

Gospel By Heart

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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 Radosevich 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

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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.

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.