

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

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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.

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**

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.

- 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

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!