

# 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](http://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 that 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 hordes 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 "oyvey" 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

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**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.

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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.

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.”