

introduction

When I was in the fifth grade, one of the first chapters in the book for our religion class focused on the cross. Our assignment was to write an essay about Jesus' death on the cross. As part of my essay, I included quotations from the Passions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, stories that had affected me greatly when I'd heard them in church during Holy Week. When December rolled around, we were given an end-of-semester opportunity for extra credit. I decided to do the same exercise with the Christmas stories from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In alarm, I told the teacher that our classroom's Bibles were *missing* Mark and John's Christmas stories! Not only that, but Matthew and Luke were almost completely different—we obviously needed to replace our Bibles with correct ones!

I was sent to the pastor to have my concerns addressed. Luckily, he was able to explain gently to me that the Gospels aren't written like newspapers, merely recounting things that had happened to Jesus, but they are four different ways to get to know Jesus. He also was able to guide me into understanding that it had been the earlier assignment that semester—the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus—that was truly at the heart of the Christian faith and that it was, in that way, the real starting point of the gospel story.

So, like any other fifth grader, I decided to read all four Gospels straight through during Christmas vacation and then—the following year—the entire Bible. That exercise generated many more questions—and many more visits with the pastor! (Incidentally, if you read five chapters of the Bible each day, you can get through the whole Bible in a calendar year; I did the math.)

I don't tell this story to illustrate what sort of child scriptural savant I was, but rather to share how fortunate I was to be encouraged at that time to get to know Jesus better by a deeper exploration of the Gospels, and of the Bible as a whole. That experience has stayed with me throughout the years as I continue to cycle through the three years of the Roman Catholic *Lectionary*

for Mass, re-read the whole Bible, and teach scripture occasionally along the way. These experiences were also responsible for this book's predecessor, *Everyday Psalms*.

Like *Everyday Psalms*, this book began as a spiritual discipline for the great ninety days of the Lent and Easter seasons. Fortunately, there are just fewer than ninety total chapters in the four Gospels, which led to the "chapter a day" approach in which I selected one verse from the chapter (not an easy task—there's a *lot* packed into each chapter!), reflected on the verse for a bit, assigned myself one task for the day that would reinforce the lesson of that verse, and said a brief discipleship prayer. As with *Everyday Psalms*, I gravitated toward verses that are not present in the Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass*, or verses from familiar narratives that, in my experience, tend to get overlooked or ignored in scriptural commentaries or preaching.

As these meditations moved from a personal spiritual journal to more concrete form, I wanted to explore further how the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospels was related to the life and ministry of Israel's prophets. Christians usually think of Jesus as being the fulfillment of the prophets—and he certainly is—but since my journey was focused on discipleship, it became clearer and clearer to me how much Jesus and the evangelists were heirs, perhaps even disciples, of Israel's prophets. I followed the architectural tradition (perhaps its best known example is in the cathedral at Chartres) of the evangelists standing on the shoulders of Israel's four major prophets. Both the public ministry of Jesus and the evangelists' portrayals of it owe much of their vision to the heritage of the prophets.

Rather than read each Gospel straight through (as I did in grade school, and have done a number of times since then), I took a different approach this time, reading across the chapters of each: I would read the first chapter of each of the four Gospels, then the second chapters, and so on. This gave me an interesting additional perspective, as the different structures of the Gospels

and their varying lengths led to unexpected convergences and divergences in the telling of the story. Since I began this exercise on Ash Wednesday, this also meant that I was reading the Passion narratives in the middle of the Easter season, another way to reflect on the profound relationship between the Passion and the Resurrection. I also received the blessing of ending with Matthew's farewell scene on Pentecost Sunday.

While it was not my intent to make a separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, I did find myself most often referring to Jesus by that name. It is the name that his family, friends, and followers used and knew him by as they tried to come to understand, day by day, what it means to know him and to be a disciple of his, and how the reign of God was being revealed to them through his life and ministry. In some places I do refer to Jesus and God, or Christ and God. This is not any sort of denial of Jesus' divinity or place in the Trinity, but emerges from a way that the evangelists and Saint Paul themselves use this sort of vocabulary.

Like all of us, I continue to walk my imperfect, stumbling way of discipleship, striving to follow the Lord Jesus as best I can. Reflecting on the Gospels in the manner presented in this book has deepened my awareness of the call to and demands of discipleship. I've come to know that the life of faith and all of life is enriched and empowered by growing in the grace of Jesus Christ through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Alan Hommerding
Pentecost Sunday 2010

FOLLOWING JESUS WITH MATTHEW JESUS THE TEACHER

Often referred to as the “Jewish” Gospel, Matthew quite frequently places Yeshua bar Yussef (Jesus, the son of Joseph, as he would have been known) in the role of Rabbi/Teacher. The Jewish heritage of Jesus can lead us to know our own rich legacy from Judaism. Jesus as Rabbi or Teacher calls us back to the dynamic, intimate relationship we must have with God, as he instructs, guides, challenges, affirms, and “schools” us in discipleship. Then we can also be named and known as “_____ bat Yeshua” or “_____ bar Yeshua”—a true disciple who is daughter or son of Jesus.

PRAYER

.....
Teach me, O Lord,
to honor the rich heritage of my faith;
teach me, O Lord,
so that I may show others the way of your
Spirit and truth.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will make a dedicated effort to be a guide or teacher for someone seeking to follow Jesus.

In what ways, even seemingly small ones, can I be a “teacher” for another Christian? Could this happen in an unexpected way or an unusual place or time? Who do I not think of as a teacher, to my own detriment?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
(Isaiah 50:4)

MATTHEW 1:5

. . . and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab.

“God is in the details,” the saying goes. This genealogical mention of Rahab—a Gentile prostitute (see Joshua 2)—in Jesus’ ancestry is precisely such a God-filled detail. She is not such an odd ancestor for him who spent much of his time proclaiming the reign of God to all kind of “outsiders,” including prostitutes. The whole story of Christian scripture is made up of those who seemed atypical for God’s great spiritual work: a peasant couple from a little town, their son who was killed like a common criminal, the unemployed fishermen huddled afraid in an upper room. Nobody is too weak or odd or unexpected to be an essential part of God’s plan.

PRAYER

You call us each by name, O God.
When I think I am too lowly,
unlikely to make a difference,
help me know that your grace
is what makes me your chosen servant.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will reconsider someone I thought could not be a follower of Christ.

Do I make quick, too-frequent judgments about who can and cannot be a disciple? Are these judgments based on my own biases, fears, or prejudices? Do I make these judgments about myself?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,
and my blessing on your offspring.
(Isaiah 44:3)

FOLLOWING JESUS WITH MARK JESUS, HEAVEN'S HUMAN FACE

We know that all four Gospels present Jesus as truly human, but there are some small yet significant ways in which Mark's portrait of him can be said to be the most "human" of them. There is a bluntness in Jesus' speech in Mark that occasionally gets softened by the other evangelists. Jesus is more often impatient or frustrated with the slowness of the disciples to understand what he's trying to do and say. While it is tempting to think that this is a shortcoming in Mark's portrayal of Jesus, it can also be viewed as a strength, a way of honoring his full and true humanity along with his divinity. We can take comfort that his humanity is also a source of his great loving kindness.

PRAYER

.....
Jesus, my friend and brother,
you know my human heart;
I know that you love me.
Be patient with me;
guide me to life with you
in heaven forever.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will honor the fullness of my own humanity as a follower of Jesus.

Do I sometimes think that Jesus doesn't understand my human weaknesses? Am I tempted to focus only on Jesus' divinity? How does this shortchange my life of faith?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.

I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.

(Hosea 11:4)

MARK 1:7

John the baptizer proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

Mark wastes no time in chapter one: we encounter John the Baptist, Jesus is baptized and tempted, calls disciples, teaches in synagogues, and works miraculous healings. Beginning with John the Baptist, everyone in this chapter knows their appropriate relationship to Jesus: disciples follow, unclean spirits convulse, a leper pleads for healing. Important for us, then, is the awareness of our multi-faceted relationship with Jesus. He is more powerful than we, yet we have been filled with his power by baptism; we are followers of his, but also walk by his side. Awareness of the many aspects of our deep, loving relationship to Jesus will enrich our discipleship.

PRAYER

Empower me, my Lord,
to know you and love you
more deeply, more fully;
I call on your name,
I follow you
so that I may lead others to you.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will focus on one relationship with Jesus I have neglected. Do I concentrate only on one or a few of the aspects of my discipleship? How is exploring some others a sign of truly loving Jesus?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

“Therefore I am surely going to teach them, this time I am going to teach them my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the LORD.”
(Jeremiah 16:21)

FOLLOWING JESUS WITH LUKE JESUS, SENT BY THE SPIRIT

Luke is the evangelist who mentions the Holy Spirit and articulates the work of the Holy Spirit most often, both in his Gospel and in Acts of the Apostles. In the story of Jesus' birth, not only is his mother, Mary, filled with the Spirit, but all those who appear in these stories—Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon—are under the Spirit's power as well. While Jesus manifests little of the behavior we often associate with the Spirit's presence—ecstatic speech, for instance—the steadfastness of his mission is a certain indicator of the ongoing power of the Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus announces early in his public ministry. Day by day, may we be able to announce the same Spirit upon us.

PRAYER

.....
In you, Lord Jesus, I see the Spirit
at work in my life:

the Spirit of life in my birth
the Spirit of grace in my baptism
the Spirit of power in my witness
the Spirit of your glad tidings
of salvation.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will know the Spirit's presence in my dedication to the gospel.

Do I think only external displays are signs of the Spirit at work? In what other, less visible ways might the Spirit want others to see Jesus in me?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God.
(Ezekiel 39:29)

LUKE 1:19

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”

Gabriel's a busy angel. Though he appears in both testaments of the Bible, he's named more often and is more active in the sacred literature written between the two (but not included in the Bible). Muslims also believe that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammed through Gabriel, and Baha'i holds him to be the very manifestation of the Divine Spirit on earth. It is appropriate that this hard-working messenger of God—an agent of God's strength (which is what his name means) made known on earth—would be the one to bring Mary her good news. In his own ministry, Jesus was also a very busy messenger of the reign of God being manifested and revealed everywhere.

PRAYER

.....
I stand before you, O God,
ready to serve as your messenger.
Send me, as you sent your Son,
to speak good news of salvation
everywhere, to everyone.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will step up my activity as a messenger of God's good news. Am I a busy or lazy messenger? Do I excuse myself because I am not an archangel?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
(Isaiah 52:7)

FOLLOWING JESUS WITH JOHN JESUS, THE DIVINE WORD

We have to consider all the ways that Jesus “speaks” in John’s Gospel, as God’s very Word in human flesh. Some of those ways aren’t verbal; after all, the Gospel tells us that the Word took on our mortal flesh and came to “live among us” and not merely “talk at us.” Even though there are many lengthy discourses in John’s Gospel in which Jesus speaks more explicitly about who he is (more than in the other Gospels), this is balanced by the importance of the signs that Jesus works. As in all the Gospels, the ultimate sign of God’s loving, faithful Word in Jesus is his passion, death, and resurrection. The ongoing sign of the Word living among us is the gift of the Holy Spirit breathed upon the church by the Word.

PRAYER

.....
Breathe on me, Word of God;
fill me with your Spirit
so that I will proclaim your name
and your Good News
in my every thought, word, and deed.

LIVING THE PRAYER

*Today I will “speak” God’s word non-verbally, in my actions.
How can I proclaim the gospel without using words? Do I talk about the deeds my faith leads me to do, or do I just do them in quiet faithfulness?*

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
(Micah 4:2)

JOHN 1:29

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

This is a “sneak preview” into the culmination of the work of Jesus. Unlike the other Gospels, Jesus’ final meal with his followers in John does not take place on Passover, but the night before, when the Passover lambs were killed. Those unblemished, first-born lambs were a remembrance of the angel of death passing over the children of Israel. As with those lambs, death will not pass over Jesus; his death, however, frees us from sin and eternal death. As we have progressed in discipleship, we have probably discerned events in our lives that later came to fulfillment in our readiness to sacrifice ourselves.

PRAYER

.....
Your will is revealed
in my life, O God.
Let me surrender myself,
always ready to
make the sacrifices
to which you may call me.

LIVING THE PRAYER

Today I will discern how God has led my life, especially in sacrifices I’ve had to make.
What early events in my life turned out to be God’s will?
Which did I think were God’s will, but actually were not?

THE GOSPEL VISION OF THE PROPHETS

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

(Isaiah 53:7)