

The experience of telling Mark's story to others was no less surprising. In retrospect, I have sympathy for my first hearers. How would you feel if this over-the-top

storytelling maniac was chanting this story to you in Greek? The first person to whom I told the story was my fellow graduate student, Gil Bartholomew. He had taught the introduction to Greek course at UTS for a couple of years and was a good Greek scholar. Nevertheless, he could understand only fragments of the story, because he had never heard it told before and had certainly never heard it chanted. Yet even though he barely understood the words, he was deeply moved, as well as puzzled, by the story.

The first time that I told a story in worship was in a chapel service at Union the following spring. Dr. Reginald Fuller had heard me tell a couple of stories and asked me to tell the Emmaus appearance story for a service during Eastertide. I remember that service vividly and how much anxiety I had about standing on the open platform rather than behind the lectern and addressing the congregation directly. The story immediately got people's attention and I could tell that they were listening more attentively than they would have listened to a reading. There was a sense of experiencing the original event, of being there on the road, of Jesus breaking the bread, and of their telling the eleven what had happened. People commented on that after the service. The response of the group, mainly other students, was universally positive, even though some were uncertain about its liturgical appropriateness. This was also the first time that I heard the most frequent response over the years: "It made the Scripture more alive."

Since then I have told biblical stories to thousands of people all over the world in a wide variety of contexts: workshops, lectures, worship services, pastoral visits, in churches, hospitals, prisons, and open air gatherings. The responses have varied greatly. The great majority of people respond to the recital of the Scriptures by heart with warmth and enthusiasm. A small minority don't like it. Negative responses I remember include: "too intense," "too much in my face," and "calls too much attention to the person telling."

In recent years, I have encouraged congregations to form "Scripture by Heart" groups and to tell all of the Scriptures by heart. After observing the extremely low level of engagement and listening in most congregations to Scripture readings, I have concluded that the recital of Scripture by heart creates a higher degree of listening and response. I first initiated this at Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton four years ago. From the first week until now, the response from the congregation and the tellers has been universally positive, with not one negative response. Scripture by heart is now one of the things that Grace advertises about its worship, and visitors regularly comment on the vitality of the Scriptures at Grace. The Grace by Heart group now includes about twenty individuals and continues to grow. The same is true of all the congregations in which this practice has been initiated: Protestant and Catholic, liberal and conservative. I strongly recommend the proclamation of the Scriptures by heart to every congregation.

The degree to which this experience of learning Mark by heart would affect my personal life only became clear in the events that followed the completion of my dissertation in the spring of 1974. On November 9 of that year I was hit by a car at a filling station on the Bronx River Parkway in New York. I was standing in back of another car waiting to talk to the attendant and a car came off the parkway and was unable to stop. Both of my legs were severely fractured, though fortunately not crushed, between the two cars. I was in casts for six months and out of work for a year. During that year, I found that the stories I knew by heart were great gifts to me in the process of recovery. The story

of the healing of the paralytic in particular was a story that I remembered and told myself many times. Indeed, the word "remember" came to have a new significance for me as I slowly and painfully regained the use of my lower members. There was a close connection between remembering this story and the process of learning to walk again. Jesus' forgiveness of the shame associated with my new paralysis and his invitation/command to get up and walk were a steady source of energy to me.

Part of what I learned in that experience was the dynamic of the memory of sacred stories. One of the side effects of strong pain medication is involuntary sleep. I often could not read for more than ten minutes without falling asleep. Watching TV would usually keep me awake; but TV in general and daytime TV in particular was depressing. It was difficult to find a source of encouragement and energy in the outside world. This was particularly intense during the long nights of sleeplessness and the long hours of painful rehabilitation exercises. The main resources I had in those times were the things in my memory: songs, prayers, and the stories from Mark that I had learned by heart during my dissertation research on Mark. My memory was the one thing that could cut through the pain. I found that the stories that I knew virtually word for word from Mark were uniquely associated with God for me. Remembering the stories and re-experiencing them in my imagination was one of the ways in which I could feel and know God's presence.

After returning to teaching, I realized that I wanted my students to have this resource for themselves. I began to explore the ways in which I as a teacher could enable others to learn the stories by heart. In the fall of 1976, I led my first biblical storytelling workshop at an opening retreat for the new S.T.M. group at New York Theological Seminary. That workshop on Mark's story of the paralytic—no surprise there—was a transformative experience. The students were energized by the process and surprised at how meaningful it was to learn and tell the story and to connect it with experiences of their own paralysis—physical and metaphorical.

Within the next year I, along with my colleague Gil, initiated the Network of Biblical Storytellers. That organization has steadily grown through the years and is now an international community with active groups in Australia, Africa, Asia, and Canada. I have personally done storytelling workshops all over the United States and around the world. The Network has enabled thousands of people to learn and tell biblical stories. I have learned from this that there is great energy in enabling others to learn and to tell the stories themselves.

All of this has been a great surprise to me. I remember asking myself while I was doing my research on Mark, "I wonder what would happen if we just told the stories?" I could never have imagined how much of an impact it would have. Thus, another thing I have learned is the multiplying power of the stories. There are now biblical storytellers all over the world. My hunch is that this was true to a much greater degree in the historical context of the first century. The phenomenal growth of early Christian Judaism is a historical fact that is inexplicable if the primary storytelling tradition of the Gospels were directed to the small communities of those who already believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Groups that only tell stories to themselves do not grow.

In addition to the new possibilities, the process of learning and telling Mark by heart has also created a new set of problems. The first and most persistent problem has been that Mark's story is very different when it is analyzed as a

performed story rather than as a text read by readers. I experienced this very early on in the first draft of my dissertation. In a chapter of conclusions, I wrote about three central issues in Markan interpretation: the purpose of the characterization of the disciples, the question of whether or not the Pilate trial was anti-Jewish polemic, and the possibility or impossibility of the ending at 16:8.

Regarding the characterization of the disciples, students of Norman Perrin had developed a Chicago school of Markan interpretation. A representative product of that school was Theodore Weeden's book *Mark: Traditions in Conflict.* These studies shared the conclusion that Mark's purpose in his highly negative characterization of the disciples was theological critique. Weeden argued that the purpose of the highly negative characterization of the disciples was to criticize the *theios aner* (divine man) Christology that the disciples represented. Werner Kelber's later book *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1984) extended this argument and concluded that Mark's purpose in creating a written gospel was to critique the oral gospel with which the disciples and particularly Peter were associated. Regarding the possible anti-Judaism of the Gospel, a prevalent reading of the Pilate trial has been that a primary purpose of the characterization of the Jews and their role in Jesus' death was anti-Jewish polemic. Regarding the ending, there was a widely held conclusion that 16:8 could not have been the intended ending of Mark, because its description of the women saying nothing was too negative.

In response to each of these three controversies, I argued that an analysis of Mark's story *as a narrative that was heard* revealed patterns of storytelling rhetoric that provided new perspectives. For example, when told and analyzed as a story, Mark's characterization of the disciples combines highly sympathetic dynamics of distance with frequent mistakes in the disciples' responses culminating in their running away at the arrest and in Peter's denial. The purpose of this is to involve the listeners with these mistakes in order to invite them to reflect on these responses in themselves. They are not led to reject the disciples. Rather, hearers are led by the narrative to identify with the disciples in a way that would enable them to address the failures of the disciples as potential failings in themselves.

Such an analysis paralleled that of the characterization of "the crowd," which is highly sympathetic and invites the listening audience to identify with the crowd in its enthusiastic response to Jesus. The crowd's sudden demand for Jesus' crucifixion and the release of Barabbas subsequently "implicates" the audience in this demand. The narrative purpose is to involve the audience in this action of the crowd. I later named this narrative strategy a "rhetoric of implication"—a strategy that implicates the audience in the death of Jesus. Far from being anti-Jewish, the narrative involves the hearer in the reactions of the crowd so that the audience could deal with the reactions of the crowd within themselves.

This same rhetorical structure of sympathetic involvement with a character who does something radically wrong is present also in the ending at 16:8. The women are highly sympathetic characters who are Jesus' only friends at his death and burial. When they flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone in response to the angel's command to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen, it is a supremely surprising ending that invites the audience to reflect on their response to the angel's command to "go tell." Will the hearers also be afraid as the women were or will they have the courage to go and tell?

These three elements of Mark's story have similar characteristics that are misperceived when the story is read as a text in silence. When heard as dimensions of a story told to audiences, they have a consistent and significantly different meaning.

Mark's story invites his audiences to reflect on their own resistance to following Jesus' way of non-violence.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the Markan storyteller's address to the audience revealed that the audience was almost always addressed as Jews. The one exception to this dominant pattern is Mark's explanation of Jewish purity traditions in 7:2–3 that is clearly directed to non-Jews. The structure of the plot is based on Jesus' suffering and death being a reversal of the audience's expectations. If that is the case, Mark addresses his audience as individuals who do not already believe that Jesus is the Messiah. That is, the evidence from the story indicates that Mark addresses his audience as Jews who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The dominant purpose of the story is not an anti-Jewish polemic. Rather, it is designed to invite his Jewish listeners to believe and to become disciples.

My dissertation committee found these conclusions unacceptable and indefensible. During the ensuing two years of searching for a way to save my dissertation, I finally concluded that the foundational problem was that there was no way for my committee to experience Mark in its original medium. In the absence of that experience, my admittedly radical conclusions had no validity. I decided to resubmit my dissertation as a 350-page rhetorical analysis of Mark's passion and resurrection narrative with the only conclusion being that it was possible to analyze Mark's narrative as a narrative. That was approved.

This was an existential crisis in which I learned that changing the medium in which Mark is experienced is very difficult. In the years since that experience, I have concluded that learning and telling Mark as a story is a paradigm shift that changes everything in Markan scholarship. What is true for Mark is equally true for the other "books" of the Bible. They were all composed orally to be performed for audiences rather than read in silence by readers. However, the assumption of *the reader* is virtually universal in historical critical biblical scholarship.

From my earlier experience, I knew that simply writing articles or books on this topic was insufficient. In order to address this problem, therefore, I finally concluded that a way forward might be to establish a research group that would investigate the media of the Bible in its ancient and modern context. It took two years of lobbying the program committee of the Society of Biblical Literature to get approval to have a consultation to see whether there was a sufficient number of scholars who were interested in this topic. The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media group was a consultation for two years (rather than the usual one year), then a research group for several years, and finally it became an established section after more than ten years. Changing the medium of biblical interpretation is a big

project. Nevertheless, this research group has had a major impact on changing the dominant paradigm. A recent step in that process of change has been the launching of "performance criticism" by David Rhoads.

What then was the meaning of the Markan storyteller's story to its first-century audiences? What impact did this story have? If the original audiences of Mark's Gospel were Jews and Gentiles in the early 70s as is implied by the apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13, the story of Jesus was heard in the context of the disastrous consequences of the Roman-Jewish war. The people of Israel had chosen the way of Barabbas rather than the way of Jesus. They had chosen to maintain separation and hostility toward the Gentiles rather than to do good for their enemies as Jesus did in his healing and feeding of Gentiles (for example, the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, and the feeding of the 4000 from the Decapolis) as well as Jews.

In contrast to the military traditions of the Messiahs of Israel such as Saul and David, Jesus killed no one and taught his disciples to preach and heal. He did not form an army to attack the enemies of Israel but instead defeated the powers of evil by his actions and teaching. His proclamation of the kingdom of God transcended the conflicts between Israel and the nation states of the Gentiles and redefined its meaning as an inclusive spiritual realm. Most striking of all, he modeled non-violent resistance to the powers of this evil age by his suffering and death. Jesus' way of peace was vindicated by God in his resurrection. The good news of the Gospel was that God had sent a Messiah who would save the world from the powers of evil—the powers of hatred, violence, and warfare. Mark's story was an appeal to his audiences to believe in Jesus as a non-violent Messiah. In the context of the period following the Judean war against Rome from 66 to 70 C.E., Mark's good news was a clear and powerful alternative to the way of warfare the nation had chosen.

Mark's story also redefined what it meant to be a follower of the Messiah. In the tradition of Israel and in the most popular story of the ancient world (Homer's epic story of the war between Greece and Troy), to be a hero meant to become a warrior and take up a sword and follow a great leader such as Alexander the Great into battle. In Mark's story, becoming a disciple of the Messiah meant taking up your cross and following Jesus into non-violent battle against the spiritual powers of evil. A primary impact of the passion narrative is also a matter of identifying with the disciples as they face their own resistance to following Jesus' way, namely, fear of suffering and death. Mark's story invites his audiences to reflect on their own resistance to following Jesus' way of non-violence. Somehow, it is easier to face death in warfare killing others than it is to face death non-violently for the sake of others.

Thus, Mark's evangelism is not primarily focused on the salvation of individual souls and accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. Nor is it focused on the theological issues of the triune manifestations of God or the relationship of Jesus' humanity and divinity. Mark's evangelism is directed to the conversion of human beings to Jesus' way of peace. The need for that kind of evangelism is thoroughly contemporary in a digital age in which we are overwhelmed by images and appeals to violence and warfare as the way by which we will be saved from our enemies and the powers of evil. The Christian churches, the nation states of the world, and, in particular, the United States of America need to hear and to be convinced of Mark's good news. This has been my deepest learning from knowing and telling Mark by heart.

Renovating Power: Embodying Jesus' New Way

Philip L. Ruge-Jones
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When I was in seminary, my first New Testament professor, David Tiede, suggested that we choose one of the four Gospels to relate to in an on-going way throughout our pastoral life. He spoke of his long relationship with the Gospel of Luke and how that Gospel continued to unfold new mysteries to him even after decades of rigorous engagement. I have followed his advice with the oldest of the four Gospels, Mark. Like many of the readers of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, I have spent time with Mark every three years since my baptism as an infant. In seminary my knowledge of the evangelist's message deepened. But our friendship went to a whole new level when I committed to taking its mysteries to heart in order to perform them for others. Every day for sixteen months, I spent a half hour over morning coffee internalizing Mark's narrative. This relationship has brought us together at such a deep level that it is hard for me to untangle where my own thinking ends and where Mark's begins. As with other deep friendships I have enjoyed throughout the years, I find myself finishing Mark's sentences for him, but more surprising is that he occasionally returns the favor for me.

At the heart of Mark's gospel is renovating power. In a context where the Roman Empire sought to control how power would be understood and experienced, the evangelist re-imagined what power was and how it could be used. Mark's Jesus overtly teaches this renovated, renovating form of power.

> You know that those considered to be rulers over the Gentile nations dominate them and their great ones are tyrants over them, but it's not like this among you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be most important among you will be a slave of all. Because even the Human One came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.[1]

This revision of power in terms of service toward others and the empowerment of others appears throughout the teachings that Jesus offers in Mark. In fact, not only the content of Jesus' teaching, but also his parabolic mode stimulates the hearers into active reflection. The parables do not deliver neatly contained propositions, but rather empower the hearers to engage in active, creative thought.

Along with what Jesus says and how he says it, Mark's Jesus puts into action this renovating power throughout his life and ministry. As Joanna Dewey and David Rhoads note about their discoveries

1. The translations throughout this article are based on the one I perform. This translation is based on the one offered in David Rhoads, Donald Michie, and Joanna Dewey's *Mark as Story* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), but includes modifications I made in light of my own work.

in relation to this Gospel, "…when Mark says, 'he came…to serve and to give his life [as] a ransom for many,' we came to understand that the life he gave referred to 'his whole life' in service…."[2] Mark's portrayal of Jesus standing in the baptismal waters among sinners, his miracles of healing and exorcism, his feedings of those who hunger, his equipping of others to heal and exorcize, his challenging of religious and political leaders in their abuse of power, all contribute to the new definition of renovating power that Mark offers us. Jesus' ministry finally leads to his painful execution because he insists on practicing power in a way that threatens those who act as tyrants over others. As womanist interpreter Raquel Annette St. Clair notes in regard to the end of Jesus' and his followers' practice, "Pain is a consequence of discipleship. It is not a lifestyle, a life sentence, or a life goal. Pain only signals the level of opposition to ministry."[3]

Internalizing and performing this Gospel allow me to experience the tension between these two ways of enacting power. As I prepare the story, I enter deeply into the frustrations and fears of those who challenge Jesus. This is not difficult since I know their motivations intimately and have stimulants toward the kind of power they pursue all around me. But I also rehearse another way of exercising power as I take on the persona of Jesus as well as several minor characters and enter into this still more excellent way. On a practical level, the rhythms of these different embodiments mean negotiating how both kinds of power are conceived and brought to life. When thinking about the *stance* of those offended by Jesus, *stance* means more than their point of view or mindset although it includes this. Stance means exploring questions like these: How do they stand physically in relation to others? How is domination embodied in very concrete ways? Other questions are brought to Jesus as well: How does he hold himself in the presence of others? How does he embody a real alternative that causes fear to rise in some and life to rise in others? Working through these dynamics in the story, I find myself drawing on my own life experiences of abusive and life-giving power; in turn, my practice of embodying them within the story flows into my own daily practices leading to a deeper, more reflective, and empowering stance in the minute-by-minute performance of daily life.

While on a family trip to visit my parents, I used the multitude of hours in the car to run through Mark's gospel. On one particular morning, I was rehearsing the story when flashing lights appeared in my rearview mirror. I ended up with a speeding citation in which the officer claimed I was traveling fifteen miles per hour over the speed limit. I remain convinced to this day—backed by my speedometer, my GPS's appraisal of my velocity, and my wife's testimony—that the officer falsely added fifteen miles to my speed. When I challenged him on this point, he told me that I certainly had the right to contest his claim in court. Later, Internet searches confirmed that many others had been caught in this speed trap. I was livid at such injustice that preys on out-of-town travelers' vulnerability to raise local revenues.

Once I settled down a bit, I decided to put this experience to some good use. I let this violation fuel my telling of the

2. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, "Reflections" in *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect,* eds. Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 266.

3. Raquel Annette St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 166.

injustice that Jesus and others in the Gospel suffered. The story certainly gained new energy in this manner of telling. Finally the story would not allow it to end there for me; Mark began finishing my sentences for me. The story confronted me with Jesus who became indignant at the injustices *others* suffered and who knew he was only one among many, many people attacked by the authorities. I wondered if he was able to face his pseudo-trial without defensiveness because he knew that the injustice he suffered was but one piece of the daily reign of terror others also knew. He would not play some trump card to get out of the harm others would continue to face. [Here is where I quietly note that I had not imitated Jesus in this regard. I brought up my special pastoral status in a rather ungracious way to the officer who leaned on my window. My anger at the injustice of the speed trap could have been greatly alleviated if I got off with a warning that others would not get. Even though I was ineffective in my attempt to change the officer's mind, the power I tried to wield against him was manipulative power.]

My daughter's later comment that she had never seen me as intense and passionate as I was when facing off with that officer still gives me pause. When I think of the multitude of injustices that I have witnessed resulting from the systematic and persistent violence against those who are poor, who are not white or male, or whose sexual identity is not heterosexual, how sad that the most passionate my daughter has ever seen me was when I was defending my own rights in the face of a momentary lapse of my privilege. Mark's story served as a mirror that helped me to see how narrowly my own passion was focused and to begin to imagine a broader, more godly focus for my energies.

This particular process gave me insight into how the Gospel may have functioned in its original context. Jesus may have *gotten my attention* in this incident through Mark's story, but that did not mean he *changed my heart and mind instantaneously*. For several days, I found myself locked in an on-going struggle between my gut response to what had happened and the more compassionate way that Jesus was calling me to follow. Some moments were better than others, some much worse. I can see that the story had a real impact on deeply entrenched moods and modes of being, reframing them even though they were not easily shifted.

In light of this experience, I have come to believe that the conflicts that Jesus confronts in Mark's gospel were told because they reflected the continued tensions within which Mark's hearers found themselves. Like me, they struggled between their long-learned mannerisms and the new way that Jesus offered. For example, they still occasionally wondered why Gentiles and sinners should be included in the community; so, Mark's Jesus showed up in the storytelling to clarify that commitment. They continued to wonder why their community was somewhat relaxed toward Sabbath requirements, or how God's Anointed One could have been crucified, or why the Temple was destroyed, or what it means that Jesus was raised. Since these issues endured, the risen Jesus took on flesh again in the telling of the story to address those ongoing struggles. He made a real impact on these deeply entrenched issues even if full resolution was not instantaneous.

As the example above indicates, the story that has been taken to heart interrupts my life at points that I do not choose. The relationship with the story is indeed like that of an old friend who shares enough history with me to get my attention when I need it most. Through the discipline of learning the story by heart, I experience

a different kind of authority or power released by the text. It does not lord it over me, but steps into my life to serve my deepest needs in the context of God's reign. It authors or rewrites my life, sending me in a new direction. Those who have not undertaken the discipline of inhabiting the specific words written by another might imagine that this process is utterly restrictive. However, my experience is quite the opposite. I find that the story constructed by the evangelist is a place of spaciousness and freedom. In this way, through the very act of learning and telling the story again, I experience the renovating power that Jesus conceived. For me as a storyteller, the proclamation of this story becomes an incarnational moment through which Jesus comes again recreating life, opening up freedom, and re-conceiving power.

Many who have heard the story told by me have confessed to having a similar incarnational experience. One representative audience member stated, "When I heard Jesus say…" She spoke as though she had heard Jesus himself through the storied event. Many hearers have witnessed to this kind of sacramental experience of Mark's Jesus; they did not only find themselves thinking about the kingdom of God that came with Jesus, they also experienced it coming among them through the storytelling event. The healing story of the bleeding woman brought them a sense of their own wholeness; the rising of the paralytic gave them the power to get up when they could not move themselves; the challenge Jesus offered struck them; Jesus' cry upon the cross merged with the lament welling up within them; and the possibility that Jesus awaited them in "Galilee" became their own hope.

Through the reflections of my audience members, I have come to see that even the death of Jesus itself may serve as an empowering story. It is not so because it speaks of some transaction between God and Jesus, but because it generates an encounter between Mark's Jesus and the hearer. Jesus' suffering helps many give voice to their own suffering and allows them to take it seriously. In ways that are not illogical but which also are not logic bound, they have heard their own sorrowful story in the narrative of violence against Jesus. Those final chapters of Mark's gospel are a vessel that has carried multiple forms of grief. I suspect that it functioned this way in relation to the devastation brought on by the Roman-Judean War of 66-70 C.E., including the destruction of the Temple. I also have heard contemporary people find their own abuse, abandonment, violation, political persecution, and brokenness become clear in relation to what they see Jesus suffer. In this connecting event, they receive again the solidarity and comfort that Jesus offered during his earthly life.

Similarly, the strange last verses of the story embody the values Jesus expressed during his life. When the young man clad in white makes his announcement, we are left with a word of promise that we cannot own but that can put us onto our own journey to meet Jesus again in Galilee. Mark's gospel denies us the religious fundamentalist's certitude. Mark appears to understand that such certitude often authorizes those who possess it to act violently against those who lack it. Mark promises that when Jesus comes among us, we will not be elevated over others. Rather when we enact empowering service with those in Galilee—those on the margins, those broken, hungry, ignored, abused or shamed—we will meet the risen Christ. The event created when the story is told reenacts in concrete ways the ministry of Jesus among us.

If many of my audience members have known this dynamic through my sharing in performances, I have experienced it

thirty, sixty, even one hundred-fold when learning the story with a community. Every couple of years I teach a class in which fifteen students learn to tell together the entire Gospel of Mark. Many of them come to the story with little theological background and even less experience in formal performance. Each class takes on a character of its own, but every time, the class community comes to embody learning in a way that takes on the renovating kind of power that Mark's Jesus conceived. The participants gain greater confidence from each other, risk vulnerability before each other, and become a community of support to each other. The environment created in these classrooms is qualitatively different than in other courses I teach. Even though I know more about the content of this topic than in my other courses, I find myself able to guard silence and to trust that the students will actively move into discoveries that the whole group needs in order to understand it. While the new perspectives may be different from what I have come to see in Mark's gospel, that difference feels generative rather than threatening. In these sessions, we enjoy more laughter and more tears, more personal growth, more honest sharing, more open struggling, and more solidarity among ourselves than in any other course I teach. The profound embodiment of the story proves to be transformative for us.[4]

It is one thing to experience this dynamic among a group of open and inquisitive college students. I also have experienced how the storied event has changed my experience with professional colleagues. Every year I participate in a seminar that facilitates collaboration among trained storytellers who have scholarly commitment and scholars willing to venture into the practice of storytelling. The scope of this seminar of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nbsint.org) moves beyond interest in the Gospel of Mark, although many of our members are leading interpreters of that Gospel. Our work together around the biblical story has created a rigorous academic community that is unlike any other I personally have known. Our work together is academically intense. Yet in addition to the academic exploration, we have become a community of mutual support. This is not to say that we agree on all points, but rather that in the midst of intense disagreement we have found our lives bound together in renovating ways. Although we are together for less than a week each year, I have discovered that the participants are primary members of my support community who allow me to know in the flesh the alternative kind of power that Jesus brings. Many others in the group have echoed this confession.

As we all know, when we tell others about a definitive relationship we have with another, words often fall short of the wonder we know. So too with this brief testimony to my friendship with the Gospel of Mark. I hope that my witness invites you to engage my friend for yourself. I trust that in taking Mark's story of Jesus to heart and binding your life to others who also experience this embodied event, you, too, will know the experience of the risen Christ in a new way. You, too, will find your understanding of power has been renovated; you, too, will directly experience Jesus' renovating power in your own life.

4. I have published other articles on this experience of teaching Mark in a college course. See my "Performance Criticism as Critical Pedagogy" in *Currents in Theology & Mission* 37 no. 4 (August 2010), 288–295. And 'The Word Heard: How Hearing a Text Differs from Reading One" in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2009), 101–113.

Follow Me: Reflections on Internalizing, Embodying, and Performing the Gospel of Mark

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I have been around "church folk" most of my life. I have received seminary degrees twice and am now an adjunct professor at two. As a director of Christian education and then a freelance biblical storyteller/workshop leader/retreat facilitator, I have spent the past twenty-two years amidst a variety of denominational settings around the globe. My closest friends and most treasured colleagues are members of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nbsint.org). Throughout all those relationships and experiences, I've developed a fairly good sense for the Bible MVPs (Most Valued Pericopes). And there are people who even have a special place in their heart for an entire book of the Bible. This seems to be especially true when it comes to the Gospels. Many women tend to gravitate to the inclusiveness of Luke; the Sermon on the Mount and the Kingdom of Heaven parables in Matthew speak profoundly to others; and John's sophistication attracts a different type. Over the years I have frequently asked people, point blank, what their favorite Gospel is; and almost never has the reply been "Mark." Prior to my in-depth work with that particular Gospel, I am not sure I would have chosen it either. But I can now say, with utmost fervor, that Mark is "da man!"

I am not just a storyteller by vocation; I am a storyteller by personality. I have been accused of not being able to say "hello" in less than a thousand words! Mind you, I am not saying this is preferable; on the contrary, over the years, I have striven to reign in my verbosity and only share what is pertinent. Mark has this discipline down pat; and it is perhaps what I find most attractive about this Gospel. As an interpreter of these words, I am struck by the fact that, since Mark has cut out all the fat, almost every one of his spare words matters and is important. This is an interpretive challenge, on the one hand, but also a creative delight. And, arguably, it begs the question as to whether the expansions of Mark's stories by Matthew and Luke are improvements. I am not sure that they are. Mark's succinctness offers a good general life lesson: sometimes less really is more.

Of course, you cannot spend much time with Mark and not notice the "immediate" urgency! Perhaps this theme is related to his pithiness. Mark is in a hurry to get the message out there so he does not waste time, not even with superfluous words.

Speaking of "the message," when I first started working intently on learning Mark, I quickly noticed three references to proclaiming "the message" near the beginning of the Gospel (1:38, 1:39, 3:14). I think the reason it got my attention was the context of the first reference. Jesus has just cured many who are sick and has also cast out many demons. The next morning,

he gets away by himself to pray. When Simon and the others find him, they imply that he is wanted back home (perhaps to "put on another show") when they say, "Everyone is searching for you." But Jesus refuses, answering, "Let's go into the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; *because <u>that</u> is what I came out to do.*" The emphasis is mine, but I think it makes sense. The disciples (and townspeople) seem to want him back for more healings and exorcisms but Jesus seems to indicate that his *main* purpose is to proclaim the message (especially since it is mentioned separately from the act of casting out demons in verse 39 as well as in 3:15). So, what exactly *is* the message?

Well, Jesus' first public act of proclaiming anything is in 1:15, where what he "proclaims" is identified by Mark in the previous verse as "the good news of God."

> The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.

There is a whole lot contained in those scant nineteen words! And if this were a different type of essay, I would spend more time exploring the cornucopia present there. But for our purposes here, I want to focus on the two middle pieces: God's kingdom coming near and people repenting.

When I first started to experiment with how to embody God's kingdom coming near, muscle memory reminded me how I portray Matthew's version of Jesus' birth, the part that mentions Emmanuel, "God with us." I typically gesture higher up (to indicate God in a "heavenly" location) and then gesture inclusively to indicate God has come from the "heavens" to be among us. God's kingdom coming near seems to be Mark's version of Emmanuel (especially since Mark does not include a birth narrative). But because Jesus is actually talking and because the storyteller "becomes" Jesus in that telling, I have fun playing with a version of the Emmanuel gesture: "…the kingdom of God" (gesture heavenward) "has come" (hands are brought down and as they pass the eyes, Jesus looks at them and smiles, recognizing a teachable moment) "…near" (gesture with palms facing the audience, fingers down, hands "pushing" slightly forward indicating an offering for the listeners, as if to say, "The kingdom of God is not some vague, amorphous idea that is lurking somewhere nearby; it's right *here*, where I'm standing, in the form of my actual body. And my physical presence among you is God's gift of incarnation to you."

What kind of message is implied by the fact that God's kingdom is now walking in our midst? Well, first of all, a kingdom implies more than one person! So I think getting other people involved connects with the second part of the proclamation's middle section: repent. Thanks to hellfire and damnation preaching, this word has come to mean something more along the lines of feeling remorse for wrongdoing. Of course, the implication is that you will not continue to do that wrong thing. And that is closer to the original meaning, which has more to do with thinking differently, switching directions or, as Eugene Peterson interprets it in *The Message*: "changing your life." It is not easy to change our ways. We are creatures of habit; we are too busy; we are not up for the challenge of bucking the status quo. During the recent ten-year anniversary commemorations of 9/11, I was reminded of what a colleague had said to me on Sept. 12, 2001. "For Christians, nothing has changed. We still worship the same God, we still follow the same Jesus, we are still supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves. As horrific as the events of yesterday were, nothing about that has changed for us." Ten years later, I

still agree with her statement, but I'd add a caveat: The only thing that changed for Christians, perhaps, was the ease with which we have been able to live out truly Christian lives in America post-9/11.

And that takes me back to Mark's message of repentance, of turning from our current trajectory and moving in a new direction. How do we know what that new direction is? Well, maybe that is why it was significant to have God walking in our midst, to show us the way, to provide a path to *follow*. And that message of "Follow me" was probably the biggest epiphany I had during my intense work with Mark. I've obviously known for most of my life that Christians follow Jesus. Duh! But what does that really mean? What are the implications—for individuals, for congregations, even for a nation that claims to be Christian?

I am convinced it was my embodiment of this text that produced my epiphanies. Simply reading Mark and coming upon the various references to following Jesus is what led to the superficial understanding mentioned above. But as a storyteller, those aspects of the text took up residence in my muscles, bones, sinews, and flesh, which, in turn, impacted my whole being, providing a filter through which to experience the narrative viscerally. Take, for instance, the end of Chapter Eight where Jesus explains to the disciples the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem, when Peter takes him aside to rebuke him, and Jesus calls him Satan. The way that scene physically played out for me showed a "tug of war" in leadership. Peter pulling Jesus aside meant, directionally, that Peter was in the lead and Jesus was following him. In fact, Jesus has to *turn* (around) to see the disciples. So, while in the character of Jesus, I forcefully turn my back on Peter, start heading back to the disciples, and say over my shoulder (and with a strong pointed-finger gesture), "*You* get behind *me*…." as a way to convey the message that Jesus has to remind Peter who is supposed to be following whom here.

This incident is followed (no pun intended) by what I understand as the core of Jesus' message. He gathers together not just the disciples but the crowd as well and explains very clearly what it means to follow him—denying self and taking up one's cross. Again, due to the physical act of embodying these words, it occurred to me that, in context, it made sense to imply that this was controversial teaching, because the idea of a Messiah (which is how Peter has just identified Jesus) was often linked with the knight-in-shining-armor image. Understandably so. How else were oppressors to be bested and liberation to be granted if not by force? Might makes right; that is what they knew. No wonder Peter chastises Jesus when he submissively foretells the unjust, violent, and deadly way he will be treated by those in power. I imagine Jesus as an effective storyteller who would not only strongly drive home this controversial point, but also highlight the powerful impact of this reversal of expectations. How might he have done this? "If any want to become my followers, [you've got to] *let* them deny themselves, take up their…" (pantomime pulling a sword from its sheath, stop, make deliberate eye contact with as many in the audience as possible while shaking head "no" and slowly putting the sword back) "…take up their *cross*…" (hands slowly rise to a cruciform position and remain there through the end of the sentence) "and follow me."

Following Jesus (I mean *really* following Jesus) is not easy. It involves a commitment to go all the way to the cross. By 10:32, this realization has dawned on at least some of his followers. "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus

was [leading the way]; they were amazed (that he was willing to take the lead on a path that would end in certain death?), and those who [*did* follow] were afraid." I can see why! This is followed immediately (of course!) by another explanation of what is to happen to Jesus once they get to Jerusalem; it is not pretty. Next in this fascinating narrative sequence, we have James and John asking for "preferred seating"—directly on the right and left of Jesus when he enters his glory. When I tell this, I again assume the cruciform position, but innocently, as James and John are simply indicating both sides of Jesus. I hold that pose for a moment, hoping the audience will make the visual connection, and then, becoming Jesus, I make it clear that *he* sees it. He winces and softly, painfully makes the point that they obviously have no idea what they are asking. Jesus asks them, in essence, if they're honestly prepared to "take up their cross and follow him…to the cross." Again, not fully understanding the implications, the disciples, of course, respond that they are prepared. Then Jesus achingly affirms that, ultimately, they will indeed follow him to the cross. The other disciples get angry (jealous?) of the brothers; so Jesus has another teachable moment with them, revealing another aspect of a life that follows Jesus: you are to go against the status quo and serve others, not expect to *be* served, as society dictates. The life of a follower of Jesus is one of humility, not exaltation.

Cue Bartimaeus' entrance. I have told this pericope for years but always struggled with how to ask Jesus' question: "What do you want me to do for you?" There are so many possibilities, starting with which word to emphasize. For instance, "What do you want *me* to do for you?" has a distinctly different connotation from "What do you want me to *do* for you?" It wasn't until looking at the larger narrative and recognizing what this story follows (again, no pun intended!), that I started to get some potential clarification. James and John, two of the three who comprise Jesus' inner circle, those closest to him, ask a favor of him and are denied. Immediately (!) afterwards, a *blind beggar* also asks a favor of him and, this time, it is granted. Why? Maybe because the brothers' request was for elevation, exaltation, an honor beyond what they deserved. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, is simply asking for his honor as a human being to be restored after living through the indignity of being forced to beg. Interestingly, his name tells us he is the son of Timaeus, and *that* name means honor. So, the son of honor had been reduced to begging *alongside* "the way" (but not able to *walk along the way* because of his blindness, even though this blind man is the only person in Mark's gospel to "see" Jesus' identity as the Son of David, which obviously has messianic reverberations). He was not asking to be elevated higher than what a regular human being could expect or deserve; he simply wants his identity as the son of honor restored. So his wish is granted. And then what does he do? He *follows Jesus along the way*, which leads immediately after the next story into Jerusalem, and to the cross.

These kinds of verbal threads and connections throughout the larger Markan narrative could certainly be noticed, recognized, and examined from a written text. But they were all made much more obvious to me through the physicality necessitated by embodying the text. And perhaps the one thing more than anything else that embodying Mark's gospel made abundantly clear to me was the humanness of Jesus. Most Christians claim that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human; however, the majority of teachings and sermons about him seem to gravitate more

to the divine part. I vividly remember a scene from Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in which hoards of people with various needs descend upon Jesus to be healed. They all come at once—reaching, grabbing, pushing—demanding a piece of Jesus, who just seems to disappear in this teeming swirl of humanity. Once the crowd finally disperses, Jesus is so exhausted he cannot even stand on his own and, breathing heavily, hangs on one or two of the disciples for support. It was the first time I had ever really contemplated the humanness of Jesus, how he must have gotten tired, and irritable, and frustrated. Internalizing Mark's gospel brought all those experiences—and more—to the forefront for me.

When you learn an extended piece of Scripture, it is easier to see and understand the circumstances that lead up to various events; there's a natural emotional arc. In Mark's case, Jesus' continual "beating of his head against a brick wall" with the disciples, his ongoing conflicts with the authorities, his nonstop encounters with a smothering crowd made *me* exhausted! I couldn't help but get irritated, frustrated, and almost desperate in my efforts as a storyteller not only to proclaim the message, but also to ensure that it was received. For me, Jesus starts out good-natured, almost teasing the scribes of the Pharisees in Chapter Two when they inquire about his choice of dinner guests. Chapter Four's various parables suggest an earnestness in his instruction; and a whiff of annoyance creeps in when dealing with the mourners at the house of Jairus. In Chapter Six, it is Jesus' turn to be "amazed" after he offends his hometown; but I am guessing that his amazement was more along the lines of disbelief himself, mingled with sadness and perhaps a realization of what he was really up against. The gravity of his situation quickly intensifies with the beheading of John the Baptist; and from then on, his temper seems to be on a much shorter leash. His exasperation with the Pharisees over the cleanliness laws culminates in an irate litany of evil and sends him storming off—into Tyre—where he ends up insulting a local woman. Can you blame him? He needs to get away, to clear his head, to diffuse his anger. He doesn't want anyone to know he's there—which is probably why he went into foreign territory. And then this woman dares to bug him with her demands. Bad timing! His aggravation continues with the disciples' obtuse answer in Chapter Eight about how the second large group of people were going to be fed and then really comes to a head in the boat when they think Jesus is talking about their only having one loaf of bread. But I do not think his last line in that sequence is delivered in annoyance or anger. "Do you still not understand?" is more sad and resigned and tinged with fatigue. This amalgam of emotions shows up again after the transfiguration when the disciples were not able to help the boy with an unclean spirit. I almost want to add a deeply sighed "Oy Vey…" before launching into Jesus' whine, "…How much longer must I put up with you?" And talk about an "oy vey" situation, full-grown men acting like children, arguing about who's greatest. (Perhaps they misunderstood Jesus when he told them they would have to become like children to enter the kingdom of God!) Regardless, I find myself sighing a lot about this time in the telling!

I would suggest that it is almost impossible to fully internalize a large narrative like this and not gain a better understanding of the emotions, the connections, the narrative arc. It would also be nearly impossible to spend this much time with a biblical text and not have your relationship with God changed. The individual benefits of doing this work are

incalculable. But the really cool thing is watching these benefits start to take hold for members of an audience. And I would like to close with three such examples.

A number of years ago, an elderly gentleman from my church mentioned to me that he just did not "get" Lent. "What is the point? Let's just get on with Easter" was his thinking. Well, that year, I performed Mark's passion as a mid-week Lenten program for my congregation and afterwards he came up to me with tears in his eyes and confessed, "I get it. I felt like I was there, I really understand it now." And every Lent since, he's made a point of coming up to me, giving my arm a squeeze, and flashing a thankful smile.

> A well-learned, embodied, and performed piece of Scripture can make old men cry, bring ADHD teens closer to God, and even cause sheer delight to bubble up in babies.

Three summers ago, I performed Mark's entire gospel for the Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. There was one artsy teen—on Ritalin—who made it clear that he was really looking forward to it. Knowing that this went two-plus hours with no intermission, however, I was skeptical about how long he was going to be able to stay engaged. Well, he grabbed a front row seat and not only stayed engaged to the end, but led an impromptu altar call afterwards where he and a few other boys knelt around the chancel, weeping and praying, for over 20 minutes. One of the leaders said to me later, "People say that youth today have no attention span and no interest in the Bible. I think you proved them wrong tonight." The next morning, as soon as this youth saw me he leapt over a couch (literally!), gave me a big bear hug, gushed about how incredible last night's experience had been and finished with, "We felt so close to God afterwards that the whole way back to the dorm, every person we passed we just had to tell them, 'God bless you!'…'And God bless *you*!'…'***God bless you***!!'"

Finally, I was performing the whole Gospel a year and a half ago for a church in downtown Washington, D.C. One audience member brought her 14-month-old daughter, and when I first saw her I was a little worried. It is hard enough to hold the attention of adults for that long but an almost-toddler? Yikes. Thankfully, she was a great audience member (and her mother was conscientious!). For much of the time she sat on the floor and quietly played with toys. When she would start to get a little fussy, her mom would bounce her on her knee. And when that did not quite satisfy her, the mother would discreetly get up and walk her at the back of the room. Well, it just so happened that the baby was on her mother's lap, facing me, when I got to Chapter Ten where Jesus indignantly "blesses out" the disciples for preventing him from blessing the little children. Because I have several youngsters in my life who are near and dear to my heart, whenever I get to that part of the story I tell it with a great deal of

genuine love, compassion, and tenderness, kneeling down at "their" level and with a warm smile on my face, pantomime Jesus gathering them into his arms, laying his hands upon them, and blessing them. That day was no exception. In the no-more-than-two-second silence that followed as I got back up on my feet to continue the story, this little 14-month-old girl broke into enthusiastic applause. It was the only time she clapped that entire two-plus hours. Was the timing a coincidence? You will never convince me of that. I'm certain that on some level she *got it*, knowing *exactly* what I had just said, sensing that this was one part of a very long narrative that applied directly to her…in a very favorable way, no less…and she appreciated it. It was one of the most profound moments I have ever experienced.

We live in an era where, thanks to computers, iPads, and smart phones, communication is engaging. It draws people in with its immediacy, its relevance, its multi-sensory modalities. Gone are the days when a poorly prepared monotone reading of Scripture will suffice. In a few of my seminary classes, I require that students write a paper outlining a plan to implement a biblical storytelling focus at their place of ministry. More than once, students have mentioned that they would not want to "overdo" something like this so they would probably only use storytelling once a month or less. Do they ever concern themselves with "overdoing" tired, boring, non-captivating readings of Scripture? A well-learned, embodied, and performed piece of Scripture can make old men cry, bring ADHD teens closer to God, and even cause sheer delight to bubble up in babies. Why in the world would you not want to make that an integral part of your congregation's ministry? Repeated exposure to this kind of powerful, against-the-status-quo experience can be transformational for a congregation, a local community, even the world. Jesus himself was a storyteller. So maybe being storytellers ourselves is also what he meant when he said, "Follow me."

Sixty Miles and Sixteen Chapters: My Journey to Learn the Gospel of Mark by Heart and What it Taught Me

Zachary P. Sturm
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> On the road again
> Just can't wait to get on the road again
> The life I love is making music with my friends
> And I can't wait to get on the road again.
>
> —Willie Nelson,
> "On the Road Again"

My journey to learning the Gospel of Mark by heart began on the road. Sixty miles of blacktop, to be precise, running along Interstate 44 from Sullivan, Mo., to Kirkwood, Mo. In the summer of 2009, I left my first call at Peace Lutheran Church, Sullivan, and received a call to Trinity Lutheran Church, Kirkwood. Even though the economy had begun to collapse by then, my realtor assured me that I could still sell my house in Sullivan (a house purchased right before the housing bubble burst in 2006). So I began my new call at Trinity doing what I always do—learning the lectionary gospel readings by heart and performing them from memory. I picked up this little habit from Professor David Rhoads while a student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). My new congregation loved my presentations, and that helped ease the tension of serving a new call but still living sixty miles away in the town of my former call.

I had no idea then that on Palm Sunday 2011 I would perform the entire Gospel of Mark in front of an audience. I had no idea then that of this writing, August 2011, I would still be living in Sullivan, Mo. Good thing I am not a weatherman!

Memorize an entire Gospel? That was only something people like Dr. Rhoads did. Or those three to five people (depending on your search engine) you can find online who will come to your church for a nominal fee and perform the Gospel of Mark. I had been given a gift of memory, but the Sunday lectionary lessons were the best I could do. I even did the Sermon on the Mount once, and realized that was my limit. Sixteen entire chapters would drive me crazy.

Or so I thought. Then the fall of 2009 dragged on as I drove 120 miles round trip each day I came into the office. No news on the house. The new year, 2010, began and I still drove 120 miles round trip each day I came into the office. No news on the house. For the first nine months of my commuting odyssey I passed the time in my car by listening to various radio stations for music, weather, sports, politics, and other programs. By summertime I realized that my brain was turning to mush. My IQ was dropping. As the housing market in Missouri showed no signs of improving,

I knew I had to do something different. I had to find a way to utilize my commuting time. When the fall of 2010 blew in something had to be different.

Then the idea came to me. Why not memorize Mark? With two hours in a car to rehearse, perhaps I could pull this off. What was there to lose? The "Bob and Tom Show" would still be there waiting for me if I failed. I told my wife, Jana, and a couple of close friends at the church of my plans. I also told my administrative assistant. She looked at me as if I were speaking Greek.

And so in September of 2010 I began. My goal was to have Mark memorized by Palm Sunday. Then I planned to perform it as a fundraiser for Lutheran Campus Ministry in St. Louis. My process was to take a chapter of Mark and try to memorize it on Monday. This was usually a whole-day affair. Then, when I drove back and forth from Kirkwood for the week, I would rehearse the chapter I had memorized. For me this was the hardest part—I had a knack for memorizing Scripture quickly, but I needed to practice it multiple times for it to stick. My commute enabled such practice. After a chapter was "up there," as I like to say, I would begin the next chapter. Of course, as I rehearsed the new chapter, the old chapters had to be continually rehearsed as well. And so the building blocks began.

By the first of October I had six chapters down. Then my spouse Jana gave birth to our second son, Grant Paul Sturm, on the afternoon of October 12 (I know—we just missed 10/10/10). Suffice it to say, waking up each night to a crying baby, midnight diaper changes, and a befuddled three-year-old who reacted to his brother's birth by moving into his parents' room did not help the memory process. By December I was still stuck on chapter 7. I began to have some doubts as to whether I could actually pull this off. Had I bitten off more than I could chew?

Thankfully, two events happened in the month of January. First of all, I joined the YMCA. Nothing like boring time on the treadmill to help one memorize Scripture. The kinetic energy worked as I plowed through chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 while working out. Second, by a divine miracle my son Grant began to sleep through the night—8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. My wife and I decided not to ask any questions but to take the blessing for what it was worth. Back on regular sleep, our moods and our ability to work increased dramatically. February brought with it chapters 11, 12, and 13. By the end of March I had finished the Gospel. April was spent rehearsing the whole Gospel. Either behind the wheel or in my garage I would recite chapters 1–8, take a break, and then recite chapters 9–16. The big date, April 17, 2011, Palm Sunday, was approaching. I knew that sooner or later I would have to perform the whole thing at once.

The first time I recited the entire Gospel at once was the day before Palm Sunday. I had planned to take a nice walk on Grant's Trail in St. Louis and recite the Gospel to myself. The weather did not cooperate, however, and St. Louis was blanketed with low temperatures and freezing rain. So I did the next best thing. I went to the closest mall I could find (how long has it been since I've been in a shopping mall?) and walked with the senior citizens as I recited the Gospel to myself. Walking and mumbling to myself, the others probably thought I had some mental problems. My lasting memory from that day was not the moment I finished the Gospel. Instead, my lasting memory was the Pokémon card-playing conference that was going on in the mall's food court. I mention this because since my experience at the mall I have performed the Gospel

of Mark four times in front of an invited audience in three different states. If one tallied all the people who have heard me, the number would not even come close to half of the children and adults at that Pokémon conference. Truly, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed…

Finally, Palm Sunday arrived. About fifty people gathered at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Manchester, Mo. I made it through chapters 1–8 without a problem. My only mental hiccup was the gentlemen who sat in the front row and followed my performance in his Bible. He never looked up from Scripture. This messed with my head a bit. Am I getting it right? Finally, I had to stop looking at him and focus on the rest of the audience. During the intermission, I said to him, "I don't mind if you follow me. However, you'll probably get more out of the performance if you just listen." He replied, "Well, I just wanted to make sure you had indeed memorized it. And you did well. I'll listen now." After the intermission I continued with chapters 9–16. Most people listened. Some people fell asleep. Some people cried. By the end, when I departed from the sanctuary repeating the opening lines of the Gospel, the audience rose and gave me a standing ovation. A feeling of relief and appreciation fell upon my heart. Eight months after working on that first line, I had accomplished my goal. Thanks be to God. And thanks be to a depressed housing market. If I had not had my two hours of rehearsal time in my car every day, memorizing Mark in my heart and mind would have never happened. I do not wish a commute and a frustrating inability to sell a house on anyone, but truly, those were the main ingredients in my blueprint for learning Mark by heart.

Now that I have shared a bit of my journey, I want to spend the second half of this article discussing what I learned from my journey. You may have noticed by now that I have used interchangeably the terms "memorize" and "learn by heart" when discussing Mark. To me the reason performers of Mark use the phrase "learn by heart" is because one cannot memorize Mark and not be changed by it. It is not just information that stays in your head. Mark's words enter your heart, and they teach you things about yourself, the world, and the church. I learned too much from Mark to write it all down in this article. Therefore, I will share with you the three main lessons I learned. I will divide my learning into three parts—what I learned about the Gospel, what I learned about my audience, and what I believe the Gospel of Mark has to say to the church today.

First, having gone through the process of memorizing Mark I can now say that I whole-heartedly believe what David Rhoads and others have been saying for years—the Gospel was written in order to be performed. The Gospel was written to be read aloud. It was not written as a book, but more like a script. As a seminarian, I never noticed any chiastic structure in Mark when I was reading it. By performing it, however, I have noticed a grand chiasm. A chiasm is a rhetorical device, based on reverse parallelism, which draws the listener into the middle of the writing. A chiasm not only facilitates performing a piece; it also facilitates listening to it. As James L. Bailey writes, "Chiasms have great rhetorical appeal and are used primarily for aural effect and for purposes of memory."[1] Hence, I believe the author wrote the Gospel of Mark in order for it to be performed aloud.

Here is the ring construction that I found in the Gospel. Whether the author truly intended to structure the Gospel in

1. James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 53.

this way I do not know. All I know is I found it and it helped me to memorize the Gospel.

A **Good News!** (the beginning of the "good news" of Jesus Christ—1:1)
B **Holy Tear** (the heavens are "torn" as Jesus is baptized—1:10)
C **Calling** (the first disciples are called by Jesus—1:16–20)
D **Supper with Sinners** (Jesus has dinner with tax collectors and sinners—2:15–17)
E **Plotting Against Jesus** (Pharisees and Herodians plot against him—3:6)
F **Hospitality Misunderstood** (Jesus declares who his true family is—3:31–35)
G **"Unknown" Growth to Come** (Parable of Wheat growing secretly—4:26–29)
H **Run from the Hills** (Swine run from the hill into the sea and are drowned—5:11–13)
I **Resurrection** (little girl is returned to life—5:42)
J **Entrance into Rejection** (Jesus rejected by hometown; John the Baptist killed—6:1–6, 17–29)
K **Jesus Tested and Jesus Heals** (Jesus tested by Pharisees, then heals the sick—7:5, 29–35)
L **Dumb Disciples and Angry Jesus** (Disciples misunderstand and let Jesus down—8:14–21)
M **Jesus is Messiah Who Suffers and Dies and is Raised from the Dead—8:27–33**
L1 **Dumb Disciples and Angry Jesus** (Disciples cannot cast out demon—9:17–19)
K1 **Jesus Tested and Jesus Heals** (Pharisees test again, followed by healing—10:2, 31–52)
J1 **Entrance into Rejection** (Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday—11:1–11, 18)
I1 **Resurrection** (Jesus explains resurrection of the dead to Sadducees—12:24–27)
H1 **Run to the Hills** (Jesus commands those in Judea to flee to the mountains—13:14)
G1 **"Unknown" Suffering to Come** (No one knows when final suffering will come—13:32–37)
F1 **Hospitality Misunderstood** (Jesus defends woman with alabaster jar—14:1–9)
E1 **Jesus Plotted Against** (Judas agrees to betray Jesus—14:10–11)
D1 **Supper with Sinners** (Jesus shares Last Supper with the one who is to betray him—14:17–25)
C1 **Jesus Calls Disciples** (Jesus calls his disciples into Gethsemane and urges wakefulness—14:33–42)
B1 **Holy Tear** (as Jesus is crucified, the curtain of the temple tears—15:38)
A1 **Good News!** (the tomb is empty; Jesus goes ahead of us—16:5–7)

From this chiastic construction, the teller of Mark can clearly see the main theological point Mark is making. It is found right in the middle—chapter 8:29–31: "Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'… Then Jesus began to tell them that the Messiah must suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes, and be killed, and three days after being killed rise again." By his structure of composition, Mark declares that this is the main point of the story. First, Mark wants to impress upon his audience that Jesus is the Messiah. No question about it. Second, Mark wants to impress upon his readers *what it means* that Jesus is the Messiah. It means that he is the one who will suffer, die, and rise again. Mark unfolds this theological claim in the narrative of the second half of his gospel (chapters 9–16).

Second, I want to share what I learned most about my audience. As I mentioned earlier, I have performed Mark in its entirety on four occasions. First was my Palm Sunday performance. Then I performed Mark at a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregation as a fundraiser for a missionary. Then I performed Mark at my former internship congregation while in town for a youth mission trip. Finally, I performed Mark, with a bout of walking pneumonia, at a colleague's congregation as a fundraiser for a food pantry. Each performance was broken up into two acts with an intermission in between. Each performance lasted roughly two and a half hours. Generally speaking, each audience was very similar in its number and age range. Each performance garnered a crowd of twenty-five to fifty people. I would say that in each audience at least 70 percent of those in attendance were of retirement age. From all of my performances I counted five people, total, under the age of twenty. One of them looked at his Smartphone the whole time and then left during intermission.

What I am trying to say is that my audiences at performances of Scripture by heart mirror the demographics of the mainline church as a whole—mostly retired people, some adults, and virtually no youth. In addition, I had an eerily similar experience at my first two performances—one at a larger ELCA church and one at a large LCMS church. When I walked into the sanctuary on Palm Sunday, one hour before my performance was scheduled to begin, I met an adult who was removing microphones from the sanctuary. "Sorry," she said, "We have youth praise band practice later and we need to move these." *Band practice is more meaningful than someone performing Mark?* During my next performance, at a large LCMS church in St. Louis, the youth praise band actually rehearsed in the second sanctuary during my performance. In both cases, my performance had been widely advertised. In both cases, the youth directors of each congregation knew about my performance. In both cases, no youth from the congregations came to listen to me. In both cases, many youth from both congregations participated in praise band practice.

I do not share this memory because I want the reader to feel sorry for me. The lack of youth did not disappoint me too much—I had too much on my mind (sixteen chapters) to be sorely disappointed. Instead, I bring up this issue because it taught me a painful lesson. Young people today (ages twenty-one and younger) are not going to be wooed into the church to watch something. No matter how "cool" or different it may be, the numbers will not be that large. Instead, young people are wooed into the church in order to *participate* in something. They want to share their gifts. They want to be in on the ministry. I grossly underestimated this desire. In the future, if I perform Mark I will be sure to include youth in some contributing way—such as a performance during intermission or performing small sections of the Gospel themselves.

Finally, I want to share what I believe the Gospel of Mark has to say to the ELCA today. In the eight months that I spent memorizing Mark, one passage in particular caught my attention the most. At the end of Mark 2, Jesus chides the Pharisees because they cried out over his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath. Then Jesus says these words, "The Sabbath was made for humankind; not humankind for the Sabbath" (2:22). While I was in seminary, I glazed over those words and did not contemplate them much. Now, after I have been a parish pastor for five years, those words have taken on a new importance for me. With those words, I believe Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, "Don't try to conform people to religion, but instead

conform religion to people." This is exactly what Jesus does throughout the Gospel of Mark. Whether healing on the Sabbath, touching an unclean person, or conversing with a Gentile, Jesus constantly takes the true blessings of religion and conforms them to his audience. He does not make people fit the current idea of religious devotion in order to engage them. He takes himself out of "proper" religious devotion and engages others on their own ground. In other words, he takes religion to them.

If one boiled down the entire Gospel, I believe this is the most important teaching for the church today. I think we are wasting a lot of energy trying to force the outside world to conform to us. What can we do to bring others in? What can we do to bring young people in? How can we force (manipulate?) them into taking up the roles in the church that we have taken up since 1950? So much energy is wasted, in my estimation, trying to pigeon-hole people into structures in our church that once flourished but which have now become ineffective. I see a denomination that, although being creative, is still desperately trying to conform people to its structure. I see a denomination believing that humankind was meant to fit into the Sabbath.

What would the reversal look like? What if the ELCA practiced the belief that the Sabbath was meant for people? What if we tried to conform to the outsider? I think the church would be a different place. For example, many people note that young adults these days, often called millennials, are just not as committed to the organized church as the previous generation was. People in their twenties and thirties will join your congregation. And they will participate. But they are not going to be in attendance every week. And they do not have much extra time to serve on committees. And due to rising educational costs that previous generations never even imagined, they are not going to tithe. It seems these realities have caused consternation among church leaders. We have tried to reverse the trend. Mark 2 encourages me to ask the question: What is so bad about these realities?

Whether healing on the Sabbath, touching an unclean person, or conversing with a Gentile, Jesus constantly takes the true blessings of religion and conforms them to his audience.

So the next generation is not going to worship every week. So they are not going to serve on more than one committee. So they are not even close to tithing. What's so bad about this? Why is this a problem?

To me, the true problem, the true elephant in the room, is full-time compensation for clergy. I believe this is the unnamed fear among pastors. We are frustrated that the new generation is not as active and is not able to pledge like the former one. Why? Because that means that we may not be able to continue to be compensated like we have been previously. If attendance and pledges are down, giving is down. If giving is down, the ability for a

local congregation to pay a pastor full-time plus benefits becomes elusive. To me this is the problem. We are concerned about our paychecks. And so we bemoan the lack of participation of millennials.

Mark reminds us that the Sabbath was made for humankind. What if we were to change the way the church functions? What if we were to change clergy compensation? What if the church were not the sole means of income for the pastor? What if the pastor were not expected to be in the office during the week, and was free to seek other employment? Other denominations, mostly of Baptist affiliation, have successfully functioned under this model for years. In the town of my first call the two Baptist congregations had four times the number of worshippers than my small congregation did. Both of their ministers had outside employment and were not expected to be in the office full-time. Yet, my small congregation was expected to pay me roughly a school administrator's compensation. And we wonder why clergy are leaving the small congregations? And we wonder why small congregations are struggling to keep open their doors?

The irony is, in my opinion, that most millennials, even Lutheran ones, do not need a full-time pastor. I whole-heartedly believe if I went to all my current members in their thirties and said, "Look, I'll be there on Sunday, I'll be there on Wednesday, I'll be there in an emergency. But other than that I'll be at my other job," they would say, "Fine with us." If a new generation is telling us, by their lack of participation, that they do not expect the pastor to be full-time why are we insisting that the pastor be compensated full-time? We can point the finger in a lot of places to understand the struggle of the mainline churches today. I think we should point at ourselves and our existing structure. I do not claim to have the answer, but if I take Mark seriously, and I do, then I think there are ways we can make the church exist for humankind. Shorten the length of seminary. Cut the costs. Instead of requiring Hebrew, require a class on employment outside the church. Encourage supplemental education among seminarians such as counseling, social work, or educational degrees. Thinking such as this is what I believe Mark is telling us to do today.

In closing, let me add that I once saw Willie Nelson perform in St. Louis. Sort of a rite-of-passage for every native Texan. At the end of the show, Willie announced there would not be an encore, saying, "Too often in the past we've come back, and no one was here anymore. So, this is our last song." He played one more song, and sure enough walked off. The crowd cheered for a while, thinking he was not serious, but then it became apparent that he was. The concert was over. Willie does not do encores.

In the same way, Mark closes without an encore. We never see the resurrected Jesus. We hear of him, but he does not show up back on stage. The women are only instructed to go and share the good news. Then, the "young man" promises, Jesus "will go ahead of you" (16:5–7). As a church if we expect the resurrected Jesus just to show up and give us all the answers, if we expect an encore, we are going to be disappointed. Instead, I believe we are called to share the good news, to embody the good news, to be bold and risky in the way we talk about the church, and to be fearless enough to leave no sacred cows as we discuss our way of functioning. On such a risky road, Christ promises to meet us. Not at the end of the journey, but during it. He is already on the road again, ahead of us, and waiting.

The Year of Mark: A Year for Performance

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This may be the year for you to begin performing Scripture! The beginning of the new church year offers an opportunity to reassess how we present Scripture in worship and Bible study. I've been changed by performing Scripture and you may be too.

My Journey to Performance

My journey to performing Scripture began with Robert Goeser at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. Goeser taught that we don't *read* the word of God; we *experience* it as present revelation. "It is as if Scripture becomes itself through the spoken Word, which makes out of the past revelatory encounters recorded in Scripture a contemporary event, makes revelation 'available,' of use to the heart."[1] We experience Jesus Christ, the Word of God, through means—in this case, through Scripture. To pronounce the symbols on a page is only to read aloud; the Word of God is the living, concrete, historical Christ who encounters us in our present moment. Goeser demonstrated this in his unforgettable, dramatic style. Once he compared David's encounter with Nathan (2 Sam 12) to King Lear's encounter with the Fool on the heath—complete with whispers and shouts, hands waving and head bobbing. For Goeser the encounter with God through Scripture was dramatic, passionate, and life-changing.

This was revolutionary for me. I had grown up in a congregation where the Scripture was read solemnly in monotone. I found it difficult to focus on what the lector read, let alone what it might mean about God, humanity, or myself. The steady and unvarying words seemed a soothing signal to let my mind and heart wander, not encounter God. Professor Goeser changed the way I thought about Scripture in worship.

I took it as my charge to not simply read the Scripture, but to embody it in tone, facial expression, emotion, movement, and gestures. Looking at the Bible as a dramatic text enabled me to hear new ways of expressing it, new ways of helping people connect with the story. For example, once when preaching on the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4), I imagined myself as the woman's third husband and how he might tell the story. This drama as sermon provoked a variety of responses in the congregation relating to divorce, remarriage, and most of all Jesus' healing presence. (I imagined that

1. Robert J. Goeser, "The Doctrine of Word and Scripture in Luther and Lutheranism," *The Report of the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Second Series, 1976-1980* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1981), 115. See also "From Exegesis to Proclamation," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church: Essays in Honor of Samuel McCray Garrett* 53.3 (September 1984): 209-220, and "Luther: Word of God, Language and Art," *CTM* 18.1 (1991): 6-11.

the third husband was one of the people the woman told about Jesus.) Performing the Scripture opened my mind to new opportunities and opened the congregation to a new experience.

I led training workshops for readers involving the rationale, history, and practice of performing the text. Retraining readers was and is difficult; many readers have been doing it for a long time and find it difficult to read with emotion and energy. Even after practicing, it is easy to slide back into old habits. Others think of the Scripture as too solemn and holy to read with variation in tone and with gestures.

"Performance" in the sense we are using it is not for entertainment or to diminish the import of the Bible, but to move toward an understanding that the word of God is active and living; the word *does* something when it is embodied in human, historical forms.

At the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, David Rhoads gave renewed energy and intellectual depth to my interest in performing scripture.[2] He suggested the word "performance" captures the dramatic encounter between the one who embodies the Scripture and the congregation that experiences the event. Like some of the readers in training, some people hesitate when I use the word "performance," which to them suggests that the Scripture is taken less seriously or that it is merely entertaining. "Performance" in the sense we are using it is not for entertainment or to diminish the import of the Bible, but to move toward an understanding that the word of God is active and living; the word *does* something when it is embodied in human, historical forms. God works through us when we embody the living word just as when Ezekiel eats the scroll of prophesy in order to proclaim it (Ezek 3:2; imitated by John in Rev 10:10) or when Paul announces Deut 30:14 to the Romans in a new way, "The word is near you on your lips and in your heart" (Rom 10:8). "Scripture by Heart" is the title of the course Rhoads taught, which indicates that these performances are about the movement of the heart, both the performer and the congregation gathered to be transformed by the word of God.

Ten Reasons to Perform Scripture (and especially Mark)

As a result of performing Scripture and

2. See the fullest published expression of Rhoads' thinking on Performance Criticism in "Performance Criticism: an Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies," Part I, *BTB* 36.3 (2006): 118-133, and Part II, *BTB* 36.4 (2006): 164-184. Both are available at www.BiblicalPerformanceCriticism.org.

studying ancient communication, I've found ten reasons to perform the Bible (and especially Mark) for modern audiences.

1. **The first audiences encountered Scripture as a spoken word.** The encounter of reader and audience was the focus; the written text supported that event. We can still see this, for example, when Mark 13:14 indicates "Let the public reader understand," a cue for the reader to explain the reference to the desolating sacrifice. Mark is especially appropriate to perform because it may have been composed in performance.[3]
2. **People's hearts are moved by emotion.** This was true two thousand years ago (see Aristotle and Cicero on the importance of emotion to persuade) and it is still important today—perhaps even more in the United States where people are saturated by emotional appeals.
3. **We live in a highly stimulating visible and audible culture.** Expressionless and disembodied reading is boring; it fails to engage the senses routinely used in everyday life.
4. **We believe the Word became flesh in Jesus.** Our theology presses us to embody the word ourselves, not to separate the words on the page from the embodied Word.
5. **Performances tailor a biblical story to a specific group** of people in time and space with particular struggles and challenges. Using word choice, gestures, emphasis, tone, expression, and movement appropriate to the congregation, the performer is part of an audience's encounter with the living Word. Performance is similar to translation. The Bible constantly needs to be retranslated from the original languages into contemporary idiom to maximize its impact. Performance, likewise, brings the old, old story into a new context.
6. **Performances elicit congregations to respond—and, in so doing, they change the performance itself.** When the congregation laughs, sighs, gives a puzzled look, or rolls their eyes, the performer responds and the performance usually changes as a result.
7. **Performance exposes the multiplicity of meanings** that are possible to hear in a text. For example, how many ways can you perform Jesus' response to James and John's request to sit at his right and left hand: "You do not know what you are asking" (Mark 10:38)? Is Jesus angry? Frustrated? Sad? Resigned? Amused? What happens if you clap your hands? Slap your forehead? Grimace? Smile? How you perform that line affects the meaning and experience of the whole passage, and there are many ways to perform it!
8. **Performances evoke theological reflection.** Congregations can learn theology through characterization. In portraying Jesus' response to James and John (10:35–45), how you perform Jesus in that passage reflects your theology about Jesus and your understanding of Mark's portrayal of Jesus. In other places, Mark's Jesus

3. Anne Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (BPC; Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2011). In other words, the Gospel of Mark should not even be conceived as a written account of one performance, but that there were many "Gospels of Mark" performed. Some were eventually written and later amalgamated (possibly from memory of performances as well as manuscripts) into Greek texts modern scholars have used to make the eclectic Greek text that is the foundation of modern translations.

seems frustrated with the disciples (e.g., 8:14–21)—is Jesus frustrated here too? Is this an expression of Jesus' humanity? Is he predicting the deaths of James and John as a seer or as someone who himself is experiencing conflict in living out God's kingdom?

9. **Preparing for performance encourages a close and holistic reading of the text.** Performing requires attention to the connections between words and sentences to help the congregation experience connected events rather than a series of words. For example, Mark contrasts the request of James and John (10:38) with the request of the blind Bartimaeus in the following episode (10:46–52). James, John, and Bartimaeus call Jesus "Teacher." And Jesus asks each of them an identical question with the exact same words: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus regains his sight; but do James and John truly "see"? It may be helpful to perform both of these pericopes together and highlight by similar tone and gestures the parallelism and contrast between the two episodes.
10. **By memorizing and performing, the performer integrates the story in a deep way** that informs all aspects of life and ministry. As I have memorized and performed Scripture, I find it floating to the surface of my consciousness in helpful and amazing ways. Once when I was meeting with a family around a dying loved one, I remembered the passage from Revelation describing the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Rev 21). I described the picture I had in my mind to the family and spoke the words of the vision, which they said strengthened their faith in the promise of the resurrection through Jesus.

Performance Groups

Richard Swanson, author of *Provoking the Gospel: Methods to Embody Biblical Storytelling through Drama* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), has persuaded me that some of the best insights into the Bible happen when a group works together to perform. Each person shares insight, creativity, and energy into the group producing a production of a text.

I was honored by many insights with groups of youth who came to Chicago as a part of their Youth in Mission experience in 2007 and 2008. I was the leader of a workshop called "Scripture by Heart." In 2007, after going through warm-up exercises modified from Swanson's *Provoking the Gospel*, we broke up into groups to take passages from chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel. Each group read their passage several times aloud, trying out different emotions and gestures to find out what fit the text and what did not. After deciding on the tone and gestures, they practiced the passage until they knew it by heart. Finally, we performed Mark 1, with each group taking a different passage. We discussed what difference it made to perform the text, how our understanding had changed, and what we would do differently next time.

I may have been the leader, but I was also a learner. The youth showed me new ways to express the urgency of the beginning of the Gospel—the prophesy (1:2–3), John the baptizer's message (1:4) and people's response (1:5) all before John is even described (1:6). The group performing that section exploded on the performance area with urgent tone and gestures suggesting that the audience needed to respond *now*, that it is too important to wait, and that their lives would be changed. It was a moving experience!

At the congregation I serve now, a college-age group is meeting to perform Mark 13:24–37 on the 1st Sunday in Ad-

vent. They have divided the reading into three scenes: the sky (13:24–27), the fig tree (13:28–31) and the home (13:32–37). They are memorizing the NRSV translation and working on the emotion, tone, and movement for these three episodes.

The emotion of each scene is different. The group discussed how the sky scene (13:24–27) begins with the fear resulting from cosmic distress ("the sun will be darkened...") moving to relief as the angels are sent out to gather the elect. The fig tree scene (13:28–31) gives the feeling of anticipation: these events are close. Finally the scene at the home waiting for the master's return evoked anxiety and excitement for the group, waiting for the Lord's return at any moment.

The group is discussing how to express those emotions in facial expressions, tone of voice, and movement. One young man has proposed acting like a street preacher predicting loud and harsh doom and gloom: "the sun will be darkened..." Another person could come out like an angel in sweeter tones to proclaim the coming of the Son of Man and the angels. A diagram of a fig tree could be placed on an easel while a member acts like a teacher with a pointer, gesturing to the picture of the fig tree. A picture of the gates of Jerusalem could be the next picture, followed by a diagram of heaven and earth fading even as "Jesus' words" remain. For the last scene, the group discussed switching to a narrator reading the text while two other members act out the homeowner who leaves and the slaves who wait with anxiety and excitement.

I am excited that these young adults are actively engaging the Bible. Preparing for performance has been more effective than many Bible studies I have led for young adults. They are closely reading the text, thinking about how audiences first heard Mark's Gospel, thinking about how to share it with the congregation in a way that it will affect their lives and help them "keep awake." (13:37)

I am not sure what the final performance will be like. The performance group is meeting every other week—and with every meeting there are new insights and ideas about how to express Mark 13. The preparation to perform is as fruitful as the performance itself.

The year of Mark may be the year to begin performing Scripture!

Telling the Story

Dawn F. Silvius

Pastor of Abiding Presence Lutheran Church, San Antonio, Texas

Uncle Raymond has something important to say.

He is the sweetest of the characters in the movie *Moonstruck* and he is sitting with the family at the dinner table. To introduce what he wants to say he says, "I never told you this before because it's not really a story."

Uncle Raymond's words make complete sense; somehow we know that *story* is what we want to *tell*. To say "it's a story" has little to do with whether it is fact or fiction. To say "it's a story" is to say it has action and character, connection and consequence and, most of all, it *makes meaning*. To say "it's a story" is to say "it wants to be told."

The first time I heard a preacher "tell" rather than "read" the Gospel lesson, I was impressed. I was so impressed that I knew "telling" was something I could never do. Yet I relished the listening (and every teller needs listeners). So the following year, I signed up for a workshop of the Network of Biblical Storytellers (www.nbsint.org). I knew four days of listening would stir my spirit. And it did! But during the course of those four days I also learned to tell Luke's Gospel story of Mary and Martha—five verses, word-for-word, from memory. I learned to draw the story's action on paper, to look for mnemonic devices and to make memorable connections. I learned to say aloud what I remembered. Those verses were the first things I had memorized since "Whose woods these are, I think I know…" in fifth grade and "We should so fear and love God that…" in seventh grade.

As it happened, Luke's story of Mary and Martha was the Gospel lesson for the following Sunday. (Good planning, NBS!) I decided to "tell" that Gospel lesson in worship that week. As I told it, I discovered that I was face-to-face with the people gathered for worship in a way that drew us together. We became a "community of listeners." This felt different from being a "community of simultaneous readers." Then and there, I committed to learning and telling the Gospel lessons each week.

The first few weeks that I told the Gospel instead of reading it, both the congregation and I were anxious. I could see that some people were reading the printed words as they listened, probably so that they could help me if I forgot a line. But gradually we adjusted to the change. I grew more comfortable as I stood to tell, and the congregation grew more attentive as it stood to listen.

That was eight years ago and now I cannot remember how to work on a sermon if I am not also in the process of learning the Gospel text by heart. It has become a single process: learning the text and reflecting on it in the context of community and current events. Learning the text by heart means carrying it in my consciousness while going about the rest of the tasks of the week. The text is there, with its questions and its claims, in the grocery store, preparing a confirmation lesson, on the road, attending a committee meeting, playing with grandchildren, washing laundry, visiting people in the hospital—wherever I go. The text is *every*where when it is being

learned. For me, "by heart" expresses this better than "memorizing." Memory carries important data but it is the heart that gives the steady beat and the exciting flutters to the flow of life.

The bad news in all this is that I always preach on the Gospel because that is the text I learn. The good news is that I find connections with the rest of the lectionary texts that I would have missed if I hadn't learned the Gospel by heart.

I use the word "tell" to describe what I do because I think telling is different from performing. Telling happens from the perspective of a narrator even when the narrator quotes a character in the story. Telling is an oral version of pointing at third persons in order to show what those third persons see and do and in order to hear what they say. Performing adds the perspectives and the expressions (and sometimes even the outfits) of characters in the story to the narration of the text. I don't have the skills to do that. But I love to "tell" the story. (I know—there's a song.)

Even "telling" requires decisions about expression. What to emphasize? What to soften? These same questions are answered as we read a text, but I find that I pay more attention to them when preparing to tell the Gospel by heart. I can read and study the text silently but I can't learn to tell the text unless I practice out loud. The meanings of words spoken aloud are nuanced by expression.

Don Juel, of blessed memory, taught me how much of the meaning of the text is made by the expressions of the one who speaks the words aloud. One of his examples was Mark 15:39—"Sure! this man was God's son!" ("sure!" with an expression of positive certainty) and "Sure! this man was God's son!" ("sure!" with skeptical irony). The printed words look the same; expression makes all the difference.

As I imagine the telling of the Gospel that preceded the written text, I imagine *shared* telling—that many of the people who gathered for worship remembered the Gospel stories so that one would begin to tell, and then another would continue the story, and then another and another—a sort of serial telling. I wonder how shared telling could happen in one of our worship services and how that would affect listening.

The word "immediately" showed a different side—not meaning *with* a rush but meaning *without* a "mediate."

One notable characteristic of Mark's Gospel is the frequency of the word "immediately." It appears dozens of times. Was Jesus always in a hurry? To me, the word "immediately" is a hurry-up word.

But as I read the Gospel out loud this week—thinking about telling this Gospel and about what it means to tell it—the word "immediately" showed a different side—not meaning *with* a rush but meaning *without* a "mediate." To be im-mediate is to be without medium, without "something in between." The Spirit "immediately" drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. There is nothing between the voice from heaven and the Spirit's driving. No quick lunch.

No rushing home to pack a few things. Nothing between that revelatory voice, "You are my beloved…" and that steering Spirit.

Im-mediate is how it feels to tell the Gospel.

The Gospel reader turns eyes to the words printed on the page in order to articulate them. The page is between the one who reads aloud and those who listen—most of whom also keep their eyes focused on the print. The Gospel teller's eyes are free to look in listeners' faces while articulating the story by heart. Listeners are free to look up from the page, to see the teller and to see each other. All are im-mediately together. As the story takes shape among us, we all become "listeners." We are engaged by the Gospel story. Our attention hones in, our curiosity is piqued and we are open for what this story does here and now, among us. Does it sound grandiose to say the Gospel story told-by-heart is heard-by-heart, too?

I am learning that listening and telling are deeper and more central to humans than reading and studying. I am learning this from our grandchildren. To be sure, they love it when we read to them. They like to point at pictures and spell out words. But something more profound seems to happen when there are no books or pictures—when it's just us, usually in the dark at bedtime, and they say, "Tell me a story." They are listening with their ears, and also with their hearts and their minds and their imaginations. Their attention is riveted to the telling. We know this because their energetic little selves are stilled by the act of listening. They may interrupt with a question but if I pause to think for too long, they say, "Keep on!" And they do not want the story to end.

The writer of the Gospel according to Mark doesn't seem to want the Gospel story to end either. That might be why it doesn't end so much as it trails off, "for they were afraid…" and the question "Are you afraid?" hangs in the air, prompting the story to continue.

There is another aspect of the experience of telling the Gospel.

Forty years ago, a gymnastics team from the USSR came to the United States on an exhibition tour. In an interview with one of the athletes, a journalist asked, "Why do you study so much? You are a gymnast; do you also want to be a scholar?" She answered, "I must know my lessons. I would fear to be called to the blackboard and have nothing to say. I would fear my silence."

There is a moment when I fear my silence. The moment comes just before we sing the Gospel acclamation. It's the moment when my left brain asks my right brain: "Hey! Did you practice enough?" and my right brain answers, "I don't know!"

The possibility that I will not remember the text exists side-by-side with the possibility that I will remember it and be able to tell it. Maybe it is our awareness of those two possibilities *together* that engages listeners and teller im-mediately, with nothing between.

Maybe it is because of such an awareness that listeners' expressions are attentive, alert, and even surprised as the Gospel story begins to be told. It is certainly because of that awareness that the same expressions are on the teller's face along with one more: plain *relief* when there is not empty silence caused by empty memory.

There are silences and fears in Mark's Gospel story, too, but they are neither empty silences to be avoided nor self-focused fears of embarrassment. Mark's silences are full of wonder (4:39), sometimes even commanded by Jesus (1:44, 5:43, 8:26). Mark's fears are full of perplexity and danger (9:32, 16:8). These are silences and fears to be explored.

Gospel By Heart

Clark K. Olson-Smith

Pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa

The first Gospel reading I performed by heart was from Mark. Jesus was baptized and immediately driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Then, after John was executed, Jesus began to announce God's good news (Mark 1:9–15). I remember, as I prepared, noticing the wild beasts in the wilderness. They were with Jesus but peaceably, it seemed, like the angels. So what sort of wilderness was this?

I would soon discover. Alone in an empty sanctuary, with Jesus' baptism printed on a page in front of me, a wilderness of new interpretive decisions stretched ominously before me. Even the familiar questions seemed strange, or suddenly strangely urgent. What sort of voice ought I to use? This voice from heaven—what would it sound like? And what should I do with my body? How might the gestures of my hands and arms, the stance of my feet on this floor, and even my upturned face show the holy mystery of heavens tearing apart, of Spirit descending like a dove? And if Jesus was driven, then I must move. So where in this sanctuary will our Jordan River be? And the wilderness? Where are the wild beasts in our worship?

And the wilderness was yet wilder. Leaving the page aside, even just to practice, felt like doing something dangerous. What if my memory failed? What if my movements looked awkward? What if these beloved people took offense? Who did I think I was? What if they saw me and not the Gospel? There was a thrill of transgressing, a tremble of becoming vulnerable, and a prayer. "Okay, Holy One of Israel, you promised to write these words on my heart, on all our hearts. Now *do it!*"

Power and promise of the Almighty notwithstanding, I began to regret this rashly chosen Lenten discipline. Two weeks before—on the Thursday before Ash Wednesday—biblical storytellers Tom Boomershine and Tracy Radosevic led a New Jersey Synod *Ministerium Day* event. First, they performed two stories: Mark's Transfiguration and the taking up of Elijah. Next, they taught us how to learn a biblical story by heart. Finally, Tom made his case—that the Bible is sound before it is ink on a page. That oral story-telling culture and the digital post-literate culture share more in common than either shares with literate silent-reading culture. Communication in digital culture need not be high-tech, as long as it is participatory, experiential, relational, and multi-sensory. So performing Scripture by heart in worship will more fully and effectively proclaim the Gospel than reading it aloud.

In hindsight, the way had been prepared by David Rhoads, who taught two of my four New Testament classes in seminary. While I never took his class "Scripture By Heart," I experienced in person his performances of Mark, Galatians, and James. Moved and amazed, I'd never made the practice my own. Until that Thursday before Ash Wednesday.

Immediately, I committed to a new Lenten discipline: to perform the Gospel by heart each week. And immediately, simply preparing, I was driven away from the page and into this place. Out of my

head alone and also into my body. Away from the distant past and into the living moment the Gospel promised to create. I wasn't alone in this wilderness.

But on the First Sunday of Lent, I found these wild beasts had indeed come peaceably. I performed that handful of Mark's verses, and I preached. I neither forgot nor fumbled. And the response was not apathy or anger but awe. "The gospel came alive, Pastor!" "I couldn't ignore it!" "It was like we were there!"

This Lent just past, I began my third year of weekly performing the Gospel by heart. It has become the backbone of my preaching process.

When the week starts, I stand in the sanctuary and read the Gospel alone and aloud, breaking the silence again and beginning to commit the Gospel to memory. I find I usually complicate it. In my first page-less attempts, I add whole verses that aren't there. So the Gospel as it is invites me to listen and listen again.

When I return to my office, I read *about* the Gospel. I read aloud the rest of the week's readings and read about them too—historical and social background, literary context, theological connections. Then I go about the rest of the week's work.

Over the next day or two, I read the Gospel *together* with others and aloud, around a table with local colleagues and, later, the people I serve. I listen to what they are hearing and share what I have discovered.

Then I go back to the sanctuary and keep rehearsing. I test possibilities for voice, gesture, and movement around the sanctuary. My intention is to clarify in the performance the good word I am hearing that week, or to keep performing until I hear. Of course, I have developed a few conventions: Jerusalem is usually toward the table, while rivers and seas are near the font, and Gentile territory and the wilderness are in the back by the door. But every week, the Gospel sends me back to that first wilderness of possibilities, with the peaceable beasts.

In any given week, I rehearse on three or more days. When I come into the office, I avoid checking email or turning to other demands until I spend at least fifteen minutes practicing. It is like learning a language. It requires daily attention so that *from memory* may become *by heart*.

After all this, I write a sermon, perform the Gospel and preach. Then, I rest and repeat.

I remember rehearsing Luke's telling of Jesus' encounter with Legion (Luke 8:26ff, cp. Mark 5:1ff). On the other side of a stormy sea, Jesus confronted a demon, commanding it to come out of a man it made wild and lonely. When the man fell at Jesus' feet, begging for mercy, Jesus asked his name before sending the demons into a nearby herd of pigs.

After rehearsing enough that the words had more or less sunk in, I began blocking the scene by identifying how I would move around as I told it. As Jesus on the shore, I stood facing the table and the cross in our wide center aisle. Then as the shouting man, I turned 180-degrees toward the door and the place just vacated. I kneeled, bowing to the floor, begging. Next, rising and turning again to stand in Jesus' place, I reported in the narrator's voice the many times the spirit seized him, the chains broken, the ineffectual guards, and then verse 30, "Jesus asked him…"

And suddenly I was overwhelmed by Jesus' compassion and I moved, literally, to sit down on the floor, our Gerasene's beach, next to this poor man: "What is your name?" As if Jesus did not stand over him imperiously, barking the question at a demonic enemy. But instead, as if, power cloaked in gentleness, Jesus lowered himself and sat in the wet sand with a helpless

friend. Sitting on the floor of the empty sanctuary, I saw through Jesus' eyes an image of myself as the wild and lonely man and an image of the wild and lonely man as the beloved people who would fill that place on Sunday. I felt the whole truth and beauty of the Gospel in Jesus' one humble movement and one humanizing question. "What is your name?"

Is there a word for an insight you have with your whole body and not your mind alone? This was a full-body insight, made possible by a daily and weekly practice of performing the Gospel by heart. It is why we attend to Scripture and its proclamation in the assembly. It is why we give time to study, reflection, and preaching, to choosing music, rehearsing, and singing. It is why we eat together and wash each other publicly. For the sake of full-bodied insight. So all our hearts might burn within us, sending fire through our bones, as God writes with a human finger her holy Word here. Whether the historical Jesus stood or sat is immaterial. Instead, at stake is whether we can *live* this Gospel and not merely read it. Whether it has power to bring us to life.

I have memorized the lyrics of dozens of pop songs and the taglines of countless brands. I burn into my mind by constant repetition my list of tasks for the day and week and imagined responses to fears, offenses, and failures that are never realized. So memorizing the Gospel for the sake of performing it by heart is like memorizing instead a sunrise or a beloved's voice or a glass of cool water. And even more than these, because it is the *Gospel*. It does my soul good—well worth the hour and a quarter a week.

I learned precisely how much time it takes me to learn the Gospel by heart this spring, when I began a part-time call. Looking back, the pressure I felt at full-time seems quaint. Now the temptation to otherwise invest that hour and a quarter is much stronger. I do that more frequently now than before; and while I cannot say I always regret it, I can say I always notice a difference. I notice the effort required to recall, at any moment in the week's work, God's word of grace to support us through it. The weeks I do learn the Gospel by heart, Jesus seems closer. Jesus baptized and accompanied by beasts and angels or Jesus confronting demons and giving people back to themselves—this Jesus and his saving action seem nearer at hand. And when I give that hour and a quarter instead to a meeting or a visit or something else, it's like seeing and hearing Jesus from a distance.

The more of myself I invest in performing the Gospel, the more people hear not me but Jesus.

How is it different for the assembly? You know, I cannot say precisely. I have never asked what hearing the Gospel is like *not* performed by heart. But when performed by heart, I hear the same responses. It's more "alive," "real," "immediate," "meaningful," "powerful." Which sounds to me like faith awakening. The more of myself I invest in performing the Gospel, the more people hear not me but Jesus.

And this makes perfect sense, because performing the Gospel by heart is prayer.

It is impossible to do without prayer. It requires prayerful time and attention. So a retreat into the wilderness is perhaps the most apt comparison. Not because it is an ascetic practice, but because it invites emptying, surrendering, listening with the ears of our hearts.

Of course, this surely is not what we church folk imagine when we hear words like "performing." Those words clang like cymbals in our ears because of how often our choirs, musicians, pastors and we ourselves say, "Worship is not a *performance*. Not *entertainment*." Comments like these made me hesitate that first Lent. But now I wonder: maybe we miss something in making the distinction. Recently, I heard an educator paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, saying people who harp on the difference between education and entertainment simply reveal their ignorance of both. Then again, maybe "*performing* the Gospel by heart" is not the best way to say it. *Kindling* the Gospel by heart? *Incarnating* the Gospel by heart? *Praying* the Gospel by heart? Or maybe this list of true but still somehow ill-fitting names is itself revealing. As if, through the Gospel done by heart, Jesus finds an uncharted and undefended way in and simply astounds us.

For example, in all the times I have performed the Gospel in worship, I stumbled only once. I do not remember which Gospel story, but I do remember who was standing just an arm's length away from me: the chair of our property committee. In the middle of the Gospel, me in the middle of the aisle next to him, when we were deep in the holiness of that astoundingly alive moment, his cell phone rang at full volume. And it kept ringing. Somehow, I kept performing. I paused gracefully and continued, raising my voice just enough to be heard.

In the thick of it, there is barely time to think. But I remember, when the ringing finally stopped yet the Gospel, unabated, still ushered forth, the word "Masterful!" floated across my consciousness. Then his phone rang again. Would you believe, he had a voicemail? I was like the deer, having leapt with ease from one lane of danger, that caught from the corner of its other eye the ominous glint of a second pair of headlights. Because, while he managed to silence it quickly, he went on to turn down his phone's volume one…deliberate…level…at…a…time. Dumbfounded and finally distracted, I turned and looked at him for two beats of my pounding heart. It was the closest I ever came to shushing someone in worship. Instead, I turned and continued, hearing the words flowing in order but as if from another mouth.

Having read it many times, I have now lived it: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It did not become marble—quarried, cut, and polished. Nor did it become paper—printed, bound, and protected. The Word became *flesh*. In Jesus of Nazareth, at peace with wild beasts. And the Word dwelt among *us*, the wild beasts. And we are beasts: wild and lonely, with itches and twitches, wandering minds and ringing cell phones, even at our best. So performing the Gospel by heart really is prayer. Wilderness prayer. It makes plain the humanizing Presence at the Gospel's heart. The Word became flesh, and we are not alone.

Weekly I pray that the Gospel by heart will invite us simply and honestly to be where we are, awakening us to what sort of wilderness this truly is and Who in the flesh dwells among us.

Scripture by Heart: Reconnecting Word and Heart

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In the fall of 2009, I was introduced to a new and exciting strategy for interpreting the Bible. At the time, I was a senior theology major at Texas Lutheran University (TLU) and a pupil of Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones. It was in his New Testament Theology course that I had my introduction to biblical storytelling or "Scripture by Heart." That introduction renewed my passion for Scripture and for what God reveals to us through that Scripture.

I am now a student at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I am on the path toward becoming a pastor in the ELCA, and I continue to hold Scripture by Heart as a close companion for interpreting Scripture. Before I continue, however, I want to describe in a bit more detail what Scripture by Heart is. For me, Scripture by Heart (biblical storytelling) is the memorizing, internalizing, and retelling of Scripture. I do this with the hope of reviving the form in which the gospel message was spread in the early church. It was a powerful tool then, and I believe it can be just as powerful (if not more so) in our modern age—especially when so much information now passes from machine to machine rather than person to person. Through storytelling, we encounter an old and often overlooked lens for biblical interpretation—*human interaction*.

How Do I Perform Scripture by Heart?

The first stage of biblical storytelling is memorizing the text. As a storyteller, I attempt to memorize a passage of Scripture word-for-word according to a particular translation—such as the NRSV. This, for many people, is the most intimidating part of biblical storytelling. As a seminary student, husband to a wonderful wife, and father to a very rambunctious two-year-old boy, I can tell you that distraction and lack of memory are hallmarks of my life right now! However, memorizing Scripture often comes surprisingly easily to me because I am already familiar with the biblical stories. So I encourage everyone who fears an inability to memorize a passage of Scripture to at least try it—they might be surprised what they can do!

After memorization, I attempt to move beyond my presuppositions of the story and work to understand variations of emotion based on literary content. The text is seeded with many hints about the reactions of the characters in the story that modern day Bible readers commonly overlook. The search for clues to the emotions involved in the text often leads to new questions and thus the opportunity for new insights. It is a great reminder that the Bible is not just a two-dimensional storybook, but that it is instead an image of the living word of God!

I like to use the centurion's response to the death of Jesus (Mark 15:39) as a way to illustrate the impact of various possible emotions within Scripture. The centurion says, "Surely, this man was the

Son of God!" With what tone does the centurion speak this? Is this a response of simple acknowledgement that Jesus was the Son of God? Perhaps there is a sense of guilt or sadness in the centurion's voice. Maybe the centurion is speaking with sarcasm or vindictiveness. What implications are there for us in each of these voices? Emotions are not found just in the voice and tone—one can also consider possible hand gestures and expressions that would be appropriate to the story. There is also the question of who the centurion's audience is. Is the centurion muttering to himself? Is he proclaiming these words to his soldiers? Was it directed at the crowd in general? Every inflection, gesture, and expression carries emotion that brings something new to the story.

Church life becomes a barren field sown with the landmines of burnout when we lose our connection to the life-giving heart of God's word.

The third stage is retelling the story to others. I believe a necessary mind-frame for good storytelling is it that it is "*okay*" to make mistakes! One of the beautiful gifts we receive from the Holy Spirit is that even our mistakes can be used by God to give people what they need. When I stand before a group of people and tell a story from the Bible, I remind myself that no matter how wonderfully or poorly I tell the story, I am incapable of inspiring the hearts and minds of others—that is the job of the Holy Spirit! It is important, however, that I genuinely care about the story and about God's message to us through that story.

"By Heart"

One of the often overlooked dangers we face in the academic world is the temptation to become disconnected from the Bible as a book of the heart. Instead, we often tend to observe the Bible as a book of the mind and see it more as abstract philosophy rather than something meaningful to our everyday lives. This past year, I started a group of biblical storytellers at Wartburg Theological Seminary. I was told by one of the participants that it was nice to be able to enjoy the Bible and not use it like "just another text book."

From a seminary student's perspective, where making the grade to get through seminary is seemingly all important, it is easy to fall into the trap of regarding the Bible as a philosophical reference book. This trap's potency does not decrease once in the parish, as the temptation ensues to see the Bible as a text from which we have to "grind out yet another sermon." Church life becomes a barren field sown with the landmines of burnout when we lose our connection to the life-giving heart of God's word. Thankfully, God provides us with a variety of resources to help us reconnect with God's healing and rejuvenating word.

In some sense, I had previously seen the Bible as a book of stories that took place over 2,000 years ago. Christ had an impact on me, but I still did not necessarily relate to what was happening within the stories. It was as though the Bible had become a religious version of Aesop's Fables. I would look for the moral of the

story and move on to the next text. But as I became more involved in storytelling, I learned a secret: *Just because the context of the Bible's stories was over 2,000 years ago does not mean that we are unable to relate our lives—our "hearts"—to what is going on in the Scripture!*

After I learned this "secret," I began to ask myself how I would have responded to the situations presented in Scripture. How would I have felt to have been one of Jesus' disciples afraid for my life in a sinking boat only to find Jesus sleeping comfortably in the back? How would I have responded to Jesus, my friend and mentor, demolishing the trade area of the temple? In the words of Dr. Ruge-Jones, I began looking for the "wow moment" in each of the stories—and sometimes what the "wow moment" turned out to be would take me by surprise.

Performing Scripture *by Heart* has been a significant experience for me to reconnect continually with God's word. What God reveals to us through Scripture has always been important to me—but I have not always experienced the Bible as the living text I knew it should be. In church, the Bible is often read using a certain rhythm and specific set of inflections—eventually one passage begins to sound much like the next. The miracle stories of the New Testament are read with almost the same passion as the extensive lineages in the Old Testament. We do a tremendous disservice to Scripture when we disfigure the life-giving history of God's interaction with creation to a standard, hum-drum slog of monotonous readings.

There is a major problem in our faith communities when we feel forced to turn toward commentaries and devotionals for our inspirational needs because Scripture seems insufficient. These tools certainly have their place, but they should not be the focus for inspiration. We strive and struggle to help people be inspired by God's good news for us, but then we mute one of the most inspiring instruments we have—Scripture.

I have realized anew through storytelling that the Bible is filled from cover to cover with the most inspiring story in our history—a story inspired by God! We do not need to create special gimmicks to spread God's word; we just need to show the passion that we have for what God has given us. A reading from Scripture deserves to end with an exclamation mark instead of a period! I am convinced that people can better relate to Scripture when they actually hear it presented, not as a reading from an ancient book but as *the living word.*

Hearing and speaking the living word is interacting with the living word. What wondrous joy and excitement fills our hearts and minds when we interact with God's word! The Bible's stories are more than 2,000 years old, but they are not stagnant, nor should they be treated as such. When we treat the Bible as a book that is alive, its message becomes prominent in our lives. Through biblical storytelling, the Bible has come alive for me in ways I could not have previously imagined.

One of my most vivid experiences of this was another course I took with Dr. Ruge-Jones at Texas Lutheran University in which our class retold the entire Gospel of Mark. It was a fascinating class, where we learned a great deal about the Gospel of Mark—but the beauty was what took place within the group. As we interacted with Scripture, God's word interacted with our temporarily entwined lives. Through this living, pertinent Gospel experience, strong friendships were forged as classmates confided in each other about personal struggles that were weighing us down. We became a living, breathing Christian community that cared and loved one another.

Learning through Story

One of my favorite stories in the Gospel of Mark to present by heart is Mark 10:17–31 (The Rich Young Man). Within this familiar story, a rich young man comes before Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. After a little back and forth between Jesus and the young man, Jesus tells the man that he must sell everything that he has, give the proceeds to the poor, and then "Come, follow me." The man goes away saddened; and Jesus proclaims the ever-famous line to his disciples: "Children, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God…it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Many interpreters of this text tend to point out the sins of greed and idolatry as stumbling blocks toward following the law. Although this is certainly a valid observation, I do not believe it was Mark's main point. Some go on to say that Jesus is stating that a person who is rich is automatically under God's scrutinizing eye, because greed and idolatry are more likely to be prevalent. But I believe these observations stop the story short and miss what Mark tells us. There is a hint at something more deeply embedded within the rich young man's story in the next two verses (Mark 10:24–25) which declare that the disciples were "*amazed*" by Jesus' bold statement, followed by the disciples' question, "Who then can be saved?"

> Faith itself is a risk; but what a wonder it is to have the risks in life be centered in God.

The emotions that Mark observes in the disciples' response are not uninterested or detached. Rather, the disciples' response seems to have a hint of shaken expectations. They are amazed, perhaps surprised, fearful, or even self-righteous in reaction to what Jesus declares. These emotions point to a "wow moment" within the story; however, understanding what that moment is takes internalization. A question burns in my mind as I attempt to internalize the disciples' emotions: "*Why?*" Why are the disciples so amazed by what Jesus says? Why do they ask, "Who then can be saved?" If the disciples do not expect Jesus to say it is hard for a person with wealth to enter the kingdom of God, then the logical conclusion is that the disciples expect the rich young man to be in God's good graces.

As it turns out, there was a common understanding in the ancient world (that is still prevalent today, as well, in some circles) that people who had a "good life" were blessed by God and those who had a hard life were cursed by God. More often than not, these blessings and curses were dependent on how well a person followed the law. There are particularly strong examples of this understanding throughout much of the Old Testament—likely the best known example is Job. Throughout the book, Job's friends become certain that he must have sinned against God in order to receive such terrible punishment. They question him as to whether or not he is truly innocent in the eyes of God and remind him that God punishes the wicked. This is a "bad things happen to bad people" concept. For if God is truly just, then the righteous should be rewarded and the sinners should be punished.

In Mark's story, we see the positive end of this blessed-cursed spectrum through a man who is blessed with riches and has striven to live a righteous life. Because of this, the disciples might suspect this rich young man to be in God's "Top Ten Picks for Eternal Life." This would explain why the disciples are "amazed" at Jesus' response. Jesus is not declaring that the rich have a harder time to get into heaven than anyone else; rather he states that even the most blessed people cannot attain salvation by their own works, because, with "mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27, NRSV).

Changing Perceptions

The Gospel of Mark recognizes the importance of emotion within the story. This Gospel is made *alive* with images of fear, joy, excitement, amazement, sadness, and everything in-between. It is a Gospel written for people to experience—not just read or have read to them. For me, the opportunity to experience the Gospel of Mark through storytelling has reshaped my understanding of Scripture. The Gospel can and should make an impact on the hearts of those who experience it.

There is risk when we attempt to help reveal Scripture as experience. There is risk that we will make fools of ourselves. There is risk that the passage will be miscommunicated or mis-interpreted. There is risk—yet, each day, we are asked again to take a risk and have faith in God's promises. Faith itself is a risk; but what a wonder it is to have the risks in life be centered in God. Those who take the risk of experiencing Scripture through storytelling, either through performance or attendance, take the risk of having the word of God revealed in a new way to their lives. I hope that we have the courageous trust to take a risk—to connect both our minds *and* our hearts to God's life-giving word.

Off the Page, Into the Heart, and Out of the Mouth: Tools for Telling the Stories of Scripture by Heart

Dennis Hart Dewey
Biblical Storyteller

My Experience as a Biblical Storyteller

Over thirty years ago on my first Palm Sunday as an ordained minister, I decided to perform the Passion Narrative of Mark's Gospel (chapters 14–15) in place of the readings and sermon for the day. As one with a background in theater, I conceived of the venture as "dramatic monologue." A year or so later I had the good fortune to spend several days at a seminar led by Tom Boomershine, founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers.[1] Tom helped me understand that the art form of the biblical tradition was not theater, but storytelling. He also taught me that these two genres entail different histories, aesthetics, psychologies, and even theologies. He also inspired and encouraged me, as I had already learned about 15 percent of Mark's narrative, to add on the remaining 85 percent! So began a life in biblical storytelling that would span my professional career, including a 15-year full time ministry as a performer and teacher of biblical storytelling, a vocation in which I am still engaged despite having returned to parish ministry in 2007.[2]

Since those early days, my repertoire has expanded to include not only the Gospel of Mark, but the material unique to the other four Gospels, half of Genesis, parts of Exodus, Numbers, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Hosea, Job, all of Jonah, Galatians, parts of Acts, and the whole of Revelation. How does one amass such a repertoire? The answer is like the response to the proverbial question of how to eat an elephant: One bite at time. There are, however, some techniques for the learning of Scripture that I have learned. One purpose of this essay is to share these learnings with you in the hope that they will encourage you to respond to the other purpose: to extend an invitation to you to become a biblical storyteller as well! But first a story about how to approach the process of learning Scripture by heart.

The "M-word"

When my wife and I were pregnant with our first child, we took natural childbirth classes from Sister William Aloysius. (The kindly, humble "Sister William" explained that she had declined the permission extended after Vatican II for nuns to exchange their male saint names for female saint names.) Sister William told us that if we called them "labor pains," they would hurt. We were, therefore, to refer to them by their proper name: "contractions." About thirty hours into labor, I clearly remember my usually gentle wife shouting, "Get Sister William in here!" Nonetheless, there is a modicum of truth to Sister William's asser-

1. www.nbsint.org
2. www.DennisDewey.org

tion that what name we give to something affects how we feel about it. And we have all had bad experiences with what I call the "M-word."

For me, then, the first answer to the question of how to approach the daunting process of learning a whole book of the Bible by heart is this: Don't use the word (and it pains me even to type it here) "memorize." But this is the least of the reasons to eschew the word. More importantly, I think that the modern notion of memorization bears little correspondence both to the process of internalization practiced in antiquity and to the method that I will outline in this essay. I prefer instead to speak of "learning by heart."

We think of "memorizing" as storing a string of printed text in the brain. Learning by heart (as the anatomical reference would suggest) is a whole-person process involving many dimensions: brain, heart, soul, muscles, senses, bones, the endocrine system, the complete set of one's life experiences, emotions, memories, musings, relationships, stored images, bodily states, prayer life, and theology—to list but a few! In Hebrew anatomy and physiology, the heart was the center of the person, the place where feeling, thinking, and willing came together. Today we speak of being "centered." The heart, appropriately located, becomes the focus of the effort to "internalize" the text. (Note that the term "text" originally referred to the *spoken* word. It comes from the same root as "textile" and "texture." We are all familiar with the metaphors of spinning a yarn or weaving a tale.) Learning by heart, then, is a process that entails much more than simply committing strings of words to the memory of the head.

Modern memory science bears witness to the felt reality of antiquity, namely, that remembering is a creative, constructive process. We do not have little filing cabinets in our head in which are stored whole memories that we simply pull out, open up, and remember. Instead, bits and pieces are stored through the brain and nervous system and in the other systems of the body. Psychologists talk about how the "body remembers" trauma. (There is a reason we call someone a "pain in the neck"—or some lower anatomical location.) In Ancient Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, who was the mother of the muses, was associated with memory and imagination. Memory was itself conceived of as a creative act. When the Homeric bards sang epics as long as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, they began by invoking the muses to assist in constructing the memories. As a biblical storyteller, I invoke the creative Holy Spirit with much the same earnestness to permeate my being and call out the story from deep within the memory of the heart.

"Memorizing," as most people understand it, is a linear process: adding words, one after another, like beads on a string. The challenge for performing text memorized in this way is like the problem with the old series Christmas lights of my childhood: when one burns out, the whole string goes dark. The trauma of facing the abyss of that darkness, and the pain of the memory lapse engenders performance anxiety and paralysis. The process of learning by heart, on the other hand, entails learning the text as a whole piece. The structure, imagery, sounds, muscle tensions, visualization, embodiment, and "geography" of this process work together to prevent lapses and to help provide a safety net should the rare blank moment occur. Learning by heart entails the acquisition of the text as a gestalt; the process is not linear but holographic.

The Text Already Alive

As important as the terminology and the understanding of the process of internalization is different from memorizing, so also is

the attitudinal relationship of teller to text different. People often compliment me on a storytelling performance by telling me, "You made it come alive!" I seldom miss a beat in responding: "Thank you kindly, but I believe it already *is* alive; I just try not to *kill* it." The notion that what we are about in this sacred enterprise is the revivification of a cadaverous text is not only presumptuous, but tends to affect the performance adversely. In fact, to approach the process with this attitude is to assume the role of Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, the bold man of science who at the end of *his* performance laments, "I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."

If I conceive of myself as doing something "to" the story, my performance will be monster-like. These texts have been around for a long time without my help; my job is not the restoration of a dull, dusty antique, but rather (to borrow Charles Wesley's words) to be lost in wonder, love, and praise. I try, therefore, to approach the process of learning and performing the texts of Scripture with joyful reverence, with a mixture of delight and fear and trembling. And that brings us to the first step in the process: prayer.

Step One: Prayer

This may seem like a no-brainer, but sometimes the anxiety around so formidable a task as learning a text the length of, say, the Gospel of Mark is so overwhelming that one may forget to breathe. Without prayer, the effort is like that of an athlete who fails to train. The *labora* of biblical storytelling cannot properly be undertaken without prerequisite *ora*.

This sacred art is *oratio divina* in which we join our breath to the performance of the God-breathed text. The performative act is, in a real sense, enacted prayer. The process of learning a substantial text will be best served by understanding biblical storytelling as a spiritual discipline. In fact, the working definition of biblical storytelling that I have taught in workshops through my ministry is this:

Biblical storytelling is a spiritual discipline that entails the lively interpretation, animation and expression of biblical text that has first been deeply internalized in the context of prayer, and then is remembranced,[3] embodied, breathed, and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred act in community with an audience/congregation.

Actually, to call prayer the "the first step" is not quite accurate. Prayer needs to suffuse the entire process—from the hard work of learning by heart through the performance event and afterglow of reflection on that experience.

The Real Step One: Reading the Text Aloud

If praying, then, is undertaken "without ceasing," then perhaps the reading of the text aloud should be labeled the "first step." Again, this may seem self-evident. And yet my experience in leading seminars, particularly with clergy, and requesting that they take a text and read it aloud is often to find them with the Bible open softly mumbling or reading in total silence! The silent reading of the Bible is so much a part of literate spirituality that, even when instructed to the contrary, that practice seems a challenge to overcome.

3. I coined this word (over the objections of spell-check) to connote the sacramental quality of the experience of learning the story by heart. The recall of the text is more than remembering; it is a sacred event that joins the whole person of the teller with the communal memory of the story across the ages and the inspired collective imagination of the audience for whom it is performed.

With a long work such as the Gospel of Mark this might be undertaken one chapter at a time or one episode at a time. The performed text will, in the end, be sound. The act of reading aloud early in the process of learning entails speaking and hearing oneself speaking; it engages the respiratory system, the vocal apparatus, the partial embodiment of the text in the act of saying it. I like to say that the next step is to read it aloud. And the step after that is to read it aloud. Three is the magic number: at least three read-throughs out loud! As we speak the text in this way, our body memory is logging the position of our tongue, the feel and taste of the words in the mouth, and the rhythms of our breathing. We are beginning to learn below the level of consciousness.

Next Step: See What Is Already There

Next, I close the book and perhaps close my eyes. I want to see what is there without effort. What has stuck? What do I remember about what I have just read? Again aloud, I tell the story to myself in my own words—not worrying about getting the story down word-for-word at this point, but getting the "gist," becoming aware of the inherently mnemonic structures of narrative, visualizing the scene and characters, paying attention to words and phrases that have been retained effortlessly, the images that float to the surface of memory.

This phase of the learning process is akin to the manner in which we internalize a joke. Seldom do we take dictation when someone is telling a whopper, then sit down with the script and memorize the words of the joke. Those mnemonic structures of the narrative constitute a carrier signal that is internalized effortlessly. We hear a joke, we laugh, and we go on about our business; then, days later, a situation reminds us of it, we open our mouth and out it comes! In learning biblical stories, it is helpful to become aware of what has already been sorted by attention with little or no effort.

Scripting: Getting It Down On Paper

One of the things we have come to know about the oral culture out of which the scriptures arose is that writing always was done in service to the mnemonics of speaking.[4] The earliest lists of things written down in ancient Egypt were essentially for the purpose of aiding the memory. The interplay of orality and literacy in antiquity from the period of the David monarchy through the cultures established in the wake of Alexander the Great to communications systems of the Roman Empire was characterized by a rich mutuality. In our post-literate, digital era, the characteristics of oral culture are newly evident; this communications culture is, in the terminology of Walter Ong, "secondarily oral."[5] Nevertheless, post-literate does not mean illiterate. We have not ceased to be people who read and write; we are just reading and writing differently and to different ends. The interplay is among systems of writing, speaking, and now digital communication. This next step in the process of internalizing makes use of the technology of writing.

We do not often think about the arrangement of the words on the page. The conventions of print are so well established

4. I have found most intriguing about this relationship Susan Niditch's *Oral World and Written World: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1996) and David Carr's *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 186.

we forget that justified margins were once a new invention. I remember my dismay when, upon returning to grade school after summer vacation, the familiar "see Jane run" book with its one-phrase-*per*-line layout had been supplanted by the "chapter book." I gazed with horror at the orderly splay of neatly margined print that commenced at one invisible, horizontal line on the left and marched lockstep to another invisible, horizontal line on the right, breaking in mid-sentence, mid-phrase, even mid-word!

The task at this stage of the process of learning the story is, in effect, to return to the First Grade: to abandon the mature aesthetics of balanced columns and rearrange the writing on the page in a way that makes sense for the sense of it. This can be done either chirographically (an adorable word that means "written by hand") or by word processor. There is much to be said for the practice of actually writing the text out by hand. Making the words by the movement of the hand muscles linked to the hand-eye interaction can be a valuable mnemonic technique. Handwriting also frees up the possibility of writing in curves (or in some creative fashion), instead of being limited exclusively to the straight lines of pixels permitted by word processing.[6]

I must confess, however, that I am too wedded to the computer. My conventions in producing a "script" using this technology are 1) to form a line of text that is about a breath-worth in length and that ends at a sensible place (at the end of a phrase or sentence), 2) to group three lines (or so) together as an "episode," 3) to indent and print in small caps in bold any text spoken as dialogue, 4) to use parentheses freely as a means to set off subordinate bits, 5) to render all numbers as numerals, and 6) to use whatever additional markings, fonts, and colors that may serve as *aides de memoire.*

Recent study contends that the Greek-speaking world did not think in words and sentences, but in breaths. The performance of texts (with or without a written script present) was always a two-stage process. The passage would first be committed to memory and then "published," that is, recited publicly. The miniscule text provides visual evidence of both of these realities. Translated into English, a slice of Mark 1 might look something like this:

> andthespiritimmediatelydrovehim outintothewildernessandhewasin-thewildernessforfortydaystempted bysatan

These manuscripts had no spaces between the words, no capitalizations, no punctuation—suggesting that one had first to *know* the text before performing it. We are more accustomed to seeing the text displayed this way:

> 12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. 14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

But I might script the passage for learning for storytelling in this way:

> And the **Spirit** immediately **drove** him out into the **wilderness.**
>
> And he was in the **wilderness** for **40 days**, **tempted** by **Satan.**
>
> And he was with the **wild beasts**. And the **angels** waited on him.

6. For a generation after the invention of moveable type, people took their printed books to calligraphers to have them copied, because it was widely accepted that *real* books were written by hand, not by a machine.

> Now after John was **arrested**, Jesus came to **Galilee** proclaiming the good news of God and saying:
>
> The time is fulfilled,
>
> and the kingdom of God has come near.
>
> Repent and believe in the good news.

Notice in the above example that the word "wilderness" recurs. Tom Boomershine calls the repetition of words "verbal threads." They are memory hooks. The sounds of the words also help the memory. The "w" sound in "wilderness" and "wild beasts" is a connector. The rhythm of that first episode is cued by the repetition of the word "and," which functioned in oral culture as aural punctuation. This is why I have "massaged" the NRSV translation to replace the "and" it leaves out in the interest of better literary expression. (I will have more to explore on the subject of massaging the text below.) Sometimes it is helpful to draw pictures in the script, in effect to "storyboard" it with images. Once commissioned to learn Joel 2 for performance at a worship conference, I was having trouble in the "seam" between verses 24 and 25:

> [24]The threshing-floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.
>
> [25] I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

In the margin of the script, I drew on my poor artistic skill to figure a wine vat on which was perched my stick figure version of a locust. The transition never failed again.

The lay of the text on the page, the patterns that it exhibits, and the visual cues in the print all reinforce the learning process. I often work on learning the text by walking around, holding the script in my hand as a reference. Even coffee stains on the page become memory cues at the level of visual text.

Synaesthesia: Stanislavsky Meets St. Ignatius

Moving the story from the page into the heart of the storyteller requires a multifaceted approach, an assortment of techniques and tools. The attention paid the text by all the senses requires concentration, but in the end, the effort is productive. Russian psychologist Alexander Luria's account of his thirty-year study of a man who seemed incapable of forgetting anything revealed something about the inner workings of the associative properties of memory that lie beyond our consciousness. When the subject was presented with a tone of fifty cycles per second at 100 decibels, he "saw a brown strip against a dark background that had red, tongue-like edges. The sense of taste he experienced was like that of sweet and sour borscht…"[7]

Our effort at learning the text will attempt to find as many sensory associations as possible: to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear the sounds of the story, to be deliberate in finding synaesthetic connections and holding together in conscious awareness these many elements in the experience of rehearsing the text's unfolding narrative. At the same time, the emotions of the text need exploration. What is the feeling tone? How does that find expression in the range of possible emotional colors? To think of emotions as colors is to run the risk of conceiving of the storytelling process as simply "painting by numbers." The truth is that emotions come in shades and admixtures. As a pastor who has been

7. A. Luira, *The Mind of Mnemonist*, English translation (Basic Books, 1968), 23.

called upon to comfort a grieving widow, for example, I have often experienced the subtleties of the palette of emotions. In the immediate aftermath of the sudden death of her husband of sixty-some years she is in shock, overcome with grief—the dominant color. And yet he was not the easiest man to live with, and so a little of the color of relief is blended in. But as soon as anything like this is allowed, guilt is added on like shadow.

As I am working my way through the story, I want to spend time reflecting on when I have been in situations in which I have felt emotions like those identified in the story, to connect with those felt memories. This is something like the technique taught by the famous teacher of actors, Constantin Stanislavsky, whose method of emotional honesty came to be known as "method acting." I have already suggested how important it is to suffuse the learning process with prayer, and I take as my model the "spiritual exercises" of St. Ignatius, who taught that in telling the stories of Jesus we find him present with us. Only semi-facetiously then do I sometimes describe this technique of internalizing the text as "Stanislavsky meets St. Ignatius." This is another way of looking at the process of learning by heart as a "whole person" process. The deep immersion in the text is to marinate in ideas, feelings, patterns, and images.

Returning to the short passage from Mark 1, for example, I would reflect on what it means to be "driven" by the Spirit into the wilderness. But this wonder would not be merely cerebral. I might get up on my feet, and push myself by the back of the head forward, push, again, PUSH! I might reflect on a time when I have felt driven by a force outside of myself. What was that like? Where is the tension in my body when I remember that feeling? What did my voice sound like in that moment? I would smell the sand, feel the heat on my skin, taste the dryness in the mouth occasioned by being breathlessly driven into the desert.

The Worth of a Thousand Words

Among the most valuable of the tools in the kitbag of the biblical storyteller is one discovered centuries before Christ by a Greek storyteller named Simonides. The story of his moment of *eureka* is related in Book II of Cicero's *De Oratore.* Suffice it to say that Simonides discovered that the secret to remembering great quantities of material was the placement of that material in imaginary three-dimensional space. The places in which this material was placed were called *topoi* in Greek, a word that is root of the English "topic" and means "place" (as in "topology" and as in "I seem to have lost my place").

Visualization of the scene in space is like stepping into a diorama and "seeing" the drama unfold around us. Running visualization as a memory track simultaneously with the other processes outlined multiplies the memory effectiveness. I am "pushed" into the wilderness by the Spirit, and I look around at it. Look! There is Satan, the tempter to my left. I look to the right and there lying in the sand I see a calendar with "40 days" emblazoned on it. I feel the oppressiveness of the desert heat and doubt in my bones that I can endure for such a long time. And look! There are the wild beasts, the wilderness wild beasts! Menacing, hungry, teeth bared! This is a diorama in motion because the wild beasts are now moving out of sight as they are being replaced by angels, angels who bring comfort, consolation, relief, and reminders of God's purposes.

Related to the visualization of the story is "story geography," by which I mean not the literal map of the Jordan Valley

in relation to the Judean wilderness, but rather the space around the storyteller, the imaginary places in three dimensions into which I step as a storyteller and in which I "see" the action unfolding in relation to the place my body occupies. This part of the story moves from near to far as Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and then from far to near, as Jesus comes into Galilee proclaiming the good news.

Telling the Text as Bodily Function

It is somewhat misleading to say that humans *have* bodies; it is probably more accurate to say that we *are* bodies. Storytelling is an e*mbodied* activity. Bodies take up space. They move in ways that communicate. They stand still in ways that do the same. Anyone who plays an instrument with some degree of skill understands "muscle memory." If I stop to think about every sixteenth note, my fingers will become tangled in the task. I simply trust the muscle memory to execute the moves.

Part of the reason that I always get up and move around as I am working at learning the story is in order to get the story into my musculature, to locate my body in relation to the imaginary story geography around me. As I am beginning to learn the story, I make large gestures and many moves. As I come to know the story, I will pull back somewhat. People sometimes ask if I practice in front of a mirror to achieve the facial expressions I exhibit in telling the stories. The truth is that I do not *know* what I look like; the expressions come from the inside out! I cautioned at the outset not to conceive of the process of learning and telling the story as doing something *to* the story. For the same reason I would never speak of "adding" a gesture. The gesture comes out of my experience of the text. It is not an "add-on" but an "outgrowth."

Generally, I have found it better to suggest that you enact the story in some "realistic" sense. If the story is about, for example, a character who is described as falling on his knees, I do not literally get down on my knees. Instead I may give a stooping gesture that suggests rather than portrays the action. For one thing, there is no graceful way to get up from one's knees—especially at my age.

In dialogue, I pick a point toward the audience where each character "looks" when speaking to the other, using the "and she said's" to move into position as the character—or sometimes simply standing still and letting a shift in head position imply the change of characters. The imaginary sightlines then cross somewhere in the middle of the audience, but the perceived effect is of natural dialogue. If, on the other hand, I position myself "realistically" having the characters face at a right angle to the audience, the effect is "stagy" and unpleasant. When it comes to embodiment in performance, more is less. It is not necessary, for example, to hold up three fingers to accompany saying the number three.

The Indispensible Tool

When I ask in a workshop, "Who has a good memory?" typically fewer than five percent of the participants will raise their hands. The truth is that there is no known limit to how much humans can remember. We can remember whatever we want to and work at. I have offered a brief description of the process and some of the techniques that I have found helpful in learning the biblical stories. But the most important tool of all is the obvious one: repetition.

I hope by now that it is clear that I do not mean the mindless repetition of rote learning. The process I have described is labor-intensive on a different order of magnitude than mere memorizing. Nevertheless, in the end, it proves to be more

productive and results in a more engaging relationship with an audience. Still, we seem to think that learning these stories should be easier than it is. It is not. If one graphs "the number of repetitions on a horizontal axis" against "the felt energy expended" on the vertical axis, the line goes out high and straight for a long, long time. Twenty, thirty, or forty repetitions and it still is not there. Fifty, one hundred—"Maybe that Dewey guy can do this, but I'll never be able to!" One hundred and ten, one hundred twenty, and then, "Oh, I give up!" But the God's honest truth is that just out there on the graph a little way beyond where most people quit is the point at which they can know the story in their bones—or, perhaps put more appropriately, they find themselves known by the story.

The learning of the text is hard work. I always tell pastors that the commitment to learn the text to tell in worship is an economic decision. I also happen to think that this pearl of great price is worth the effort. To be able to look a congregation in the eye and tell the story from the heart is an experience unlike any most congregations have known. The immediacy of the Word, the passion involved, and the humanity of the text reach across the span of air between teller and listener and draw them into relationship with each other, into relationship with the text that has been traditioned by the corporate memory of the church, and, finally, into relationship with the God who is behind it all.

'Here and Now' vs. 'There and Then'

At the beginning of my storytelling ministry decades ago, when people still made conversation while in airplanes, I frequently found myself trying to explain biblical storytelling to a seatmate. For one thing, the word "storytelling" seems exclusively to connote activity with children. I would often find it necessary to say that most of my performance work was with adult or intergenerational audiences—not with children. Then my curious fellow traveler would want to know what kind of stories I tell. The answer "biblical" only served to elicited additional queries. When at length I explained that I tell the stories in the words of the text that has been traditioned to us in translation, the inquirer would ask with amazement, "And people actually *listen*?" Those who have not heard the text told well and faithfully by a skilled teller cannot imagine that there is much difference between the experience of the story read aloud and that of hearing a story told by heart. I frequently begin my workshops by offering these experiences side by side. Asked to identify the differences, the participants always aver that the two are night and day.

The reading (which I attempt to do in a fashion similar to the way in which the text might be read in Sunday worship) is, they say, hard to pay attention to. It sounds like print coming out of the mouth. Some admit that after the first few words are read, they mentally check out, saying to themselves, "Oh yes, I already know this story." For some, the reading is mainly an exercise in extracting the theological "juice" from the story, a communication that occurs at the level of the head for them to think about in a dispassionate, distanced way. The telling, however, is compelling. Engaging them eyeball to eyeball, the audience is drawn into the story. They cannot *not* pay attention. The story draws them in, connecting at the level of the *solar plexus* and ushering the audience into an imaginative world in which things "happen" in their presence. One respondent put it this way: "The reading was like 'there and then'; the telling was like 'here and now.'"

The late, great Don Juel, himself a Markan scholar, wrote in an essay called "The Strange Silence of the Bible":

> I remember the first time I saw the Gospel of Mark "performed" in public. I had regularly begun my lectures on the synoptic Gospels by pointing to the episodic nature of the prose, which many have taken to be the mark of oral sources. Looking at the printed page, it was not difficult to make the case that the narratives were in major ways deficient…. The person who "performed" Mark, however, recited in such a way that the breaks in the story were not a problem. The sense of coherence was established in several ways, like changing positions and looking at different sections of the audience. It worked. The audience had little sense that the Gospel was deficient as a narrative. There were gaps and jumps, but the way they were handled by the performer made them enticing rather than irritating and distracting.
>
> I also noted there were times during the performance when people laughed. I did not recall ever laughing to myself when reading through Mark…. An interpretation that fails to take into account what happens when written words are spoken seems adequate neither to the "original" setting in which they were spoken nor to the contemporary setting in which they continue to function.[8]

Those who have not experienced the power of biblical storytelling tend to conceive of the prospect as dull and boring, sadly to say in the way that most people experience the reading of the text in worship. They cannot imagine that there can be anything engaging, let alone moving, in simply performing the text as it appears on the page. Where is the creativity in mere recitation of words memorized by rote? Of course, these hypothetical neophytes have not read this essay to discover that the story told well and faithfully entails the artistry of the whole person as teller/performer! Do people walk out of a recital by Yo-Yo Mah demanding their money back because he only played the notes that Bach wrote?

To conceive of the artistry of biblical storytelling as something akin to playing music is a worthwhile metaphorical understanding. The text is replete with "musical cues" for one who looks for them. As we have noted above, the function of the written text in antiquity was very much like the function of the dots and squiggles of musical notation for the musician performer. The ink on the page is not the music; the music is the music!

Gravitation Pull and Massaging

I find that one good analogy for work of biblical storytelling is jazz. The jazz musician knows the "chart," knows the notes and is always aware of where he/she is in relation to those notes and yet is not strictly bound by them. As people who have a biblical text (in translation), we are held to account by the gravitational pull of the center of that text. We know, of course, that deep down in the subatomic world, reality is mostly empty space. If the center of the text is the community memory of the event, shaped and reshaped in the telling, the next layer out is the expression of that memory in transcript of performance we call "Scripture." A further layer out is the translation of that transcript into our own language.

Within the Network of Biblical Storytellers we recognize both the accountability of sticking close to the text and the flexibility that acknowledges that all communication is interpretive and all narrative is "fictive," that is "made in the moment." The account of the event is not the event itself. What is left in and what is left out, the perspective from which the event is told, the many changes through which the Holy Spirit has guided pass-

8. *Interpretation*, January 1997, 8.

ing on the memory made in words—all these things suggest a certain flexibility in relation to the actual words. That gets translated in quantitative terms of 95 percent content accuracy and 75 percent verbal accuracy. The wiggle room in the 5 and 25 percent is where I "massage" the text. Sometimes this is simply because the words of the translation are not sufficiently easy to articulate aloud. Sometimes the massaging arises out of an aesthetic need or a pastoral concern.

I have already mentioned my habit of replacing the oral punctuation of the "and's" removed by the NRSV translators from Mark's Gospel. In preparing a script for the performance of the Gospel of John years ago, I reached to another translation for something that felt right in my mouth to say what Jesus says when he responds to Mary's expression of concern at the Cana wedding that they have no wine, and he says, "Woman, why are you getting me involved in this? My hour has not come yet." Once, in Toronto, when I was performing the Gospel of Mark (which I learned originally in the RSV) for the something-hundredth time, I knew the words of the text at the moment in Gethsemane as Jesus says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." But the jazz words that came from my heart and out of my mouth that night were these: "I am so full of sorrow that I could die." I noted those words and kept them. I say them now instead of the exact words of the translation. And I believe the Holy Spirit is involved in that.

There are some who bristle at the word "performance." The term has become synonymous in our culture with "showing off." Nevertheless, I want to reclaim the word as appropriate for what we do as sacred storytellers. To per-form is to form completely. Can we seek to do anything less with the texts we hold so dear? Storytelling performance is different from acting in several ways. Most importantly, the aesthetic of acting is distance; the aesthetic of storytelling, on the other hand, is intimacy. Every telling of the text (like every reading of the text) is an interpretation. There is no "interpretationless" telling (or reading) of the text. In an effort to tell the text with no "taint" of emotion, some have advocated the reverential, flat, expressionless intoning of the text. What that approach fails to appreciate about itself, of course, is that it, too, is an interpretation—one that does not comport well with the storytelling tradition of Israel or with the rabbinical tradition of the first century. All of this is another way of saying, "If it was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me."

When it comes to performance decisions generally, I try to approach the task with what I call "reverential risk." I have also been reassured by Kenneth Bailey's observation that we must always understand the interpretive enterprise as coming to "tentative finality." The three maxims I encourage in budding biblical stories are these:

Know the story.
Love the story.
Trust the story.

Telling to Eyeballs

One last small but important piece of advice to would-be biblical storytellers: Rehearse with eyeballs looking back at you. The experience of telling to the walls or the trees is nothing like that of telling to breathing beings who are looking back at you. Friends, family, church members, dogs, cats—choose someone/thing with eyes to practice the telling of the story. Listen to the feedback you get from friends about what works and what does not, what is moving and what is confusing. Keep telling, telling, telling until the life of the story resides in you deeply—and you in it—to the glory of God. Amen.

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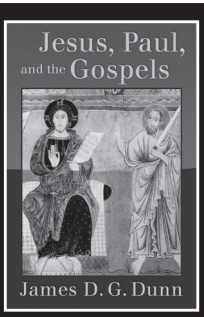

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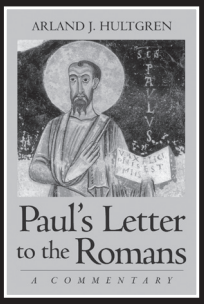

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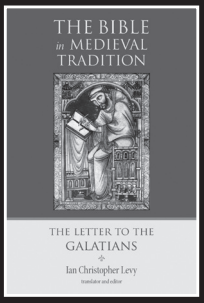

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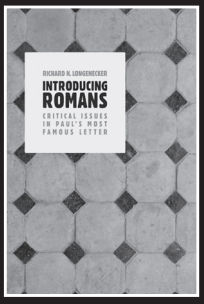

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Book Reviews

Christmas: Festival of Incarnation. By Donald Heinz. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9733-4. xiii and 274 pages. Cloth. $25.00.

Donald Heinz provides purpose and description for *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation*: "This book is a religious and historical accounting of Christmas as an ever-evolving festival of Incarnation….The drama of Incarnation, a central theme of this book, is the *risk* God takes in becoming human and fully immersed in and committed to a material world." (ix) Part One is titled "Plotting Incarnation: Divine Scripts and Human Actors." Part Two describes "Theater of Incarnation: The Church as Festival House." Part Three deals with "Incarnational Extravagance: All the World's a Stage." Heinz tells the story which originates in the New Testament, plays in the church as its festival house, and finally ends up with the whole world as its stage. Heinz reflects an interdisciplinary, secular academic's perspective (he is a professor of religious studies and for twelve years Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities in the California State University system, while maintaining his genuine pastoral and Lutheran grounding).

This book gives pastors, teachers, students, musicians, worship planners, and entire congregations reason and hope for celebrating imaginatively and purposefully the material of God's adventuresome and risky Christmas investment.

Heinz wrote this book with Christian congregations always in mind, and in hopes of revitalizing the church's Christmas celebration. The Fortress Press website provides a free 8-page guide for "Clergy, Worship Leaders, Musicians" planning Christmas celebrations and a 28-page guide with provocative questions for discussion for adult forums that use this book as an Advent discipline or a manual for re-imagining Christmas.

Whatever the season when this book is read, renewed pilgrims will have new expectations and plans about celebrating what is human and divine. You definitely want to buy this book for yourself and give it as gift to others!

James W. Hallerbergr
San Diego, California

Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology. By Thomas H. McCall. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8020-6270-9. vii and 256 pages. Paper. $30.00.

McCall is an evangelical of the Arminian persuasion who teaches systematics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. He approaches Trinitarian theology through the lens of analytic philosophy. This book is markedly erudite in breadth of scholarship and intensely guided by semantic and logical precision so highly valued by the analytic tradition.

The book is divided into three sections: (1) Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? (2) The Kingdom of the Trinity (3) The Future of Trinitarian Theology. Chapter one outlines recent Trinitarian models such as (A) "social Trinitarianism," in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct centers of consciousness whose interrelationship forms a generic divine essence (41); (B) relative Trinitarianism which sees God as "an individual (rather than a society, or a complex entity made up of parts)" (109); and (C) Latin Trinitarianism in which the one divine substance and the three persons are God "three times over" (50). Chapter two especially focuses on Richard Bauckham's New Testament basis for triune theology, the perspective that Second Temple Judaism was concerned primarily with Yahweh's uniqueness as Creator and ruler oblivious to the metaphysical categories employed by later Christians and thus permitting Jesus a place in Yahweh's identity. In this light, McCall favors social Trinitarianism over its two rivals, noting however, that relative Trinitarianism has much to be commended.

In the next section, McCall critiques the work of Robert Jenson, Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas, as well as Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware. His critique of Jenson is masterly. Jenson's claim that God is identical to his revelatory speech and action (129) makes God dependent on creation similar to the thinking of Hegel. Similar concerns arise for Moltmann's view of the Trinity defined as thoroughgoing *perichoresis* (each of the Trinitarian persons thoroughly indwelling the others). In Moltmann's Hegelian-inspired view, the fact that God *can* suffer becomes tantamount to the view that God *must* suffer. With respect to Grudem's and Ware's views of the Son's subordination to the Father within the trinity, McCall worries that if the Son is necessarily subordinate to the Father, then such subordination as essential is hard to square with the *homoousios* doctrine, i.e., that the Son is of the same (not just similar) substance as the Father (178–180).

In conclusion, McCall sets an agenda for Trinitarian doctrine which includes commitment to monotheism, acceptance of the full divinity of the distinct persons, squaring with the New Testament, and that avoids merely generic or perichoretic unity (though perichoresis can help us understand God's purposes in creation). A robust view of the Trinity should be able to affirm God's redemptive action in light of the triune identity and purposes for creation (246–253).

Mark Mattes
Des Moines, Iowa

The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective. By Jerome H. Neyrey. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8028-4866-6. xx and 489 pages. Paper. $37.00.

Jerome Neyrey, S.J., is professor emeritus of New Testament at the University of Notre Dame. He has published widely for more than thirty years. This volume is a collection of eighteen essays previously published as far back as 1979, though most came out in the decades after 1990, and gathered as chapters here.

For the most part Professor Neyrey confirms common assessments of themes, characters, and dynamics of the Fourth Gospel by expressing them in the specialized terminology and categories of classical rhetoric and cultural anthropology. Yet the book is sprinkled with surprising assertions, e.g., that we should think of the Father's house "as God's family or household here on earth" (76).

Neyrey himself raises the question that dogs analyses undertaken from this particular perspective: "Does appreciation of honor and shame demand a reinterpretation of older scholarly opinions on various passages?" (434) This question invites a companion question: Are the innovative insights Neyrey draws out of certain passages the result of application of his interpretive model or the result of personal qualities he brings to the study, such as decades-long engagement with biblical texts, with extra-biblical ancient literature, with scholarly debates, and with Christian teaching and practice? No doubt to state my question as an either/or is an overstatement. Nevertheless, my general impression is that typical readers will be more satisfied with *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* if they approach it with an interest in hearing from Professor Neyrey more than with anticipation of sweeping reinterpretations of Johannine thought demanded by Neyrey's interpretive categories.

Readers will benefit well from Neyrey's summaries and critiques of scholarly viewpoints on the theme or topic he is taking up in that chapter. Among the worthy offerings in this volume, I most heartily recommend chapter eleven: "The 'Noble' Shepherd in John 10."

S. John Roth
Jacksonville, Ill.

Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique. By Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir. New York: Oxford, 2010. ISBN 978-0-19-539796-3. ix and 175 pages. Cloth. $65.00.

"Is the cross of Christ a symbol of hope or a sign of oppression?" asks Gudmundsdottir,

Lutheran pastor and Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Iceland. This is a clear, straightforward historic overview of Christology and feminist approaches that could serve well in an adult forum, colleague study group, or seminary classroom.

She traces the broad spectrum of feminist typologies by beginning with Lutheran laywoman Rachel Conrad Wahlberg's books revealing Jesus' liberating attitude toward women. She presents Daphne Hampson's post-Christian perspective, as well as those of Carter Heyward and Mary Daly in a way that bids readers seek out their original works. Gudmundsdottir identifies more closely with Elizabeth Johnson whose feminist Christology functions to redeem the name of Christ from the exclusive and oppressive use of Christological doctrines for the healing of humankind. (Eastertide 2011, over seventy-five Lutheran women in religious studies, theology and pastoral ministry, including Gudmundsdottir, wrote an open letter of support to Dr. Johnson whose recent book has been criticized by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.)

Gudmundsdottir then provides substantive and succinct perspective of the cross, as a hermeneutical tool, from Paul to Origen to Luther to Moltmann, God participates in the world's suffering, bringing hope into hopeless situations.

Gudmundsdottir draws a distinction between use and abuse of a theology of the cross. She believes a feminist retrieval of a theology of the cross must unveil the distortion of patriarchal Christology, which still exists, and avoid making suffering, particularly women's suffering, a virtue. Gudmundsdottir, who so clearly presents many voices, has found her own. I look forward to her future work showing that the cross and resurrection liberate and empower to carry us even more fully into new ways of sharing power as women and men for the transformation of theology, ministry, and the church itself.

Norma Cook Everist
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul's Theology in the Pastoral Epistles. Edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terrry L. Wilder. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8054-4841-2. v and 340 pages. Paper. $19.99

Köstenberger, of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Wilder, of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, have assembled twelve essays that defend the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. The various authors show how the Pastorals can be identified with the genuine Pauline letters in terms of language, theology, ecclesiology, ethics, and literary structure. In a final essay, well-known academician I. Howard Marshall summarizes the various arguments and the issues involved. He himself cannot affirm that the Pastorals actually reflect genuine Pauline material. At the same time, he does not believe the canon of the New Testament would have included pseudonymous material. So he leaves us with a description of the assertions, but the problem remains unsolved.

Graydon F. Snyder
Chicago, Ill.

The Resurrection of Jesus: A Sourcebook. Edited by Bernard Brandon Scott. ISBN 978-1-59815-013-1. Salem: Polebridge Press, 2009. 104 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Scott has collected a series of essays written by scholars loosely associated with the Jesus Seminar. Robert Funk, founder of the seminar furnished a complete compilation of resurrection references from the New Testament period. Arthur J. Dewey expanded this collection with a discussion of the resurrection texts in the Gospel of Peter. Robert M. Price collected a number of hero stories in which the body was not found and would appear to be among the gods. Roy W. Hoover reflects on the complex relationship of resurrection as theology and then as history. Finally, Thomas Sheehan asks whether reading the resurrection as history does damage to our faith. This little book (128 pages) inspires a number of

serious and useful questions regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

Graydon F. Snyder

Briefly Noted

The Gospel of John. By J. Ramsey Michaels. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8028-2302-1. v and 1094 pages. Cloth. $65.00.

Michaels, a well-known educator and author, contributes an extensive and thorough commentary on the Gospel of John for the series The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Given the remarkable size of this study he covers every subject carefully. In the prologue he spends considerable effort to determine the identity of the "disciple whom Jesus loved". None of the "John" persons (apostle, brother of Jesus, presbyter at Ephesus) will quite satisfy the criteria. Finally Michaels makes no positive identification.

From Michael's perspective, the basic theology of the Gospel is found in verses 1:1–5 and 1:14. In contrast to the Jesus of the Synoptics, the Jesus of John is not a messenger from God, but is the presence of God among us. Referencing 15:9–17 Michaels assumes the author of John sees God's primary presence in terms of the love commandment as exhibited by the Son Jesus.

While Michaels covers everything in the Johannine text, he, admittedly does not have space to pursue the historical impact of some well-known texts. For example, while he explains well the Eucharistic type narrative in 6:11 and 6:53–50 as a definition of God's presence in Jesus, he does not attempt to connect this passage with the Last Supper of the Synoptics nor with the later practice of eating the bread (flesh) and drinking the wine (blood). On the other hand, while he recognizes that 13:1–17, the washing of feet, is a key description of God's serving love in Jesus, he does not discuss its fascinating, complicated, liturgical usage.

Michaels' volume serves as a useful reference for understanding the text of the Fourth Gospel. It has less value for delving into Johannine theology or its later ecclesiastical importance.

Graydon F. Snyder

Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence (Westminster John Knox Press, $24.95), by Stanley Saunders, is a helpful resource for preaching in the year of Matthew. He treats each pericope in two ways: "Exploring the Text," interpretation comments, and "Preaching and Teaching the Word," suggestions for applying the text today. While he gives a good bibliography on pages 323–325 and has clearly used it, there are very few references to it in the text. It is a very practical, helpful book that will repay frequent use.

Edgar Krentz
Chicago, Ill.

Introducing the New Testament by Mark Allan Powell (Baker, $44.99) is a modern, well-designed text for college students, probably too elementary for seminary classes, illustrated with art and some photographs of ancient sites—though the captions are often too general to be truly useful. Powell presents alternative views well, often without coming to a conclusion about disputed matters. Thus the book is useful for teachers of differing approaches and methods. There are helpful sidebars, basic bibliographies in English, and websites designed to help students and teachers. It deserves wide use also in parish libraries.

Edgar Krentz

James VanderKam's ***The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*** (1994) served a generation as a trustworthy introduction to the Qumran documents. Now the revised second edition (Eerdmans, $21.00, ISBN 978-0-8028-6435-2), which takes into account the research of the last fifteen years, will do that for the next fifteen. Its seven chapters provide basic information, cover the field, give excellent guidance to modern literature and are accessible to interested non-specialists. A good read, I heartily recommend it.

Edgar Krentz

Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany to Fifth Sunday in Lent

"Finally!"

For two of the years that my family and I spent Sunday mornings driving from The University of Notre Dame to our church in Sturgis, Michigan, we listened to "America's Top 40 with Casey Kasem." Casey counted down the forty most popular songs in the United States of America, from #40 to #1. A feature of the show was the "Long Distance Dedication." Someone would dedicate a song to someone special far away through an often tear-jerking testimonial or declaration of love. Asked how this feature found its way into the program, Casey said he did not force it. He had to be patient and wait for that very first dedication to come, in those days in the mail.

I feel a little bit like Casey as I write this introduction to "Preaching Helps." I have waited for years for a bishop to agree to write "Preaching Helps." Probably because I spend too much time with Ambrose of Milan, but I like to think of a bishop as a preacher and an expositor of Scripture, what 1 Timothy calls "an apt teacher." Alas, our bishops are busy administering, explaining what the church is and isn't doing, and putting out fires. Writing "Preaching Helps" is something many bishops told me they *wished* they had time to do.

I'd just about given up hope when Bishop Mike Rinehart of the ELCA's Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod agreed to find the time—make the time—to write. "Finally!" I thought, in a burst of praise. Mike and I knew each other when we were students at Trinity Seminary in Columbus. We renewed our acquaintance in 2010, when I was privileged to talk to pastors at several locations in his synod about preaching Advent and Christmas. Bishop Rinehart earned the Bachelor of Music in organ performance from Valparaiso University, and the Master of Divinity from Trinity Lutheran Seminary. He served St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa; Christ Lutheran Church, Charlotte, North Carolina; and Grace Lutheran Church, Conroe, Texas, before being called to the office of bishop. Evangelism—"making fully devoted followers of Christ, who taught love of God and neighbor as the greatest commandments"—is one of Mike's passions, and his synod's highest priority. Pastors tell me that Mike is a "forward thinking bishop." You might enjoy checking out his blog: http://bishopmike.com/

I wonder what the church would be like if bishops and pastors were given more time to study Scripture. I've been lucky because my congregations expected this from me. For example, in *When God Speaks through Worship*, I recount attending an evangelism conference.

> [W]e were taught that pastors need to get out of their congregations, which are full of people who go to church, and be visibly active in the community to meet the unchurched. Among other things, we were counseled to spend considerable time each week getting to know the regular patrons in a restaurant or coffee shop near

the church. We could learn their concerns and needs, and ways the congregation might minister to them. Then, when the opportunity presented itself, we could invite them to church. So I spent time sitting at the counter of the restaurant across the street, sipping coffee, talking with the regulars, and waiting for the moment when the Spirit would nudge me to invite them to church.

After a few weeks of this, some key members of the congregation made their way into my office. "We're here to find out what's wrong," they said. "Your preaching is off. The whole service seems off." I told them that I was being an evangelist and explained how I was getting to know the unchurched. The room exploded in conversation. After listening a good while, a soft-spoken man named Ernie raised his hand. The room got quiet. "Pastor," he said, "I understand the importance of evangelism, and I really admire you for taking it so seriously. I also appreciate how hard you're working. How about this? I'll go across the street and drink coffee. I know a lot of the people there, and I promise I'll invite them to church. We need you here studying Scripture, writing your sermon, and planning worship, because that's where we come into God's presence."[1]

This set of Preaching Helps brings us into Lent. Bishop Rinehart has me imagining telling my dean that I am going to give up some committee time and seminary busywork for Lent and spend that time studying Scripture. I really do not expect my workload to lessen. I do wonder where the conversation would lead. I wonder where conversations would go if pastors and bishops proposed this to their congregation and synod councils. That a bishop of the church has me thinking this way is inspiring. It is grace. It's certainly forward thinking. Thanks, Mike!

And thank you for your responses to my question of whether this column is valuable to you. While a few of you graciously invited me to briefly introduce the contributor and be done with it, most who responded expressed appreciation for my efforts. I suggest that you ask a similar question in your church newsletter. I suspect that you will be surprised and blessed by the responses you receive.

Have a holy and blessed Lent!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps
http://www.craigasatterlee.com/

1. Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 2009), 6–7.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 5, 2012

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

First Reading

After thirty-nine chapters of ranting prophetic doom on Judah (and on other nations, to be inclusive), the book of Isaiah changes voice to the hopeful promise of a new creation and a new kingdom in chapters 40–55. First Isaiah prophesies Judah's destruction and exile. Second Isaiah, written perhaps 200 years later, in the exile, prophesies the return from Babylon. Then in chapter 56 we change again to a third author writing after the exile. Isaiah is a collection of pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic writings. Verse 21 is a continuation of the answer to the question in verse 18: "To what will you liken God?" God is not an idol that you can cast and gild, or carve so that it will not rot or tip over. The God we are talking about sits above the earth. We are like grasshoppers to this God, who created the universe and spread out the heavens like a curtain. Implicitly, if this God could bring you into exile, this God could bring you out. This God could give you strength for the journey—empowering the powerless, the young, and the old.

Those who wait on the Lord will have their strength renewed. They will soar with the eagles. Those who wait on the Lord are the (*u·qui*). They are "those expecting" that God will show up and do what God does: give life and create out of nothing. This is the new creation.

First Corinthians 9 takes on a different theme. It is a common Pauline logic: I have the right to charge for the gospel, but I do not make use of that right, like Christ who was in the form of God, but didn't exploit that status. I have the right to be free, but I give up that right to be a slave to all. I become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel, so that I might share in its blessings.

In Mark 1, we return to a "waiting on the Lord" theme, but first Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. I wonder what she had. Could it be malaria? Whatever it was, word spread fast, and by sundown all the sick and possessed were brought to him. "The whole city" plopped down on their doorstep, and Jesus healed their sick, casting out demons. How do you recharge from such an exhausting ministry?

We're told that Jesus got up in the morning while it was still night. Know that feeling? (*pro-ee enucha,* morning/night.) What for? He went to a lonely place (*eremon topon*—lonely, deserted, desolate, alone place) to pray. He went to wait on the Lord, who renews our strength, so that we can mount up on wings like eagles. We use this God-given strength, not for self-aggrandizement, but in service to others. We use it to bring good news and healing to the world.

Pastoral Reflection

The preacher may wish to use this week to talk about prayer, not as a laundry list of things we want from God, but rather as a time of silent waiting upon God, the wellspring of life, who brings hope and strength. The good news is that God gives, even when we don't ask. Our very lives are an unrequested gift. And even when in old age our strength wanes, and our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed. God gives.

Where is your lonely place where you wait for God? The life and ministry of the church grows out of a life of prayer. We

cannot sustain our strength for ministry in this world without returning to the well for the water of life.

We have heard of those who have set out to change the world, only to run out of steam mid-course. Perhaps you have been that person. Without a spiritual source, we lose altitude quickly. The rigors of public ministry—exposing evil to the light, serving in Jesus' name, going the extra mile, loving the unlovable, touching the untouchable, healing the sick, casting out evil spirits—are simply too difficult. We run out of gas. What fills your tank? How might the preacher seriously engage the congregation in pondering this question?

Pastor, former bishop and coordinator of the ELCA Malaria Campaign, Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl suggests that it is quite likely Simon's mother-in-law had malaria. For those participating in the effort to contain malaria by 2015, this could be a great Sunday to splash the campaign. Go to www.ELCA.org/malaria and click "resources" for envelopes, posters, bulletin inserts, videos, youth materials, worship materials, and more.

When we trust that God will refresh, renew, and restore, we are free to give ourselves away for the life of the world. We can give until we have nothing left, because we know that lonely place where we can wait upon the Lord who renews strength. We know the more we give, the more we will receive, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing. And we long to be emptied, for the joy of being refilled. We need to be filled. As Mother Teresa said, "God cannot fill what is already full."

"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:23). MWR

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 12, 2012

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

First Reading

Namaan is a mighty warrior. He is a winner on the battlefield and off. In high favor with his master, the Lord has given him victory. Still, he has a personal problem: leprosy. All his accomplishments cannot protect him, even the Lord's favor in battle. His wealth and power cannot help him. A young, powerless, captured slave girl can. He goes to the King of Israel who believes he's being set up by the King of Aram. Elisha intervenes, telling Namaan to wash in the Jordan seven times. Namaan balks, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" In the end, he relents and is healed. It is not his great accomplishments that save him, but rather faith, reluctant faith in the God of Israel.

In a continuation of our reading of 1 Corinthians 9, Paul compares his spiritual self-discipline to athletics: running and boxing in particular. He has been telling the Corinthians about the freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols. He cautions them as well to not let this freedom become a stumbling block to others. Partying at pagan feasts might just lead others away from God. Instead, live a disciplined, intently focused life, like an athlete preparing for the Olympics. It is jarring to hear the apostle of justification-by-grace-through-faith telling us to strive (work) for our imperishable wreath (salvation). This is a reminder that Paul's concept of faith was not theoretical. It was not

an armchair faith: intellectual assent to a doctrinal proposition. Paul's faith is trusting God, as did Abraham and Sarah. Faith is a life lived in such trust that we are free to give our lives away in serving the gospel and doing the hard work to which faith calls us.

Jesus is a good example. Living in complete trust, he is free to embark on an exhausting healing ministry in the community. He operates also out of his inborn compassion. "Moved with pity," Mark tells us (*spalnk-nees-theis:* literally "guts"), Jesus does something that makes him unclean: he touches a leper. His gut-wrenching encounter with this horrific disease impels him to action. Leprosy in the Hebrew Bible is a range of illnesses with symptoms of rash, spots, discolorations, hair loss, itches, discharges and the like. The remedy is usually the blood of an animal. Clothes and buildings can have leprosy in Leviticus 13 and 14. If one has leprosy one is "unclean" and must be quarantined from community. Jesus' action restores the leper to community. Augustine says this is the same healing as Matt 8:2. Bede says this shows the power of faith over law. Chrysostom says compassion drives Jesus to heal with his touch, not just his word. In order to fulfill all law, Jesus tells the leper to offer the sacrifices commanded by Moses and to show himself to the priests.

Pastoral Reflection

How effective would Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God have been, had it not been accompanied by his ministry of healing in the community?

Corollary: How effective will *our* preaching the reign of God be, if it is not accompanied by a healing ministry in the community?

Here is the good news: In Christ, God responds to the suffering of the world with great compassion. He touches the untouchable and offers healing to all those he encounters. Furthermore, God invites us to be a part of this saving action in the world. God calls us to respond with compassion to a world of suffering, touching the untouchable.

We must be careful not to insinuate that everyone who has faith will be magically healed. Luke reminds us that there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha's day, but only Namaan was healed. Paul asks to have his thorn in the flesh taken away and the answer is no. Jesus asks to let this cup of suffering pass him by, but instead he goes to the cross. Jesus never promises his followers a free pass from suffering. Quite the opposite. He warns them they will be dragged before magistrates. As one pastor in our synod said, "If you haven't been dragged into court for fighting injustice, you're going to have some explaining to do in heaven." We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus into the world.

People do not suffer because of their lack of faith. But suffering may occur because of our communal lack of faith. A communal lack of trust in God might lead us to live lives of fear, hoarding, and selfishness, contributing to a world where there is plenty of food for all, and yet too many are starving.

Faith invites us to respond to the world of suffering as did Jesus, with compassion, with touch, with hope. When we trust God to provide all we need, we will not be afraid to share, to give generously. We will share our bread with the hungry, share our touch with the outcast, share our time with the sick.

What is your congregation's healing presence in the community? What is your congregation's healing presence in the world? MWR

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 19, 2012

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

First Reading

In 2 Kings, Elijah is taken up into heaven by a whirlwind, with a chariot and horses of fire attending. Elisha takes on the mantle of Elijah, striking the waters of the Jordan and parting them. Shades of Moses.

Second Corinthians is complex. Paul is defending his apostleship in the face of some false apostles. In chapter 3, Paul explains that he and his colleagues are ministers of a new covenant, not written on stone (like the Ten Commandments/Law) but rather on hearts. The revelation of the Law came in such glory that the people could not look upon Moses' face. It had to be veiled. If the ministry of condemnation had glory, how much more must the ministry of justification have glory! Paul figures the reason his fellow Israelites do not "see" Jesus as the messiah is because the veil is still there. When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. In Christ, we see the image of God as in a mirror. One imagines an icon of Christ, as a mirror through which one views the glory of God over one's shoulder. Enter chapter 4. Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing (presumably in their sins and condemnation by the law). The god of this world has blinded them from seeing the glory of God as reflected in the face of Christ. It is a complex argument, borne out of Paul's grief that all Israel has not run to Christ.

The Transfiguration is referenced in Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9 and 2 Peter 1 (16–18). Some (who propose an unlikely date of 64 A.D. for 2 Peter) suggest that this account predates the Gospel accounts. Others suggest that Peter is behind the writing of Mark's Gospel. If so, the scribe of Mark's Gospel may be penning an old man's firsthand account of a life-changing, perspective-altering, mountain-top experience. Origen suggested this was a preview of the resurrection. Later scholars proposed a theory that it was a resurrection story mistakenly or intentionally misplaced. Yet, it lacks some of the characteristics of the resurrection appearances (like Jesus being gone at the beginning of the narrative). In either case, the oral iconography is clear: Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. This was Luther's interpretation.

The story has all the marks of a theophany. The glory of God is reflected in Jesus as it was (is) in Moses and Elijah. They are on a mountain top just as Moses and Elijah were on the mountain top. The cloud is the Shekinah of God's glory. This event confirms Jesus as the Son of God. The voice is heard as at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son…"

Pastoral Reflection

Once, a friend invited me to run a 200-mile race, with a team. It was called the Hood-to-Coast. We started on Mt. Hood, the tallest mountain in Oregon (11,000 feet), above the tree-line, above the clouds. The view is incredible, it inspires awe. When was the last time you felt awe? The thing about mountains is the perspective you get. You can see for miles. You see how little you are. You think about yourself and about things differently when you're on the mountaintop. It's both exhilarating and terrifying.

Mount Tabor, looming above the

Jezreel Valley, is where some people imagine the Transfiguration. There is a church there on the ridge, called the Church of the Transfiguration. Under it lie the remains of a very old church. We do not know how old exactly. One writer mentions seeing three basilicas there in 570 A.D. Jezreel is where Elijah fought the prophets of Baal and where Jesus was raised as a child. Why this mountain? This valley? The view? The sense of history? A sense of perspective?

Others place the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon, further to the north, which is nearly 10,000 feet in altitude. Mount Hermon is now a well-known Israeli ski resort attracting thousands every year. Why do they go? Could it be the exhilaration and perspective one gets on the mountaintop?

Moses had his perspective changed on the mountaintop. He went up for forty days and forty nights. He hid in the cleft of the rock as God passed by; he could not behold the brightness of God's glory because it would consume him. On the mountain, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

Elijah also had his perspective and life changed in a mountaintop experience. He traveled forty days and forty nights to get to Mount Horeb, what the Bible calls the Mountain of God, the same mountain where Moses saw the burning bush, the same mountain where Moses received the law on tablets of stone. It was there that Elijah experienced a terrifying storm, with wind that brought down rocks, but God was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After that there was a whisper of silence. And God was in the silence.

Peter's perspective was changed in this mountaintop experience. Jesus just rebuked Peter for not believing that he must suffer and die. Peter is in the dark about Jesus' life and mission, but in this vision he is blinded by the light. He begins to understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. He begins to understand Jesus' prediction of his own crucifixion. He begins to understand Jesus as the future of humanity.

We are invited in Word and Sacrament to climb the mountain and behold the glory of God in the face of Christ, the fulfillment of the law and prophets. May it change your perspective. MWR

Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2012

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

First Reading

Joel precedes Isaiah as a prophet of Judah. Joel lived in the eighth century C.E. during the reign of King Uzziah. We know that Isaiah received his call after that: "In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated upon the throne…" (Isaiah 6:1). Uzziah's time was a golden era for Judah. Wine flowed freely. Flocks and herds abounded. It was a time of material prosperity. Occasionally (always?) in times of prosperity, people can get lazy, overconfident and self-centered. Joel begins with a shot across the bow: "Wake up, you drunkards, and weep…" (Joel 1:5a).

By the time we reach our reading in chapter 2, the rant is in full swing. The prophet proposes a way for a society choking on material wealth to respond. Perhaps we should listen in. "Blow the trumpet. Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn

assembly. Invite young and old, even newlyweds on their honeymoon."

In 2 Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that unlike the false apostles, he does not need letters of recommendation. In fact, his sufferings (in which he dares to boast) speak for themselves. They commend him and his colleagues: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger… having nothing, yet possessing everything. Paul's own austerity is an example. He knows he is not saved by his suffering, but he considers it a confirmation of his calling to share in the sufferings of Christ.

The gospel reading, from the Sermon on the Mount, gives us Jesus' instructions to his followers regarding fasting and prayer, with a preview on almsgiving. Jesus assumes his followers will fast and pray. He does not say, "if you fast," but, "when you fast." Fasting and prayer are assumed staples of the spiritual life in antiquity.

Jesus' warnings are in-line with much of the synoptic tradition. The real danger, the real sin to worry about, is self-righteousness. So when you pray, do not do so in order to be seen by others. A genuine seeking of God in private will bear much fruit. As a show, it puffs up. When you fast, do not go around looking dismal to show off. Wash up and stand up straight so that others do not even know. And when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet. Do not wave that check in others' faces before dramatically dropping it in the offering plate. Let what you do grow out of your faith, not out of a need to look good before others.

Pastoral Reflection

Good news! There is an antidote to our hectic lives: prayer. There is an antidote to gluttony: fasting. There is an antidote to materialism: generosity. These are ways of placing our lives into God's hands.

A younger generation is aching for ancient spiritual practices. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving provide a way to live what we believe. My preaching professor used to write at the bottom of our sermons: "So what?" (Or was it just my sermons?) Yes, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. So what? How then shall we respond to the grace we have received in Christ Jesus? They are saying, "Teach me."

While in seminary, I took a class on spiritual direction at the Josephinum Pontifical College in Columbus, Ohio. The nun teaching the class noticed that we Lutheran students were struggling. "How many of you have been on a 30-day retreat?" We shook our heads. "What classes on prayer and spirituality have you taken?" We shook our heads, "None." "What classes are required?" We shook our heads. "What classes are offered?" I went back and looked. None. I am sure the situation has been remedied. We were as perplexed as the nun. Our training had been in theology and Scriptural exegesis. Aside from daily chapel, we had not been taught the rich Christian traditions of prayer. I went to the seminary bookstore and bought several books on contemplative prayer, set aside some time to try, found a spiritual director, and embarked on a new journey.

Perhaps Lent can be a time to get back to the basics. As Vince Lombardi said, "Gentlemen, this is a football." Lent may be a time to say, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is prayer." We can teach *lectio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio* and *meditatio*. Matthew Fox pointed out in *On Becoming a Magical Mystical Bear,* we learned to pray in our formative years when we were dependent on our parents for everything, so we came to know prayer as asking for stuff. Many people have arrested spiritual development. They never learned to pray as adults.

What might happen in our communities if we were to recommit to teaching basic spiritual practices? What fruit might that bear? How might it change the mood of the congregation? How might it affect congregational decision-making? How might it impact our vision, mission, and core values?

This Lent teach people how to pray. Teach them how to fast. Talk to them about how to give. This Ash Wednesday why not have a local rabbi come and blow the shofar?

"Sound the trumpet. Sanctify a fast. Call a solemn assembly. Invite young and old, even newlyweds on their honeymoon." MWR

First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2012

Genesis 9:8–17
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Peter 3:18–22
Mark 1:9–15

First Reading

Genesis: The Noahic Covenant. The Hebrew readings for Lent B give us a course in covenantal theology. We get to hear the Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, and the promise of a New Covenant. The first Sunday in Lent we begin with the Noahic covenant. God chooses to deal with the problem of sin by wiping out humanity, except for a very few, Noah and his family. And then, as if God has also repented, we get a promise, a covenant, made to Noah in the 600th year of his life: "Never again will I flood the whole earth. I give you, as a sign of this promise, the bow in the clouds."

1 Peter: Noah's salvation prefigures baptism. The epistle passage from 1 Peter picks up on Noah's salvation. In a passage on dealing with suffering, the author contends that under normal circumstances, no one will be persecuted for seeking the common good. But if you do suffer for doing good, you are blessed. Your persecutors will be shamed, especially if you have kept your nose clean. So live an exemplary life, like Christ, who also suffered for doing good, in order to bring you to God. Then, after a short dissertation on Christ preaching to the "spirits in prison," those who did not obey "in former times" (from which "descended to the dead/hell" was derived for the creed), the author states that God's salvation through water and the ark, prefigures baptism.

Mark: The gospels in Lent B begin with Jesus' baptism and temptation, then Peter's confession and rebuke. Lent 3 we get John 2: the Cleansing of the Temple. Lent 4 we hear John 3: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up…" Lent 5 some Greeks come to Jesus (John 12), leaving Jesus to reflect further on his coming passion.

Jesus' baptism brings salvation, with consequences. In the gospel, Jesus is baptized (by John in the Jordan?). That baptism is more than just fire insurance. Salvation is wholeness, completeness, fulfillment. Salvation in a broken world brings implications. Jesus' baptism is a commissioning that drives him into the wilderness for testing, and then into public ministry where he preaches: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Pastoral Reflection

Good news! God has called you in your baptism to be a part of the kingdom breaking into our world!

The covenants are weighty stuff to weave into sermons during Lent. Consider if your congregation is ready to dig deeply into covenantal theology. The covenants are promises God makes, sometimes with strings attached, other times not. Luther said the sacraments were signs of God's promises. The bow in the sky is a sign of God's promise to Noah. My wife's wedding ring is a sign of my promise to her. They are outward signs of an inward grace. Baptism and communion are visible, tangible, sensory signs of God's promises in Christ. For Luther, faith is trusting in God's promises with our whole lives. The sacraments are signs reminding us, encouraging us and empowering us to trust those promises, freeing us to live in good trust. They are the visible Word.

Another angle of vision is to consider Christ's preaching. It has both the indicative and the imperative. The indicative: The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. The imperative: Repent and believe the good news. It is never enough to speak only of what God has done. We must immediately follow it up with what we are to do in response. In the gospels and epistles, the indicative is always followed by an imperative. "Take up your pallet and walk." Or Paul, "Therefore…offer your bodies as a living sacrifice…which is your spiritual worship."

The rainbow is an intriguing image. "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Gen 9:16). The covenant is not just with God and Noah. It is with all humanity, and even the animals (Gen 9:9–10). God makes a covenant with the birds, and every animal that comes out of the ark. Never again…. This is a comforting promise in light of the prophets of Armageddon. It can also be a jumping-off point for discussing care of the earth.

The First Sunday of Lent is always Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness. The shorter Markan version does not mention fasting. It mentions temptation but does not go into detail. For those who take on the spiritual disciplines of Lent—prayer, fasting, and generosity—addressing temptation is essential. Anyone who attempts to deny oneself anything in this society of abundance will encounter temptation. Engaging it in healthy ways is important. It brings comfort to know that even Jesus encountered temptation. If we cannot resist the smaller temptations to deny ourselves, how will we be prepared to resist the larger temptation to be derailed from the ministry to which God has called us? MWR

Second Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2012

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16
Psalm 22:23–31
Romans 4:13–25
Mark 8:31–38

First Reading

Genesis: The Abrahamic Covenant. Last week we read the Noahic covenant. This week we hear God's covenant with Abram now Abraham, age 99: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. Sarai/Sarah also receives a promise, that she will bear a son and give rise to nations. Kings shall come from her. Like the covenant with Noah last week, this covenant also has a sign: Circumcision. Throughout all generations, on the eighth day, all children shall be circumcised, even your slaves, both those born in the house and those purchased. The covenant

is good for the offspring as well. It is an "everlasting" covenant.

Romans: Righteousness by faith has been God's plan all along. Paul puts forth his classic argument—God's promises (salvation) came to Abraham and his offspring, because he believed and trusted God, not because he kept the law. The Mosaic Law would not come around for another half a millennium. Hoping against hope, Abram trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Paul wants the Romans to understand that justification by grace through faith has been God's *modus operandi* all along. The law, Paul says in Galatians, was our babysitter until Christ came.

Mark: Passion Prediction. This reading has parallels in Matthew (16) and Luke (9), but Luke does not report Peter's rebuke. Some early writers suggest that it was precisely because of Peter's confession (which takes place prior to this in all three synoptics) that Jesus can now reveal the mystery of the cross. The Son of Man must undergo "great suffering," then be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise. Peter is shocked, and begins to rebuke Jesus (*epiteeman,* to chide severely). Bede says Peter speaks with the voice of a man who loves…. We can understand his reluctance to accept this jarring new information.

Jesus rebukes back. "Get behind me Satan." Jesus senses that his life and calling are hurling inexorably in this direction. He would probably love to hear nothing more than a word absolving him of this destiny. "Remove this cup from me," will be his prayer in Mark 14. Nevertheless, he is staying focused on divine things, not human things.

What Jesus says next must be of great importance, because it is the same, word-for-word in all three synoptic gospels, with just a couple of unimportant variants: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves [Luke adds "daily"] and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Matthew and Luke omit "and for the sake of the gospel" which Mark has in some early copies like p45. Matthew likes "will find it" over "will save it." Matthew likes "find," as in "seek and you shall find" and stories like finding a coin, or a treasure in a field. For Mark, nothing less than salvation is at stake.

Pastoral Reflection

Faith is not assent to an intellectual proposition. It is trusting God, in life and in death. For Abraham, faith means trusting in God's promises enough to leave home and family and kindred and go wandering about to a place he does not know. It means trusting that his descendants will number like the stars, even when all hope seems lost. Faith is not theoretical; it calls us to act. It calls us to put our lives on the line. Paul understands that faith gives life, and brings us into relationship with the living God in a way that the law can never do. For Paul, Abraham is the model for faith.

Faith may even call us to put our lives on the line. If the highest good is saving my skin, then my life is self-centered rather than God-centered, other-centered. If saving his own skin were the highest good, Bonhoeffer could have stayed in New York at the behest of his American colleagues, and not have risked his neck returning to Nazi Germany to witness to the light. It is to have our minds set on divine things, and not just human things.

It means trusting God enough to do the hard thing, and not always the easy thing.

This reading drives us to ask the question of the congregation: Upon what are our minds set? Truth be told, we have to admit that our minds are set on acquisition of wealth. We want money, comfort, and privilege. In short, we must confess in this season of Lent, our minds are set on the earthly things. What would it look like to set our minds on the things of God? What are the things of God? What are the things of the Spirit?

> *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* (Micah 6:8)

For Paul, the things of the Spirit are spiritual fruits: "…the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control…" (Gal 5:22).

The good news sounds like bad news. In order to find our lives we must lose them. In order to save them, we must give them away. It is a counterintuitive gospel. God saves us, from our self-consuming gluttony. Life is found in self-denial that can only come through trusting God's promises. MWR

Third Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2012

Exodus 20:1–17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18–25
John 2:13–22

First Reading

Exodus: The Mosaic Covenant. The Ten Commandments form the center of the Mosaic Covenant. In all, there are 613 commandments in the Torah, a contract between God and the Israelites. "I brought you out of the land of Israel." Moses was purportedly 80 years old when he ascended Mount Sinai. The Covenant consisted of laws, holiness codes, cleanliness codes, and dietary codes to protect the people and maintain their holiness before God. It also had punishments for those who broke those codes. This is a conditional covenant. "Follow my laws and statutes, and I will go before you and be your rear guard."

1 Corinthians: Gospel foolishness. The message of the cross is utter folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. The idea that we find our lives by losing them, that we save them by giving them away, must seem idiotic to those with a zero-sum view of life. "Eat and drink for tomorrow we die!" "Life is short. Grab all the gusto you can get. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach this unexpected message of Christ crucified. The weakness of God is greater than the strength of humans.

John 2: **The Cleansing of the Temple.** This is one of the few stories that appears in all four canonical gospels. In John's Gospel, the Cleansing of the Temple happens early. Rather than the culmination of his ministry, after his arrival in Jerusalem, rather than being the catalyst for his crucifixion, in John the cleansing sets the tone for his ministry from the outset. It also sets up tension in the plot. Jesus chooses his disciples, turns water into wine at Cana, makes a brief stop in Capernaum, and then heads to Jerusalem for Passover.

In John, Jesus uses a whip, giving this even more force. In the synoptics Jesus says it's written, "My house shall be a house of prayer [for all nations, Mark adds], but you have made it a den of robbers." In

John, Jesus does not mention the "house of prayer," but simply says, "Stop making my Father's house a house of trade." The word here is *oikon emporiou.* You can see the word emporium. One might translate this, "Stop making my Father's house an emporium." The NRSV chooses, "marketplace."

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it." In a play-on-words, Jesus substitutes himself for the Temple, and predicts the resurrection for those with ears to hear.

Pastoral Reflection

Last week we had a crucifixion prediction. This week we have a resurrection prediction. Some see Jesus calling for an end to the temple system. Perhaps so, but do not miss the economic reforms implied here. Jesus is a reformer, like Nehemiah driving out Eliashib's grandson and turning over Tobiah's furniture for leasing out the Temple storeroom (Nehemiah 13). Jesus is unhappy with what the Temple has become, an emporium. His anger is righteous indignation. Luther's anger at the sale of indulgences comes to mind. It bothered him that Rome was being built on the backs of the poor, by the sale of forgiveness.

As an *ecclesiam semper reformandum* we are called to evaluate and critique our religious systems, which can easily become so mired in the economic realities of resourcing organizations that they lose their primary purpose. This is as true of congregations as it is of denominations.

There is a deeper meta-message here. For the early church, temple worship eventually became house worship, church worship. A building as God's dwelling place was replaced by Jesus as God's dwelling place. God's locus shifted from a building to a person. Animal sacrifice as a central act of worship (in many religions) was replaced by Jesus as the final sacrifice.

There is a danger of preaching supercessionism here. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that for Paul, faith brings life and salvation that the law cannot. Jesus transforms the water of all our human religious systems to the wine of faith, which is trusting in God's promises. For the gospel writers, Jesus is the new Moses, ushering in a new covenant, not written on stone tablets, but on hearts.

This new covenant finds its strength not in the supremacy of Israel, but in the supremacy of humility and sacrifice. This all is nonsense, of course, by the world's standards of power and privilege, but for those who have discovered in it a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, it is the very power of God.

How might our congregations encounter God through the humility of the cross? Might we not encounter Christ by seeking out those who are suffering most in our world? MWR

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2012

Numbers 21:4–9
Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22
Ephesians 2:1–10
John 3:14–21

First Reading

Numbers 21:4–9: The Serpent Lifted Up—Moses led the people out of slavery into freedom, but they would rather return to the old ways. "We hate this food." So human. The people whine. Scholars call it the murmuring motif, but we know what it is: whining. And so God sends serpents to kill them. The people repent! "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord (and against you, Moses). Help!" So

Moses prays. God instructs him to take a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, so that whoever looks upon it might live.

Ephesians 2:1–10: Grace through Faith—Chapter 2 of the Letter to the Ephesians deals with the transformation the Ephesians have taken. What one believes changes how one lives. Like Peter in the gospel for Lent 2B, the Ephesians were focused on earthly things, and not as concerned with spiritual things. Dead in their sins, they were following the "prince of power of the air." This phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament. Satan is not in hell (a word that never appears in this letter), but in the space between earth and heaven. Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." Paul tells the Ephesians that following the prince of power of the air leads to becoming children of wrath.

In contrast, God, rich in mercy, loved us when we were at our worst, and made us alive together with Christ. Like Christ, we too are raised up and seated in the heavenly places. God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. This is grace. It is not our own doing. It is a free gift, not by works (*ergon*). Christ has transformed us, and created us for good works.

John 3:14–21: The Son of Man Lifted Up—Just as Moses "lifted up" (*hooposen*) the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be "lifted up," that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Just as the serpent was lifted up for the healing of the Israelites, so Christ, lifted up, will be the healing of the world. God loved the world so much he gave his Son, not to judge/condemn the world, but that it might be saved, that it might not perish.

Judgment comes in another form, that people prefer darkness to the light. Works may not make one righteous, but as Jesus says in various places, you can tell a tree by the fruit that it bears. If the heart is right with God, good works will inevitably come. When the works do come, we cannot take credit for them, because we are naturally selfish. The only explanation for selfish people doing good works is the power of the Spirit transforming us. The whole world can then see that our works are from God.

Pastoral Reflection

One year I found myself reading this Numbers text with just a little too much emotion. What preacher does not *feel* this text? A congregation moves from an inward, survival mentality with a 1950s style of ministry, to an outwardly focused ministry that attracts a postmodern crowd. The pews are full again and the bills are being paid, but the old guard is upset that things are not being done like they used to be done. The troops long for the fleshpots of Egypt. Sigh.

The snakes come, and the people repent. Moses sets up a bronze serpent on a pole, that all who look upon it might be healed. This becomes a symbol for the healing profession, the caduceus. What, then, is going on here? Magic? Is this a fall-back to an age of serpent-worship? Hezekiah eventually takes down the pole during his Temple reforms a few hundred years later.

Or is this punitive? A reminder for whiny Israelites? "PEOPLE! REMEMBER THE SNAKES!" My fifth-grade teacher had a huge paddle hanging up in front of the room, that all might look upon it and be healed from their urge to do mischievous things. For nine months I stared at that thing, five days a week. It worked on me—most of the time. So is the serpent law? Or is it gospel, an invitation to healing by placing our trust in a God who is merciful in spite of our whiny, disobedient ways?

For the author of Ephesians, salva-

tion, healing, and wholeness are free gifts. Period. God saves us in spite of ourselves. We are not saved by the law, or by our works. But notice we are, nevertheless, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works. We may not be saved *by* our good works, but we are saved *for* good works. They may not be the cause of salvation, but they are certainly the result. They are an indispensable part of the equation. You can tell a tree by its fruit.

God acts mercifully in the midst of a chaotic world. Can you see it? Christ being lifted up is a metaphor for his crucifixion. A violent world kills its maker. This is *Lord of the Flies.* Gaze upon it, and understand. God responds with mercy and forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Turn the other cheek." "Go the extra mile." "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The resurrection is God's vindication of the way. The death and resurrection of Christ are healing signs for the world. MWR

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 25, 2012

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 51:1–12 or Psalm 119:9–16
Hebrews 5:5–10
John 12:20–33

First Reading

Jeremiah 31:31–34: The new covenant—We went from the Noahic Covenant, to the Abrahamic Covenant to the Mosaic Covenant. After weeks of wading through various covenants, we come to this final week before Passion/Palm Sunday, in which Jeremiah promises a new covenant. The problem with the Mosaic Covenant is that the people could not keep it. Their infidelity is why Judah is in exile in Babylon.

After many harsh words, the prophet delivers a word of hope. One day a new covenant will come, not like the Mosaic Covenant. "I will write the law on their hearts." All will know the Lord. Their sins will be remembered no more. The days are coming, says the Lord.

Hebrews 5:5–10: Jesus is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek (*malchi zedek,* "my king is righteousness") is mentioned in Genesis 14. He is the King of Salem and a priest of "God most high" who blesses Abraham. Melchizedek is also mentioned in Psalm 110 ("The Lord said to my Lord" psalm). Melchizedek is mentioned several times in Hebrews. In the author of Hebrews' cryptic theology, this probably is a way of saying that Jesus is now the high priest. The Temple is no longer necessary. In some ways, this is a similar message to the Cleansing of the Temple in John 2 (Lent 3B).

The theology is complex. Jesus "learned obedience through suffering." This is likely encouragement to a church that is under persecution. Christ's followers are to learn obedience through suffering as Christ did.

John 12:20–33: Greeks want to see Jesus. Some Greeks wish to see Jesus. Jesus has already said he has other sheep "not of this fold." The mission to the Gentiles is in full swing long before John writes his gospel.

For the first part of the gospel, Jesus has been saying his hour has not yet come. Remember the Wedding at Cana, "Woman, why are you involving me?… My hour has not yet come." Well, after the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11, the decision to kill Jesus is made. Jesus ignores Philip and the Greeks, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Discursus: Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone. If it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate it will keep it. Jesus is now to be glorified, to be lifted up, hearkening back to John 3 of last week.

Pastoral Reflection

This passage touches upon something that we have seen several times during Lent, the mystery of the cross: The only way to find life is to lose it. "Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up." "If any would follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." "The cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The preacher must know his or her community well to find creative ways to convey this counterintuitive message with conviction. The power of God is most perfect in our weakness. Life grows when we let it go.

The Greeks wanting to see Jesus gives an excellent opportunity to preach a message of witness. People may be turned off with the church, but they are still very, very interested in Jesus. If we show that we are more interested in people's spiritual lives than the instructional survival of our religious clubs, we still have the ability to see the power of the gospel at work in the lives of seekers.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be lifted up. Jesus approaches his "hour" with open fear, and also resignation. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (12:27). This could be a model of how we as Christians might approach death. It is natural to be worried, but as a people of the resurrection, confident of God's saving grace, we know that our lives are in God's hands.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). Though it is homiletical allegory, the preacher might ask the congregation to consider the ways in which Christ is being lifted up in their community. Is Christ lifted up in our speech? In our lives? Is the Son of Man being lifted up in our congregation's presence in the community? When people talk about our congregation what do they say? What do they see? How are we known? How is Christ known through us? The good news here is that when Christ is lifted up, people will be drawn to him. MWR

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