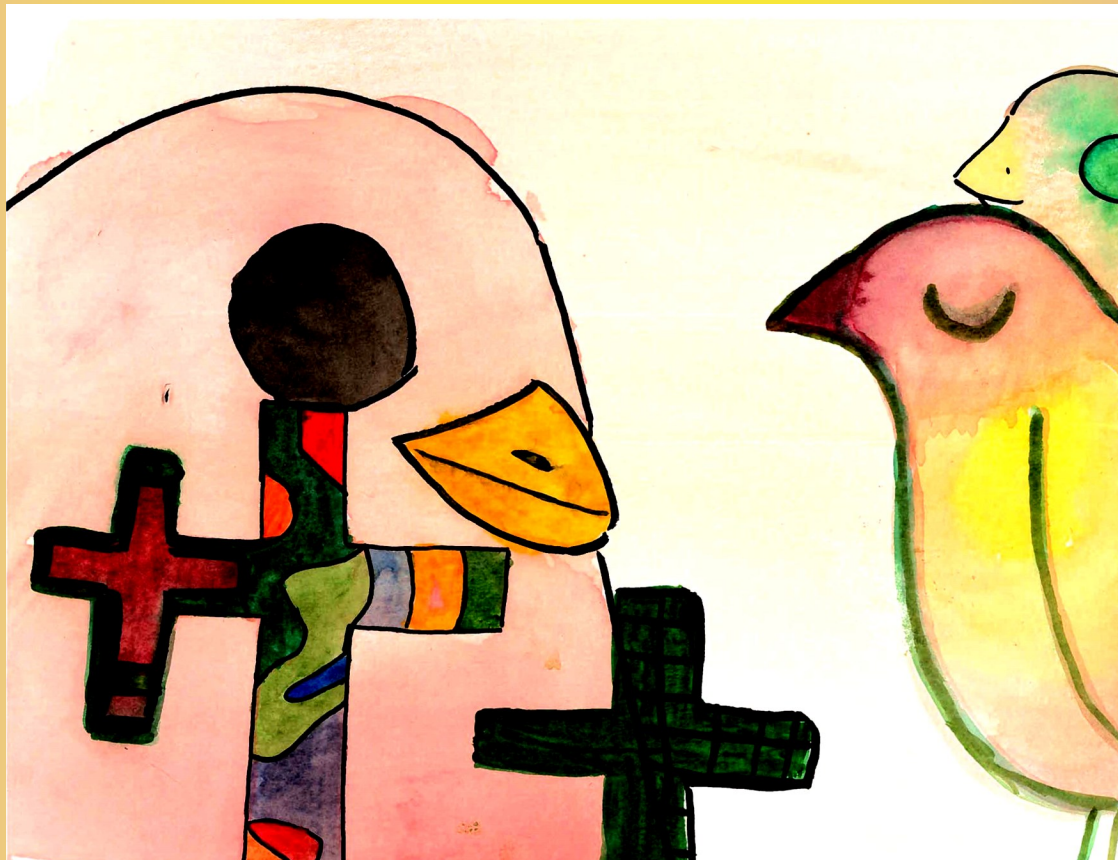


# **RHYTHMS OF THE GOD-LIFE**

**THE GOSPEL OF MARK THROUGH  
PARAPHRASE, POETRY, AND PRAYER**



**BRAD MUNROE**

# Rhythms of the God-Life

## General Introduction

*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”*

*Proust*

### Encountering the Word

The little boy tugged on his father’s pant leg. The father bent down and his son whispered in his ear, “Daddy, why does Mrs. Smith carry such a big Bible everywhere?”

The father whispered back, “Why don’t you ask her.”

Summoning his courage, the boy asked Mrs. Smith about her Bible. With an immediate smile that the boy did not expect, Mrs. Smith replied, “Well I like to read it!”

“But why?” the boy blurted out, much to his father’s embarrassment.

“Because it’s the only book that reads me back,” was her reply.<sup>1</sup>

*Rhythms of the God-Life* is an invitation to dig deeper into God’s Word. *Rhythms* is an “interpretive paraphrase” (about which I will say more below) that invites readers to read with both head and heart, to ponder the ways the Word connects to who you are and whose you are, and to respond to God’s call with actions in both the private and public sphere. Both your interior life of spirit and your public living of truth will be challenged in these pages, for you will encounter Jesus in them.

It is not enough to read Scripture without engaging and encountering the Word. As John Calvin once wrote, “Let not the Word of The Truth flit about in your mind alone but allow it to seep into the deep places, into the very marrow of your soul.” The aphorism that “the Bible is the only book that we read that reads us back” is as true for an interpretive paraphrase as for a traditional translation.

I am a pastor who believes Scripture when it says the Holy Spirit lives within each one of us who calls upon

the name of God and has been baptized according to the Triune name. As such, each of us has living within us a theological seminary of sorts: the Scripture text we are reading or know by heart, the experiences of fidelity and failure with which we have sought to live the Gospel, as well as the great communion of saints we have known and know, whose voices are our companions along the Way of Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is our Counselor who takes all this source material and shapes, forms and transforms us more fully into the image of Christ Jesus.

The above paragraph sounds grandiose. Let me rephrase it in terms of educational theory. I do not believe in the “Banking Model” of education, in which an instructor opens up the student’s brain and deposits facts and information first to be memorized, then to be regurgitated, with the assumption that such methods can be called learning. What we know about the human brain tells us learning is not linear. Instead of a one-way transmission of information, true learning happens as we engage one another in dialogue: back-and-forth, forth-and-back. True learning moves beyond the informational to the transformational.

*Rhythms* seeks transformation. It is comprised of three sections for each passage: an interpretive paraphrase, a poem that interprets and applies the text, and a prayer that applies the text to one’s daily life. Each of these sections intends to engage the reader with information that leads to dialogue. I do not ask you merely to receive my interpretation of the biblical text and its implications for our daily living and life together. I ask you to engage the material with mind and heart and spirit as an active learner.

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<sup>1</sup> This story is of unknown origin. I first heard it told in the 1990’s at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in a continuing

education seminar taught by Tom Long, who at the time was a professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

## Interpretive Paraphrase

What will it look like to be an active learner with *Rhythms*? It starts with interpretive paraphrase, which balances scrupulosity to the Greek text and creativity to modern expressions. *Rhythms* remains rooted in the text and yet gives the text wings, to convey faithfully the Greek text of the New Testament yet do so in a way that invites the reader to see beyond the familiarity of beloved words of Scripture to experience the Word more deeply. This balancing act required choices about what words give precision and clarity for textual understanding, what words invite the reader's imagination to hear the music of Scripture, and when it is necessary to expand on the Greek text in order to convey culture and customs unseen by most modern readers. I will let you, Gentle Reader, be the judge as to whether I have made wise choices.

Early readers of the pages that follow often mistook them for Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, which I took as an extreme compliment. I have endeavored to apply the same scrupulosity to my paraphrase as Dr. Peterson famously applied to *The Message*. Where we differ is that I have taken the liberty to include contextual clues not found in the original, Greek manuscripts but which would have been obvious to the original, 1st century readers and hearers of the text. These contextual clues come from citing the Hebrew Scriptures, Roman laws, and both Roman and Jewish cultural practices. Sometimes the cultural clues are embedded in the paraphrase and other times they are in a footnote.

For instance, in Volume I of the *Rhythms* series I paraphrase the familiar passage, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer them the left also" (Matthew 5:39). I show how this passage assumes cultural practices between Roman soldiers and the oppressed, Jewish populace as follows:

If a Roman soldier backhands you, essentially treating you like a dog, turn your other cheek to him, inviting him to treat you as his equal.

In Volume II of the *Rhythms* series, I provide context in a footnote when Paul references being in prison:

Paul is in and out of prison frequently during his ministry. In the autocratic and oppressive rule of

the Romans, Christian ethics were perceived as seditious. Roman culture was a caste system and like all dictatorships the Romans were suspicious when people from different castes gathered together. The Romans' presumption was that rebellion was being planned. The Romans did not care about Paul's preaching for its religious content (because he was Jewish or participated in a Jewish sect) but because his message led people to challenge the social and legal structures upon which Roman culture was built. Further, the early Christian confession that Jesus is Lord was in direct violation of Roman law and a contradiction to the foundational, political statement of Roman authority that said Caesar is Lord.

The purpose of these interpretive insertions into the paraphrase is to illuminate the Word more fully; however, it is the responsibility of each reader, as one in whom the Holy Spirit lives, to engage my words as an active learner and dialogue partner: Why did I phrase this as I did? What did I see that you did not or missed that you see?

## Poetry

To assist in the work of engaging and encountering the Word, each passage includes a poem and a prayer that reflects upon the passage. Emily Dickinson wrote that poetry helps us see something "slant"<sup>2</sup> and opens us to new perspectives. Dickinson invited her readers to look upon the familiar and see new creation, to move beyond our assumptions to encounter life's mysteries with wonder and awe. To tell something slant has become a metaphor that both connects with the concrete and then amplifies and moves beyond it. The poems in *Rhythms* seek to help readers see God's Word "slant" and use three poetic styles: Haiku, Cinquain, and free verse.

*Haiku* poems have three lines. The first line is five syllables. The second line is seven syllables. The third line is five syllables. Here is an example of a *Haiku* from Romans 8:1-4:

*Jesus on the Cross  
Battle for eternity  
His heart curved outward*

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<sup>2</sup> c.f. Emily Dickinson, *Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant* (1886) and *There's a Certain Slant of Light* (1861).

*Cinquain* poems have five lines. The first line is one word, the second line two words, then three words, four words, but then the fifth line is one word. Here is an example of a *Cinquain* from 1 Corinthians 2:3-16:

Wisdom  
spiritual mystery  
wondering and wandering  
learning The Truth-rhythms anew  
wholeness

Free verse will be a more familiar form for most readers. I use free verse for the majority of passages and seek both to invite insights into the meaning of the text as well as provoke questions about the text. If the poems do not connect for you, I invite you to craft your own poetic response to the Word!

### Prayer

Praying the Word is an ancient spiritual practice combining Scripture and prayer, often called *lectio divina*, which is a Latin phrase meaning “divine reading.” Benedictine *lectio divina* invites a reader to notice where the Spirit draws one’s attention and to remain in that place in meditation on the word, phrase, or verse. Ignatian *lectio divina*, which works well for story passages, invites a reader to imagine yourself present in the event being described. For example, imagine yourself as a disciple watching four men lower their paralyzed friend down through a roof (Mark 2:3-4). What do you see, hear, smell, and notice through your Spirit-guided sacred imagination?

In Volume I, for the Gospels of Matthew and John, I pray using the format of the Prayer of St. Francis. Here is an example from Matthew 5:3:

Lord, make me poor in spirit,  
when too full, let me be poured out,  
when too proud, let me choose humility,  
when grasping for my own sake,  
let me be spent in compassion.  
O Divine Master, may I not so much seek  
to live for my own gain as to love with joyful generosity,  
to trust in my strength as to accept my belovedness,  
to think I know best as to trust you know better.  
For the act of *kenosis*<sup>3</sup> - of emptying - is Jesus’ model,

the giving of self, the Way of the Cross  
that leads to eternal life.

In Mark, Luke, and Acts in Volume I, and continuing with Romans to Revelation in Volume II, the prayers begin, “God, it’s me....” Here is an example from Hebrews 8:1-13:

God, it’s me. I long for certainty: not the kind conveyed by power and privilege, nor that which comes from market success or insurance. No, I long for the certainty that my life is built on that which endures: character and hope and a love that will not let me go. I long for the certainty that my well-being depends not on human choices but upon Divine choosing: I belong to you—body and soul, in life and in death. I am humbled and grateful, that my longing is welcomed by Jesus.

In Matthew and John I chose to mirror the format of the “Prayer of St. Francis.”

Whether through direct address or formatted to mirror St. Francis (aka, my favorite saint), the prayers are written from my personal perspective, as if I am praying. If you do not connect with my personal experience, I invite you to craft your own prayer that speaks from your heart to God.

### God-Language

Writing (and reading) a paraphrase is an opportunity to challenge one’s faith or, at least, explore the spiritual life slant. Though I am absolutely committed to inclusive language when referring to humanity, when speaking of the divine I prefer personal pronouns rather than the repetition of God, as in, “God said that God would bring God’s deliverance.” For me, personal pronouns better communicate that God is relational—the Holy Trinity, Three-in-One! I am personally comfortable speaking of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as saying something like, “God said that he would bring his deliverance.” That’s me: my comfort zone, my customary way of speaking the faith. And that’s okay.

However, as I have participated in small groups with female colleagues and listened to their experience of being excluded by the use of exclusively male expressions of God, I found myself wanting to experiment with the

himself nothing” (NIV) to describe Jesus’ emptying of his divine prerogatives to embrace the form of a servant.

<sup>3</sup> *Kenosis* is a Greek word that means “emptying.” It is used most famously in the New Testament in Philippians 2:7 (c.f. “made

language I use. The Apostle Paul’s ethical guidance in Romans 14 is germane: “charity before freedom.” In *Rhythms* I chose to be cognizant that the way I speak of God may impact my beloved in Jesus in profound ways, for good or ill. Insisting on my personal comfort zone when others are negatively impacted is not okay.

I experimented with several ways to be inclusive with God-language (language about the divine) in early drafts. One experiment I found particularly meaningful personally was to speak of God as *Abba* and *Imma*, which are the Aramaic endearments for Daddy and Mommy. I wondered, as I wrote, how taking turns using *Abba* and *Imma* would affect my experience of the biblical text as Word of God. I wondered how my commitment to using personal pronouns while seeking to honor inclusive expressions of the One we worship as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier might affect me spiritually and ethically. What I discovered is a sense of community with female colleagues that felt sacred and unexpected (I am now chagrined to admit). I liked this fresh expression for speaking of God; therefore, you will find *Abba* and *Imma* but only used in one letter each.

Why only once?

In sharing *Rhythms* in written form and through teaching workshops, I discovered that some readers could not move past the prevalence of *Imma*. These readers, who were both male and female, appreciated my efforts to write a fresh expression of God’s Word, but, for them, the use of *Imma* prevented them from embracing the interpretive paraphrase. Having already decided that “charity before freedom” is germane, I adapted my writing and tried another experiment in the following pages.

When using the divine name, I take the Hebrew Bible as inspiration, where God is called *El-Shaddai* (The Truth Almighty) and *El-Elyon* (Lord of Heaven and Earth). In the pages that follow, I call Yahweh by a unique characteristic connected to the theology and spirituality of the particular book or letter.

<b>Book/Letter</b>	<b>Divine Name</b>
Matthew	The Truth
Mark	The Action
Luke	The Compassion
John	The I WILL BE
Acts	The Sender
Romans	Abba
1 Corinthians	The Unity
2 Corinthians	The Reconciliation

<b>Book/Letter</b>	<b>Divine Name</b>
Galatians	The Freedom
Ephesians	The Mystery
Philippians	The Joy
Colossians	Imma
1, 2 Thessalonians	The Hope
1, 2 Timothy & Titus	The Root
Philemon	The Liberator
Hebrews	The Name
James	Sophia
1, 2, 3 Peter	The Sovereign
1, 2, 3 John	The Love
Jude	The Holy
Revelation	The Glory

I am not the first to call Yahweh by a unique characteristic by the way. In Genesis 31:42, God is called “The Fear of Isaac” (Genesis 31:42). If God can be called “The Fear,” why not “The Joy” or “The Glory”? Further, I use “They,” with a capital “T” as God’s pronoun both to convey God’s trinitarian nature and remain gender inclusive.

### Religious Speech

Writing a paraphrase is an opportunity to explore fresh means of expressing faith and life. I use “God-rhythms” and “God-life” because I feel they convey a jazz-like sense of musical harmony appropriate to life with Jesus. I have made other linguistic changes in my attempt to create an environment in which readers might hear God’s Word as a fresh expression and to receive it with insight, imagination, appreciation, and affirmation. For example, the word grace, a word that I dearly love, is paraphrased as “loving-kindness.” Please be assured, O Gentle Reader, that I love the word grace. Not only is it integral to my story of giving my life to Jesus, but *Amazing Grace* is my absolute favorite hymn!

One difficulty of crafting an interpretive paraphrase is that the Bible is so well-known and loved that the temptation is to use well-known and beloved phrases. However, a paraphrase, by definition, seeks to open new pathways into understanding the text by deliberately *not* using well-worn phrases, and this practice may cause readers confusion! To minimize confusion, I want to give you a head start on some of the vocabulary I use, especially of familiar terms:

<b>Traditional Term</b>	<b>Fresh Expression</b>
Christ	the Anointed
church	gathering or the Body
demon	unholy spirit
disciple (individual)	disciplined follower, Devoted
faith	trust
grace	loving-kindness
healed	made whole
holy	set apart
kingdom of God	kin-dom, or rule of sovereign love
Lord	sovereign above Caesar, sovereign above the cosmos, or sovereign above the Body
prophets	truth-tellers
righteousness	right relationship(s)
salvation	becoming whole and complete, becoming our true self
Satan/Devil	Accuser
spirit vs. flesh	true self vs. false self

Readers will note the names of all 1st century Jewish groups have also been modified. My intent is to describe them according to how they function within 1st century Jewish culture yet point to the truth these same characters function within every 21st century Christian church.

<b>Traditional Term</b>	<b>Fresh Expression</b>
antichrists	the Opposers
apostles	sent ones
chief priests	the Rulers
deacons	the Caring
disciples (group)	the Disciplined followers
elders	the Old Ones
false teachers	the Speculators
Herodians	the Collaborators
Pharisees	the Intense
Sadducees	the Elite
Scribes	the Scrupulous

Some of my verbal experiments will work; others will not. Please don't judge the entire manuscript if one or more of these experiments fall flat for you! Instead, continue reading in search of nourishment for your heart, mind, and spirit. I hope you will take a "water off a duck's back" approach to experiments that fall flat. Many of the footnotes compare my word choice to the choices made by English translations or suggest how the Greek text might allow for such an interpretation. (I highly recommend you read the footnotes, especially if you have a question about why I have phrased something in a particular way.)

Do you agree or disagree with the choices I have made? Why or why not? Let the dialogue begin.

# Mark

The Gospel of Mark is both my second and last paraphrase of the New Testament. Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a paraphrase of Mark while on sabbatical in Scotland. It was the early days of the internet, and the then-current versions of external hard drives were expensive. I did not back up my work, except to my computer. I had just completed my work on Mark, so my wife and I took our children into town to celebrate, leaving my laptop in our flat at the University of Edinburgh. Painters came that afternoon, as the fall semester was about to begin. When we returned, my laptop was gone.

I was devastated! I had poured my heart and soul into writing Mark. Months of labor and time away from my family were lost in a moment. I called the police, who dutifully took our report and dusted for fingerprints. I hung posters offering a reward—no questions asked—for the return of my computer. I walked to every pawn shop in Edinburgh over the next three days, reward posters in hand, but to no avail. Distraught, I boarded our plane to return home four days after the theft of my work. The date was September 3, 2001. The world changed irrevocably eight days later.

My sense of loss took on a new perspective after the events of September 11, 2001. My loss of some work paled in the light of the world's shock, the nation's trauma, and the suffering experienced by families of victims and first responders. More urgent work intervened: a prayer vigil to organize, a sermon to prepare, and congregants to assure that God is still God. My week, like that of all pastors that week, focused on how to respond to suffering and brokenness in light of the Good News of Jesus.

The question of how to respond to suffering and brokenness is a key theme in Mark's Gospel. Mark famously begins his Gospel without a birth narrative and, arguably, ends without a resurrection narrative.<sup>4</sup> Mark proclaims the redemptive suffering of Jesus. In the first half of the Gospel, Jesus acts to proclaim and heal, but always with a personal humility that directs honor to God rather

than himself. For example, after healing the leper, Jesus tells him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them." (NRSV) So pronounced is Jesus' tendency to act without seeking acclaim that some scholars speak of his "Messianic Secret" in Mark's Gospel.<sup>5</sup> Jesus' low profile culminates at the end of the first half of the Gospel when he heals a blind man and then tells him, "Do not even go into the village."

This first half of the Gospel climaxes with Peter's confession: "You are the Anointed One!" This is immediately followed by Jesus' stern warning not to tell anyone about his identity. Jesus then begins to teach that the Anointed One must suffer. Three times in the second half of the Gospel, Jesus warns his followers of his impending suffering and death (c.f. 8:31, 10:45, and 14:21, 36). Readers should not be judged for thinking that Jesus seems to be in a hurry to meet his Cross. Then, in the climax of the Gospel, the first (and only) person in the Gospel to give a full confession about Jesus is the Roman soldier who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion. Standing for hours before Jesus' innocent suffering, bearing witness to his love reaching outward and upward, the soldier confessed, "Truly, this man was the Son of God."

Mark's Gospel conveys an urgency that Matthew, Luke, and John do not. Jesus takes action "immediately" (Greek: *amesos*) in Mark as frequently as all the other three Gospels combined. For this reason, in my paraphrase, I use only present tense verbs; they best express Jesus' urgency. Jesus is constantly moving from place to place, acting with haste to heal and embody the rule of Sovereign love. He even seems to hurry when preaching the kin-dom. Mark lacks the extended teaching segments of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Luke's parables, or John's "I Am" discourses. God in Jesus is constantly doing something in Mark, which is why I refer to God as "The Action."

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<sup>4</sup> See notes in chapter 16 that discuss Mark's first and second endings to the Gospel.

<sup>5</sup> c.f. 1:43, 7:36, 8:26, 8:30, 9:9, etc.

Having written a paraphrase of Mark only to suffer a sense of loss upon its theft, I felt uncustomarily reticent about (re)writing Mark. This is why I have concluded the *Rhythms* series with Mark. I held off as long as possible. Then, upon starting this portion of my years-long project, my reticence continued. As I worked my way through

Mark, my reticence dissipated until it finally disappeared. My love of words and of The Action's Word shifted my focus from my loss in Scotland to The Action's continuing, active presence in my life and the life of the world. I learned anew that all suffering is redeemed in Jesus.

## Postscript on the Introduction to Mark

What I call my "reticence" in the introduction above was really a trauma reaction, as trauma can stifle the mind and distort one's emotions. My usual rhythm of evening writing and the joy I discovered through it were absent. I was experiencing a sort of Dark Night of the (Writer's) Soul. So, I tried something new to overcome my reticence: AI.

Having never used AI before, I needed to learn what it was all about. I googled essays, read about its pros and cons, but mostly tried to figure out how to use it effectively. I finally entered the other 26 books in the *Rhythms* series into ChatGPT and asked it to create a work on Mark using the same style, tone, and structure, though I instructed it to use only present-tense verbs. The result was impressive; at first, I couldn't tell the difference between what AI produced and my own writing.

However, wanting to ensure quality, I reviewed every paraphrase, poem, prayer, and charge. Fairly quickly, I noticed significant differences in the poems and prayers. The AI versions used clever, lively speech but wholly lacked personal content. Since I use the poems and prayers to respond with my mind, heart, and spirit to the biblical text, anything lacking personal content—even if clever and lively—is not acceptable. I decided to write the poems and prayers from scratch, though I occasionally included AI-generated phrases to supplement them.

I used AI more in the paraphrases than in the other sections, as the result was remarkably similar to my own writing. Twenty-five years ago, during my sabbatical, I also used present tense verbs for the draft of Mark. My recollection was that I tried then to convey Mark's urgency, though how, specifically, I wrote is but a wisp of a memory. Still, the paraphrases AI crafted were passages I *generally* affirmed. What AI did not replicate was the inclusion of linguistic and cultural references that make the "paraphrase" an "interpretive paraphrase." All of the footnotes and much additional content were added during my editorial review.

I wrote the concluding charges ("Go into the world...") because AI did not match the style or tone I wanted, though I note that AI had less data to simulate, as only in *Matthew* does my previous work have charges. Perhaps AI did not have sufficient material to generate an adequate simulation.

My writer's group and other pastor friends had mixed reactions to the notion of using AI; even more, there was robust debate on the question of whether or not I should alert readers to its use. Those advocating for not acknowledging AI's use argued that acknowledging AI's use might distract the reader from a proper focus on the paraphrases, poems, prayers, and charges found below. Given the source material in my prompt was my own writing, why muddy the waters for readers? God forbid readers either choose not to read *Mark* or constantly wonder about a sentence, "Is it live or is it Memorex?" Those advocating for acknowledging AI's use argued that my readers deserve openness and transparency. The entire *Rhythms* project is predicated on an honest, vulnerable engagement with the Word and Spirit. To not acknowledge "the AI assist" would betray a sacred trust between author and reader.

In the end, I decided to confess. Perhaps it is my Presbyterian soul that requires the joyous knowledge of a cleansed conscience that led me to come clean about using AI. Perhaps I want to share the good news of how AI helped me see the dawn after a dark night. But the reality is more prosaic: AI is a tool about which we must learn. Biblical preachers and teachers use tools every Sunday: commentaries, podcasts, conversations with colleagues, *The Book of Common Worship*. Almost nothing you hear on a Sunday morning is *exclusively* your pastor's original idea, yet *everything* you hear is your pastor's heart, mind, and spirit seeking to share the Good News of Jesus. We may not fully understand this new tool, but we need to, because it's not going anywhere. As with all new tools (from the Guttenberg press to the internet), rather than fear its use, we must learn to use it well—responsibly and ethically.

I pray this postscript has planted seeds for your ongoing reflection and our continuing conversation about how to use this new tool.

## Mark 1:1-8

The beginning—not of a book, but of The Way—the Good News of Jesus, The Action’s Anointed, Their Beloved, Their Embodied. A story that begins not with a birth but with a voice. A story that starts with a drumbeat already mid-march: a truth-teller shouting in the wilderness, the voice echoing off canyon walls. Isaiah said it first:

Prepare the path.

Tear down the power lines.

Level the hills that protect the strong.

Fill the valleys that bury the weak.

Clear the clutter.

Straighten the crooked road.

The kin-dom is drawing near.

This is happening now.

Enter John: Looking like Elijah and sounding like thunder. Not dressed in Prada but in camel hair; not sipping cocktails but foraging locusts and wild honey. He preaches a new justice: Come clean and get wet. Not just ritual but revolution. He doesn’t offer comfort. He doesn’t offer excuses. He offers change, and the people come, from Jerusalem and Judea, the curious and the convicted, lining up to confess and plunge into water. Repentance as protest. Baptism as birth.

But even the preacher knows he’s the warm-up act. "I’m not the One," he says. "Don’t fixate on me. I’m not even worthy to untie his sandals. I dunk in water—he’ll flood you with Spirit." Not purification; power. Not cleansing; consummation. Not rules; resurrection.

*Not in the temple’s hush  
nor behind polished pulpits,  
through desert winds and wild locust breath  
comes the Word.*

*A prophet—dirt under his nails,  
honey on his lips,  
and fire in his belly  
for action and The Action.*

*He cries out:  
Come clean, come honest, come hungry.  
Let the waters drown your delusions  
and raise you into justice.*

*This thunder is no lullaby, but a lion’s roar:  
Turn around! Get ready! Clean house!  
No nursery rhymes here but cannons unleashed,  
a wild voice calling us home.*

*Lose it all  
in this desert place that desiccates hypocrisy:  
Bring not your grudges, nor your credentials,  
not even your neatly folded regrets.*

*The wilderness is the holiest place.  
Where the raw and unruly belong,  
where heaven kisses earth.*

*Out in the wilderness, the path is not easy—  
but it’s straight.  
Let’s go!*

God, it’s me. O Voice who thunders in the stillness, whispers through unlikely mouths, calls from paved places into sacred wilderness—Prepare your way in me. Where I have built barricades, break open a clearing. Where I have valued order over justice, send locusts to consume my pride. Where I seek prestige in your name, wrap me in camel’s hair. Where I long for a tame Messiah, let your wild Spirit upend my life. O Divine Master, may I seek not to find you in certainty but to follow you into mystery, to avoid the desert as to embrace its fire, to wait for someone else to prepare the way as to become that someone. For it is in stepping into wilderness that I encounter your voice, it is in laying down my illusions that I am lifted by your Spirit, it is in becoming less that The Action becomes more.

*Go into the world:* Notice what in your life needs clearing—habits, hurts, assumptions. What might it mean for you to make a path for The Action today—in your home, your community, your heart? Notice. Pray. Act.

## Mark 1:9-13

Jesus comes, not riding clouds or wielding lightning but walking dusty roads from Nazareth. No fanfare, no entourage—just a carpenter with calloused hands and eyes like mercy remembered. He enters the Jordan with the rest. No separation. No spotlight. One of the people. One with the people. He steps into the same

muddy water as sinners, saints, seekers, and skeptics. Not because he needs to be washed but because we need him to wade into our broken lives. And when he comes up from the depths—water still dripping from his eyelashes, river-wind wrapping his skin—the sky cracks open, torn like the Temple curtain will be, as if heaven refuses to keep its distance. And the Spirit? Like a dove, yet also like Breath hovering, heavy with intent, descends, rests, and remains on him. And the Voice speaks:

You are my Beloved.  
I see you.  
I claim you.  
I delight in you.

Before miracles, before ministry, before martyrdom: Belovedness. Then immediately—yes, immediately—the Spirit who blessed him drives him into the wilderness. No time to bask in glory. No crown. No break. No honeymoon. Only beasts and barren silence. Only hunger and heat and the hiss of temptation. Forty days of solitude and struggle. Wild animals watch him, but so do angels. And the angels wait on him. Not to keep him from suffering, but to accompany him in it.

*Dust in his beard,  
Jordan's chill climbing his spine,  
the water swallowed him  
as it swallows us.*

*Crack!  
Sky torn open.  
As if something sacred finally had enough  
of courtesy.*

*"You are mine,"  
comes the Voice—  
blessing not just Jesus  
but anyone who dares the water.*

*Beloved.  
The Word before the work,  
the Name before the call,  
the Blessing before the battle.*

*Then the Spirit  
drove him—  
not led, not nudged—  
a holy shove into the jaws of the wilderness.*

*Blessing does not lead to ease.  
The Spirit does not coddle.  
The Spirit compels.  
Wilderness, here I come.*

God, it's me. You name us before we achieve, you claim us before we prove, you love us before we deserve. Jesus joined us in the baptismal waters not to be cleansed but to wade into solidarity with us. So, I pray: Where the wilderness is lonely, be our companion. Where the wilderness tempts, be our strength. Where the wilderness goes silent, be our song. Where the wilderness asks us who we are, call us Beloved. O Divine Master, may we seek not to escape the wilderness but to be transformed in it, not to avoid testing but to deepen our trust, not to chase blessing but to abide in you. For it is in testing that we are tempered, in being named that we learn whose we are, and in the desert that we discover your love never leaves.

*Go into the world:* Notice what wilderness you are in or being called into. Are you resisting it or accepting it? What voices compete with the truth of your belovedness? What beasts need naming? What angels are near? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 1:14-20**

After John is silenced—arrested, chained, and locked up by the Empire—Jesus steps forward. He doesn't wait for safe conditions or a strategic plan. He walks into Galilee and says, "Now. Now is the time." The *kairos*<sup>6</sup> moment for which prophets<sup>7</sup> have dreamed and poets have wept has arrived. "The kin-dom is crashing in," he declares. "The rule of Sovereign Love is here. At hand. Within reach. Therefore, turn around. Let go. Trust this Good News."

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used is *kairos*, which means the transformational moment (e.g. a nine-months-pregnant woman telling her partner, "It's time!") *Kairos* contrasts with the other Greek word for time, *chronos*, which refers to chronological time.

<sup>7</sup> Ordinarily in the *Rhythms* series, I use the term "truth-teller" to signify the Hebrew prophets. I use the actual word "prophets" here to maintain alliteration for "prophets and poets."

And then—without ceremony or campaign—Jesus strolls along the shoreline. There he sees Simon and Andrew, casting nets into the sea—two brothers in the rhythm of survival. He says nothing of doctrine. Makes no threats of hellfire. But something in his voice—an urgency, a joy, an authority, perhaps an ache—pierces their hearts: “Come. Follow me. I’ll teach you how to fish for people—to cast wide a net of justice, to draw in the forgotten, to haul up the drowning.”

Simon and Andrew drop their nets. No hesitation. No negotiations. They leave their nets—and their income, their identity, their security<sup>8</sup>—to follow the strange man with fire in his voice.

Jesus walks a little farther to where James and John work on their nets, mending what was torn, tending to the damage of yesterday’s work. Tending nets has been their adult life for their entire adult life—the rhythm of drudgery—and they imagined it would always be their future.<sup>9</sup> Then, Jesus calls for them to walk with him into tomorrow. And they leave everything—their work, their wages, even their father in the boat—to follow this new tide.

*The time had come.  
Not the time on a clock,  
but the ache in the soul of a people,  
ready to give birth to God-life among them.*

*The people had waited  
for something to change,  
for someone to dare,  
for hope to arrive.*

*And then it did—hope arrived.  
Not with credentials but calluses.  
Not with a sword but a simple sentence:  
“Come.”*

*Someone dared tell them:  
Drop your nets,  
Leave your boat.  
The tide is turning.*

*Something had changed and was changing.  
He does not ask about beliefs or resume or pedigree,  
only for an open heart, and a willingness*

*to leave the familiar to follow the Way,  
to join a revolution that echoes into eternity.  
to drop our nets—*

*then our assumptions,  
our schedules, and, for heaven’s sake, STOP!  
believing the lie that this is all there ever will be.*

*God, it’s me. Call me away from the life I have created into my true vocation, away from safety and into solidarity, away from habit into holy disruption. When I cling to my nets, when my self-made identity repels even your Spirit, give me courage to confront systems that devalue you, to leave comforts that numb me, to speak out when silence would be safer. Show me anew, O Action, that fishing for success is not as winsome and wonderful as wading with you into the waters of grace.*

*Go into the world...* Notice what nets you are holding—habits, roles, comforts. What might it look like to lay one down today? Where is Jesus calling you to follow him, and what is keeping you from responding?

### **Mark 1:21-28**

Jesus and this gaggle of fishermen go to Capernaum, a fishing village turned front porch for new creation, a town where the Sabbath came with scrolls and silence, and men standing tall behind law-laden traditions. Jesus enters the synagogue—a guest, not an official—and begins to teach. But this is not teaching like the people have ever heard before. It isn’t rehashed tradition or secondhand commentary like the gruel the Scrupulous serve up. It is wise, it’s *real*. Not borrowed, not footnoted, but spoken with the weight of heaven behind it. This is *authority*—a voice rooted in truth deeper than law, a voice that doesn’t echo other men but echoes The Action. It makes the Intense nervous, the people lean forward, and the spirit world trembles. And then—a man in their midst, unclean, possessed, oppressed by something too long ignored—cries out: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” The unholy spirit knows Jesus’ name! And his power.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek text only says they dropped their nets; however, the significance of this act is included to provide context.

<sup>9</sup> This sentence is also not in the Greek text but added to provide context.

Jesus doesn't argue. Doesn't posture. Doesn't perform. He simply says: "Be quiet. Come out of him." And the unholy spirit—unseen—shakes the man. And obeys. Just like that, the unholy spirit leaves. No spectacle. No show. Only liberation. The people are stunned. A new teaching, yes—but more: a new kind of authority. Not controlling, freeing. And word spreads. Fast. Like hope through despairing hearts. Like fire through dry fields. The kind of fire an Empire can't contain.

*It often happens in the sanctuary.  
The broken thing breaks open.  
The hidden thing speaks.  
The silence splits.*

*Jesus—not embarrassed, not evasive—  
faced the unholy spirit straight on.  
Not with rituals, but with a word.  
"Be still. Come out."*

*There's power in naming.  
There's healing in rebuke.  
Where truth shows up, falsehood panics.  
And obeys.*

*"Have you come to destroy us?" evil asks. Yes—  
every chain,  
every torment,  
every lie whispered to weary souls.*

*There is no evil Jesus refuses to confront.  
Even when it's loud.  
Even when it's awkward.  
Even when it's in the middle of worship.*

*Jesus might not have made a good Presbyterian.<sup>10</sup>*

*God, it's me. Speak your truth with authority into the places I have made too quiet, into pulpits too safe, into hearts grown weary with turmoil and division. Speak with your authority to our human spirits too long dominated by the unholy: self-hatred, fear, and the inner Critic whom we've come to call familiar. O Action, may we not so much seek to hold power as to be embraced by your presence, to dominate with*

*doctrine as to set free with compassion, to perform religion as to embody liberation. For your authority loosens the chains of injustice, your presence causes the unholy to obey, your teaching—a yoke<sup>11</sup> whose burden is light—leads us to the only knowledge that makes us whole and complete: love.*

*Go into the world...* Notice what needs naming—in your life, your community, your church. What unholy spirit—fear, shame, despair—is begging to be seen and silenced by love? Where do you shy away from truth-telling? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 1:29–39**

As soon as they leave the synagogue, Jesus and his new companions—Simon, Andrew, James, and John—walk straight into Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law is sick, fever burning her body, life reduced to sweat and silence. They tell Jesus. He doesn't hesitate. He goes to her—no fear of contamination, no avoiding the sickroom. He touches her hand. Raises her up. The fever leaves.

She rises to serve. Not because she is a woman, but because she has been healed—and when you're truly healed, something in you wants to offer yourself. That evening, the whole village shows up. They bring their sick, their possessed, their broken, their exhausted, their wounded and weary. Jesus heals many—so many. He casts out unholy spirits and refuses to let them speak. They know who Jesus is, but he won't let defiled lips define holy purpose.

In the early morning, while it is still dark, Jesus slips away. No announcement. No applause. Just seeking solitude. He goes to pray, to remember who he is apart from the crowd's expectations. Simon and the others hunt him down. "Everyone's looking for you," they say.

But Jesus, unmoved by popularity, replies, "We need to move on to other towns, for this is my purpose: preaching, teaching, healing—always moving, and always faithful to the deeper call."

*He healed her and she reached for others.  
He lifted her up and she filled the table.  
He spoke no sermons—  
only touch, only tenderness, only presence.*

<sup>10</sup> For the record, I love being Presbyterian. But I must confess, nimbleness and embracing the unexpected in worship is not our spiritual gift.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, a rabbi's teaching was colloquially called a "yoke."

*And then, night fell—and with it came  
every ache in the city,  
lined up like shadows,  
each face a question.*

*He touched them, too.  
One by one.  
Name by name.  
Wound by wound.*

*And still he rose—  
before sunrise,  
before applause,  
before the next need could find him.*

*He rose to pray—  
turning away from popularity,  
turning toward the Presence,  
turning toward the dawn of the new creation.*

*It was a today o'clock—time to get going again.*

God, it's me. Healer of fevered bodies and fevered souls, touch us again, touch us anew. Reach into the rooms we've boarded up—where shame burns quietly, where exhaustion hides beneath performance, where we serve not from wholeness but from habit. Teach us what it means to rise and serve without losing ourselves. And when the crowd's hunger becomes a demand, when popularity confuses purpose, when the needs press in like heat—lead us into the stillness where only you remain. For it is in your quiet that we remember who we are, in your touch that we are lifted, in your purpose that we keep moving forward—not to please, but to proclaim.

*Go into the world...* Notice how often you move from *task* to *task* without pausing. What would it take to wake up while it's still, while you're still—not to grind, but to *pray*? Notice where you are serving from. Is it from love or obligation? From healing or habit? Notice. Pray. Act.

## **Mark 1:40–45**

A man covered in leprosy comes to Jesus—not from a distance, not shouting “Unclean! as the law requires<sup>12</sup>—but close, bold, desperate, trembling. “If you want to,” the leper says, “you can make me clean.” And Jesus—moved by something deeper than pity—reaches out his hand and touches him. Touches him! Before the healing. Before the cleansing. Before the return to community, and in so doing makes himself unclean, too.

“I do want to,” Jesus says. “Be clean.” And just like that, the disease disappears. The man is whole again. Jesus tells him—sternly, urgently—“Don't tell anyone. Go to the priest. Let the system certify your healing. Offer what Moses commanded.”<sup>13</sup>

But the man can't contain his joy. How could he? He tells everyone. Everywhere. And so, Jesus can no longer enter towns openly. The healer has become the outsider. And still the people come. From every direction. Hungry for touch. Hungry for hope.

*The man approached the Holy  
not with pride but with desperation,  
willing to ask a question rooted in centuries of silence.*

*“If you want to...”  
as if mercy was a maybe,  
as if healing were a luxury only for the favored.*

*Jesus didn't flinch,  
didn't recoil, didn't hesitate.  
He answered with skin.*

*Jesus reached across the no-go zone of shame.  
He touched skin that had not felt kindness in years.  
He said, “Yes, I want to.”*

*No conditions.  
No penance.  
No prerequisites.*

*Suddenly, the one who lived outside was welcomed—  
while the healer took his place in lonely spaces.  
A holy trade willingly made.*

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<sup>12</sup> The Law required lepers to remain distant from people and warn them away from their presence (c.f., Leviticus 13:46 and Numbers 5:2).

<sup>13</sup> c.f. Leviticus 14:3-7.

God, it's me. I come like the leper—not because I've earned your touch, but because I need it. I carry my own "leprosy"—the shame no one sees, the wounds I dare not name, the exile I've learned to normalize. Touch me before I am whole, before I am worthy, before I believe I am lovable. Touch me in the places I keep hidden from others. O Divine Master, may I not so much seek to hide what is broken as to bring it to you, to tidy myself up as to trust your mercy, to avoid others' messes as to share their exile. For it is in being touched that we are healed, it is in our healing that we are sent, and it is in sharing our story that your love becomes contagious.

*Go into the world...* Notice who in your life has been deemed "untouchable"—by others or by you. What lines of comfort, stigma, or fear are you being invited to cross? Who needs your kindness in their life? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 2:1-12**

Jesus returns to Capernaum—home base for the Good News Liberation Movement—and word spreads fast: He is back. People crowd the house, pressing into doorways, filling the courtyard, straining to hear. While Jesus teaches, four friends carry a man on a mat—paralyzed, silenced by his body's rebellion. They can't get through the crowd. So, the friends climb up to the thatched roof, tear it open like the sky tore open for Jesus at his baptism, and lower him down. Debris falls. Dust scatters. People gasp.

Jesus looks up at the friends, and sees their trust—loud, persistent, irreverent. Then he looks at the man and says: "Child, your sins are forgiven." Not your legs restored. Not your body made whole. Your soul unchained.

Some Scrupulous are present. Jesus' words ruffle their robes. The Scrupulous think, but do not say, "Who does he think he is? Forgiveness is The Action's job."

Jesus, knowing the thoughts no one dares voice, asks: "Why are you stuck in suspicion? What's easier—saying 'your sins are forgiven' or 'get up and walk'? But to show you the Son of Humanity has the authority to free both soul and body..." He turns to the man: "Get up. Pick up your mat. Go home." And the man does. Right there.

In front of everyone. He rises<sup>14</sup> up—experiences a mini-resurrection in his body, shoulders lifted, eyes wide, mat rolled under one arm—and walks out. A holy hush falls over the house. Then awe. Then praise. "We've never seen anything like this."

*Faith with calluses.*

*Hope with a crowbar.*

*Love on a stretcher.*

*The friends didn't wait for permission.*

*Didn't worry about protocol.*

*They broke the roof to get their friend to mercy.*

*Sometimes faith has fingernails.*

*Sometimes love refuses to wait its turn.*

*Sometimes mercy rips through decorum.*

*Jesus did not chastise them*

*for the mess,*

*for the interruption,*

*for the gall.*

*Jesus saw trust*

*in the tear of the thatch,*

*in the stretch of the rope,*

*in the blur of dust and desperation.*

*And then he said—forgiven.*

*Because sometimes*

*what's paralyzed*

*is deeper than legs.*

God, it's me. At our most faithful, we tear off the roof of what is proper and predictable. At our most hopeful, we descend into your presence, even if we come awkward or broken. At our most loving, we come with ropes in our hands—hauling both the ones we love and pieces of ourselves that can no longer move. Only forgiven are we at our most faithful, hopeful, or loving. Forgive what has grown stiff in us—our cynicism, our cold hearts, our silent fears. O Divine Master, may we not so much seek to keep religion tidy as to make space for healing, to preserve the house as to lift the roof,

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<sup>14</sup> The Greek word used is *egiero*, which is the same word that is translated throughout the Gospels and Pauline letters as "resurrection."

to wait for a turn as to make way for the hurting. For it is in audacious faith that others find wholeness, in radical forgiveness that the world is renewed, in lowering our pride that your love lifts us all.

*Go into the world...* Notice who's stuck—by shame, illness, or circumstance. What roofs need tearing off? What part of the mat are you being asked to carry? Where might Jesus be asking you to act not for yourself, but for another's healing? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 2:13-17**

Jesus goes out to the lakeshore again—not to escape, but to teach. Crowds follow him. They always do, for they are still hungry for healing, still clinging to hope. He teaches them, not with distant proclamations but with nearness. As he walks, Jesus sees Levi—a tax collector,<sup>15</sup> a collaborator with the Roman Empire, a traitor in the eyes of his people, a man most people cursed under their breath. Jesus doesn't glare. Doesn't condemn. He simply says: "Follow me." And Levi gets up, leaves the booth, the money, the shame, and follows.

Later, Jesus is at Levi's house, reclining at the table. And who is there? Not the righteous. Not the impressive. But tax collectors: sinners, outsiders, the ones who never get invited unless someone needs a scapegoat. Jesus sits in the middle of them—eating, laughing, speaking like they matter. The Intense see this and whisper loudly: "Why does he eat with people like that?"

Jesus hears. And Jesus answers: "The healthy don't need a doctor. The sick do. I haven't come to call the righteous—but sinners."

*Jesus saw him.*

*Not the role. Not the robe. Not the reputation.*

*Jesus saw Levi.*

*Jesus went to Levi's house.*

*He didn't ask for confession or good works first.*

*He pulled up a chair.*

*Jesus didn't count the tattoos,*

*the debts, the betrayals, the complicated pasts.*

*He counted them in. All of them.*

*And the ones who watched from a distance,  
polishing their piety,  
couldn't stand how grace tasted.*

*But the Table—cluttered with imperfection—  
full of laughter and love, like the kin-dom always is—  
with Jesus in the center, chowing down.*

*Oh, and if you're wondering: Jesus sees you, too.*

God, it's us. You dine where others refuse to sit. Come to our tables. Not the ones we clean up for guests, but the ones scattered with crumbs of regret, cups of resentment, and the unpaid bills of our past. Come anyway. Sit among the unworthy. Sit among us. And when we are tempted to withhold hospitality—to draw lines, to screen the guest list, to decide who's in and who's out—remind us: we were once Levi too.

*Go into the world...* Notice who sits at the edges—at work, at church, in the community. Who eats alone? Who gets whispered about? What might it look like to invite them in, to make space, to sit beside them instead of above them? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 2:18-22**

Some people notice something strange. John's disciples are fasting. The Intense's followers are fasting. But Jesus' disciplined followers are eating. The people ask Jesus a good religious question, "Why don't your people fast like the others?"

Jesus answers with a deeper question: "Can the wedding guests fast while the groom is with them? This is not a funeral. This is a feast." And he doesn't leave it there. "The day will come," he says, "when the groom is taken away. That day will be a day of mourning, a day to begin fasting. But today is a day of joy." Then Jesus offers a riddle for the heart: "No one sews a patch of new cloth on an old coat. The new cloth will shrink, for the new and old are mismatched. The coat will tear worse than before. And no one pours new wine into old, brittle wineskins—the skin will burst, the wine will spill, and both will be lost. New wine needs new skins."

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<sup>15</sup> The next three phrases are not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context, as the phrases describe the common opinion of tax-collectors.

*They came with questions about rules,  
Jesus wasn't looking for religion by the numbers.*

*The people wanted a somber Messiah.  
Jesus spoke of fragile things stretched beyond capacity.*

*You can't mend the world with threadbare theology.  
You can't contain revolution in yesterday's tea setting.*

*The Holy is fermenting something new.  
It needs space.*

*To breathe.  
To stretch.  
To swell.  
To surprise.*

*And those who insist on tight seams will miss  
the burst of joy that can't be stitched to the old.*

God, it's me. You who refuses to shrink your Spirit to fit our tired forms, stretch us. When we cling to the comfort of the old—our rituals, our righteousness, our reasons—unsettle us. When we fast for tradition's sake but not for truth, interrupt us. When your joy comes too wild, too alive, too new—give us hearts that welcome it. O Divine Master, may we not so much seek to patch your gospel onto our assumptions, as to be unraveled and rewoven, not to preserve the wineskin as to pour out the wine. For it is in letting go that your Spirit fills us, it is in stretching that we are made vessels of the new, it is in joy—deep, defiant joy—that we discover your kin-dom has come.

*Go into the world...* Notice the ways you cling to “how it's always been.” Where are you asking new questions but expecting old answers? Where do you long for new faith but hold onto old habits? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 2:23-28**

One Sabbath, Jesus and his disciplined followers are walking through the grainfields. Hungry, they pluck heads of grain as they walk—hands brushing stalks, seeds

cracking open between their fingers. The Intense are watching. Always watching. “That's work!” they accuse. “Why are they doing what's not lawful on the Sabbath?”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus answers the Intense with a story. “Remember David? When he and his soldiers were hungry, he went into The Action's house, took the sacred bread—the bread only priests are supposed to eat—and shared it with his people.”<sup>17</sup> Then Jesus puts this story into a wider context: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Humanity is Sovereign even over the Sabbath.”

*They walked through the fields  
with hunger in their bellies, and  
rhythm in their steps.*

*Every step was watched, every motion measured  
by those who saw piety as performance  
and law as leverage.*

*The pious saw rule-breakers.  
Jesus saw hunger.  
The virtuous saw offense.  
Jesus saw need.*

*Jesus walked through wheat—  
redefining the holy.  
The law was never meant  
to starve the hungry or shame the weary.*

*The Sabbath—a gift—had been turned into  
a gate, a wall, a weapon.  
The Sabbath—always a gift—is not a cage.  
It's a table.*

God, it's me. When rules are weaponized to shame the wounded, speak your truth again: “The Sabbath was made for humanity.” When rest becomes a burden, and religion becomes a chain, remind me of your freedom. O Action, teach me to honor your God-rhythms not by rigidity, but by remembering I am human. May I not so much seek to defend the law as to embody its purpose, to preserve control as to serve compassion, to idolize tradition as to honor your liberating love.

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<sup>16</sup> The accusation is not about picking grain, which is specifically allowed (c.f., Deuteronomy 23:25), but the Intense's interpretation of “keeping the Sabbath holy.”

<sup>17</sup> c.f. 1 Samuel 21:1-5.

*Go into the world...* Notice where you've confused rule-keeping with righteousness. When do you elevate the rule over the person? What laws are you enforcing—on yourself or others that no longer serve love? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 3:1-6**

Jesus enters the synagogue again. There is a man there, hand withered, life limited by something he never chose, forgotten by others but not by Jesus. The Intense and Scrupulous are there too, watching. Not to worship. To accuse. To catch Jesus in the act of healing—on the Sabbath. Jesus sees the man, sees the watchers, too. He calls the man forward: "Come. Stand in the middle." No hiding. No back pew. Jesus makes the brokenness visible. Makes the moment unavoidable. Then he asks all present, "What's lawful on the Sabbath—to do good or to do harm? To save life or to kill?"

Silence. Heavy with fear. Cloaked in self-righteousness. Jesus looks around, eyes on fire—his heart grieving, longing, aching. And, angry at their indifference. Grieved by their hard hearts, Jesus turns to the man and says: "Stretch out your hand." The man stretches out his hand. It is healed—whole. The man walks away restored. The Intense and Scrupulous walk away plotting how to destroy the One who dared to make healing more important than rules.

*Stretch! Hearing the word,  
my mind races with memories:*

*I am ten-years old,  
standing with 30 other kids upon the grass  
Mr. Mohenny taking us through calisthenics.*

*I've never been good at stretching.  
Even in school, swimming and playing water polo,  
touching my toes was an aspirational exercise.*

*I strongly suspect, Jesus' call to stretch  
is not about signing up for a yoga class.*

*Stretch! Hearing the word,  
my mind wonders what I will encounter  
as a clergy observer to Immigration Court.<sup>18</sup>*

*Stretch! Hearing the call,  
my heart opens in vulnerability,  
preparing to accompany suffering with hope.*

*Stretch! Obeying the command (or is it invitation?)  
I act—responding to Jesus, accepting his Word—  
my fears set aside in order to risk becoming whole.*

God, it's me. You call the hurting into the center, not to shame, but to heal. Therefore, may I call those from the margins of invisibility into the holy tension where silence is shattered and mercy speaks. When I am tempted to cling to rules that comfort me and my privilege, soften my heart and take away its fear. When I am called to stretch what shrivels my soul—fear, despair, cynicism—give me courage to fling myself toward your love that I may be made whole. May I stand in the center with the wounded, embody your mercy, and speak peace to the broken.

*Go into the world...* Notice the spaces where you've stayed on the edge. What would it mean for you to stand in the middle—with your wounds, your fears, your story? What might Jesus be asking you to stretch today? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 3:7-12**

Jesus withdraws to the lake—not to escape but because the pressure is mounting. The crowds follow—massive and multiplying—from Galilee and Judea, from Jerusalem and Idumea, east of the Jordan River,<sup>19</sup> and even from the coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>20</sup> They come from everywhere. Hungry. Wounded. Hopeful. Desperate. They have heard what Jesus is doing—how people are being healed, how unholy spirits are cast out, how mercy isn't a rumor but a reality. The crowd swells and surges. Jesus tells his disciplined followers to keep a boat ready so that he won't be crushed. The crowds press in to touch him—just a touch, because power flows from him like breath moves through lungs. Whenever the unholy spirits see him, they fall, writhing, and cry out: "You are the Holy One, the Action's Anointed!" Jesus silences them—not because it isn't true but because it isn't time, not yet the *kairos*. There will be no testimony from torment, no truth from fear.

<sup>18</sup> I wrote this poem two days before participating with an accompaniment team at the Phoenix Immigration Court.

<sup>19</sup> Modern day Jordan, south of the Dead Sea.

<sup>20</sup> Modern day Lebanon.

*A chorus of need, a tidal wave of ache.  
Hope piled on hunger, pain heaped on longing.  
They come with rumors in their pockets  
and desperation on their faces.*

*What should be done?<sup>21</sup>*

*The crowds are met by angry soldiers,  
ordered to feed these masses,  
yet wary, so wary, that amidst the crowd  
lurk gunmen who killed their friends.*

*What could go wrong?<sup>22</sup>*

*Tensions rise as the crowds surge.  
Soldiers, one hand on a bag of flour, the other on a gun,  
eyes darting between crowd and each other.  
A random sound is all it takes for mayhem to erupt.*

*The blame game begins.*

*But even demons cannot stay hidden.  
Even darkness is exposed when light shines.  
The world sees beyond the formal press release.  
True things are spoken even in silence.*

*Israel<sup>21</sup> falls and writhes before the Holy One.*

God, it's me. When the world presses in, when pain comes in multitudes, when the ache is collective—be our center. We come with our own longing, but we are not alone in our desperation. So, when the needs feel overwhelming, remind us we live amidst your beloved community—never alone, always with gifts of companionship and accompaniment just a phone call away. And in the strength we receive through community, may we be a force for good, an instrument of healing, the Voice that calls darkness into the light of your presence.

*Go into the world...* Notice who needs presence, who longs for compassion. Where are you called to silence even a correct confession when it is devoid of love? What power flows through your touch? Notice. Pray. Act.

## **Mark 3:13–19**

Jesus went up the mountain—not to escape the crowd, but to call forth something deeper. He summoned those he wanted. And they came to him—not by résumé, not by reputation, but by relationship. He appointed twelve. Not just to follow, but to be sent. Jesus gave these “Sent Ones”<sup>22</sup> authority, yes—but first he gave them proximity, called to be with him so that he could send them out—to preach, to heal, to cast out unholy spirits, to carry forward the work as co-laborers in the kin-dom. Jesus named them one by one—Simon, to whom he gave the name Peter; James and John, the Sons of Thunder, whose hearts beat like storm clouds; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew; Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus; Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot—who would later betray him. He chose them—all of them. Even the one who would break his heart.

*He climbed the mountain  
not to breathe rare air but to gather the ones  
who would carry breath to others.*

*He called by name:  
not the qualified, not the polished, not the pure.  
Just people.*

*Not the cleanest, not the calmest, nt the safest.  
Just people needing the God-life.*

*He didn't ask for their resumes:  
fishermen, firebrands, taxmen, doubters,  
brothers with thunder in their bones  
(and sometimes between their ears).*

*He called them first to be with him—  
before preaching, before performing miracles.  
To be with: him.*

*Before justice, Jesus.  
Before passion, presence.  
And presence always sends.*

*To whom and for what are you being sent?<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> This poem seeks to convey the trauma and tragedy of the famine in Gaza, during the summer of 2025. Though the poem says, “Israel,” I really mean “the government of Benjamin Netanyahu,” which did not fit the poem’s cadence.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek word *apostoleo* means “to be sent.” “The apostles” are literally “Sent Ones.”

God, it's me. You name us before we are useful, you call us before we are capable—call us anew and keep calling until we answer. When we climb mountains of ambition or self-doubt, meet us with mercy. Remind us that you do not call the perfect, but the present. Teach us to be with you before we rush to do for you. Send us out not with arrogance but with love.

*Go into the world...* Notice the times you are being drawn into being present with Jesus. Where might you be called simply to be *with* Jesus before being sent in Jesus' name? Notice where you are trying to earn your place instead of receiving it. Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 3:20-30**

Jesus returns to the house. The crowd comes again—so thick, so constant, Jesus and his disciplined followers can't even eat. And then his family shows up. They have heard the rumors. "He's gone too far," they think. "He must be unwell, unstable." His family has come to restrain him.

The Scrupulous also come down from Jerusalem—not to stop him, but to accuse him. The Scrupulous don't deny the power. They twist it. "He casts out unholy spirits by the power of the Accuser," they say. "He is a friend to the one who started it all—abuse, betrayal, and corruption."

Jesus looks at the Scrupulous and speaks to them in stories: "How can the Accuser cast out the Accuser? A kin-dom divided against itself cannot stand. I'm not possessed; I'm binding the oppressor. If evil were my lover, evil would be in my bed, not falling at my feet." Jesus keeps going: "No one can pillage a strong person's house without first tying up the owner. And that's what I've done and will continue to do—bind the owner. I'm taking back what's mine." Then, Jesus says something they aren't ready for: "People can be forgiven all kinds of brokenness—every failure, every profanity, even sacrilege. But whoever speaks against the Divine Spirit—who twists The Action's healing into something malicious, who distorts the Spirit's liberation of people from their bondage into guilt and shame and calls it unholy—well, that barricades the heart. Such people put themselves beyond reach." He says this because the Scrupulous are staring mercy in the eye and calling it broken.

*The religious leaders didn't like Jesus!  
Too much mercy.  
Too little caution.  
Too willing to touch the untouchables.*

*Jesus didn't care what they said about him, but do not call mercy evil,  
do not watch compassion at work and call it "woke,"  
do not spit on the Spirit when as she sets people free.*

*Nothing threatens control  
like wild, Spirit-drenched freedom.*

*Nothing blinds the heart  
like seeing shades of gray in a rainbow.*

God, it's me. When we see your holy fire in others and fear we'll get burned, guard our hearts. When our fear clouds our ability to see your freedom, open the eyes of our spirits. When we mistake your wild mercy for unruliness, silence the Accuser in us. Help us notice and then celebrate the Spirit when she colors outside the lines, in the margins, through misfits. Lessen my anxiousness so I feel no need to explain you but revel in the gift of experiencing you, releasing my desire to judge what I don't understand and honoring the mystery—trusting you will reveal yourself when the time is right, and I am ready to receive. For I trust that my wounds heal as I welcome your Spirit, who is beyond my control. Come, Divine Spirit, come!

*Go into the world...* Notice your first reactions to what is unfamiliar. When do you call something "wrong" because it threatens your framework? Where might you be resisting what is holy because it doesn't look like what you expect? Notice also what you label—people, movements, moments. Are your words aligned with the Spirit, or with your fear? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 3:31-35**

Jesus is inside, surrounded by a crowd—still teaching, healing, holding space. Outside, his mother and brothers arrive. They stand at the edges and send someone in to fetch him. The message wends its way through the crowd: "Your family is outside, asking for you." Jesus looks around at those seated near him—saints and sinners and strangers, rascals and rogues and the righteous, both the

curious and the committed—and says something that bends the meaning of kin: “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Then he answers his own question: “Here. These ones. Whoever does The Action’s will, they are my brother, and sister, and mother.” He wasn’t rejecting his family. He was expanding it.

*In a world defined by “us” and “them,”  
where “othering” is now a verb,  
Jesus formed a new circle from the leftovers of society:*

*bloodlines paused,  
birthrights ignored,  
belonging redefined,*

*no gang affiliation matters,  
no clans from Bonnie Scotland,  
no tribal names, only*

*those who listen,  
those who follow,  
those who lean in with trembling yeses.*

*Jesus didn’t tell his mom, “Talk to the hand.”  
Mary and his brothers weren’t dissed, but  
he did open the door to all—*

*both to “us” and to “them” and to “the other.”  
This is how family lives and moves and has its being  
when The Action is your center.*

God, it’s me. You call strangers “sister” and outcasts “brother” and widen our hearts when we draw tight circles around family and loyalty and belonging. As we loosen our grip on ego-driven pursuits, let us draw close to you not by legacy but by love, by listening, by trusting the God-life is the path to peace. Let us be found in the crowd seated close to you, not by blood, but by love, by listening, by doing your will. May we not so much seek to protect what is ours as to share what is yours, to define family by blood as to live it by the Spirit, to demand loyalty as to embody love.

*Go into the world...* Notice who is “outside” the circle today—by birth, by status, by unspoken rules. Where can you stretch out your hand and say, “Here is my brother, my sister, my family”? How might Jesus be inviting you to expand your circle of belonging? Notice. Pray. Act.

## **Mark 4:1–20**

Jesus teaches again by the sea. The crowd is so large that he gets into a boat and sits out on the water while the people gather along the shore. He teaches the people in parables—stories with soul, truth hidden in the soil of everyday life. “Listen!” he says, “A farmer went out to sow seeds.” Some seeds fall on the path—hard, exposed, and the birds come quickly and take the seeds away. Some seeds fall on rocky ground—they spring up fast, but the roots can’t go deep, and when the sun comes out, they wither. Some seeds fall among thorns—they grow, but the thorns grow faster and choke the life out of them. Some seeds fall on good soil—rich, ready, open. These seeds multiply—thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Later, when Jesus is alone with his disciplined followers, they ask him what his parable means. Jesus says, “You’ve been given the mystery of the kingdom—but not everyone sees it. Some look but cannot perceive, some listen but cannot understand.” Then he explains: “The seed is the Word—the invitation to dance the God-rhythms of the God-life. Some hearts are like the path—too hardened. The Word never sinks in. The Accuser snatches it away. Some hearts are rocky soil—excited at first, but shallow. The Word has no root. Trouble scorches the seed before it bears God-life. Some hearts are choked by thorns—anxieties, wealth, distractions. The Word gets smothered in these hearts, can’t breathe with God-breath. But the good soil—that’s where the Word takes root, grows deep, and bears fruit—abundantly.”

*Injured arm from overuse.  
Shoulder aching and hand numb.  
Both forehand and backhand, he gets no distance.  
He can barely grip the sling.*

*Yet on the path and beside it,  
in the ditch and between rows plowed straight,  
he walks and winds up and walks some more,  
only to dribble seed through sun scorched fingers.*

*Wiping sweat from brow, the farmer dribbles seed—  
even where birds circle,  
even where heat scorches,  
even where weeds threaten.*

*Roasting in midday sun, the farmer continues:  
even where bigotry circles,  
even where hate-speech scorches,  
even where fascism threatens.*

*The parable isn't about our hardness of heart, but  
the indefatigable nature of the Action's love:  
Lavish. Reckless. Unrelenting.  
Love never stops, not even for "even wheres."*

God, it's me. Where my heart has become a path trampled by routine, hardened by cynicism—break open the earth. Where I have become shallow—all enthusiasm, no root, dig deep. Where anxiety, greed, or distraction have become thorns that choke the good, prune me. Cultivate me to become good soil, able to receive your Word and respond by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with, O Action, my Sovereign.

*Go into the world...* Notice the soil of your soul today—are you hardened, shallow, distracted, or willing, open and ready? What small seed is The Action sowing? How might you protect it, water it, welcome it?

#### **Mark 4:21-25**

Jesus continues to teach his disciplined followers. He says to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to hide it? Tuck it under a basket or shove it under the bed? Of course not. You set it on a stand. For light seeps through the cracks to shine, it will not be diminished, and everything hidden is meant to be revealed. No secret stays buried forever." Then he says again: "Let anyone with ears to hear—listen." And he adds: "Pay attention to what you hear. The measure you use will be the measure you receive—and more besides. As you open your mind, the more you are filled with wonder. As your heart turns toward the sacred, the more you are overwhelmed with awe. As your spirit welcomes the God-life, the more intimately you experience it. Those who dance God-rhythms will continually learn the flow and beat of the Spirit. Those who resist the God-life will see even what they have slip away."

*Thomas had his Sallie,  
John had his Marilyn,  
Bill had his Monica,  
Donald has his Jeffrey.*

*Serving as both cudgel and clarion,  
secrets unveil as an inevitability,  
sacred spotlight sweeps cobwebs,  
dampening distortions and inspiring holy desire.*

*What secrets lurk in your heart?  
What candle shall convert shadows into clarity?*

*Truth does not tremble in dark corners.  
Light doesn't demand—it invites.*

God, it's me. Teach me the habit of wonder and awe as daily practice. Show me the way of justice, kindness, and humility as the path to becoming my true self. Grant me the discipline to open my mind to your Word, turn my heart toward the sacred, and welcome the God-life into the intimate places of my spirit. O Action, I have ears, and I am listening. I have eyes, and I am looking. I have a voice, and I sing your praise.

*Go into the world...* Notice which lamps you have dimmed out of fear or fatigue. Where is Jesus inviting you to listen more deeply—not just to words but to Spirit, not just to sermons but to your life? Listen closely today—to voices you'd normally ignore, to insights you'd usually resist, to the whisper that says: "Come into the light." Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 4:26-34**

Jesus continued teaching, "The kin-dom of The Action is like this: a person scatters seed on the ground, then goes to sleep—wakes and sleeps again—over and over. All the while, the seed grows and grows, inch by inch. How? No one can say. The earth does the work: first the stalk, then the head, then the whole grain in the head. And when it's ready, the harvest comes."

Then Jesus says, "What can we compare the kin-dom of The Action to? What story helps us see it as it is and perceive all that it can be? It's like a mustard seed—so small, almost nothing. But once planted, the mustard seed grows—not into a tidy garden herb, but into a wild, spreading shrub so large that birds nest in its shade." Jesus tells them so many stories like this—parables full of mystery and movement—as many as his disciplined followers can absorb in a single sitting. And later he tells them even more stories, piling them on, one after the other, until their minds spin with wonder and their hearts are so full they

feel they might burst. Privately, he explains everything to his disciplined followers. He gives them insight—seeds of wisdom for their hearts to tend.

*The kin-dom starts with a whisper, not a shout.  
Not in big and beautiful, but in small and humble.  
Not with thunder, but gentle rain that causes sprouts.*

*The kin-dom is Ms. Vo teaching three generations,  
giggly children who hardly seemed to pay attention,  
until they bring their own kids to Sunday School.*

*The kin-dom is Mr. Trevor filling grocery bags,  
Sneaking in sweets when he sees mom has kids in tow.  
He remembers when he was that kid.*

*The kin-dom stretches, surprises, sprouts wings.  
A prayer no one hears becomes another's blessing.  
Even a little trust casts a holy shadow.*

*This is how it happens,  
while we wait, while we rest, while we let go,  
so The Action can get to work.*

God, it's me. Gardener of grace, plant your kin-dom in me. Remind me that spiritual growth does not depend on my striving but on my receiving from you. So, I pray that your mercy will take root, your peace sprout, and your love bear fruit. Even from the smallest of things, O Action—the overlooked gesture, the hidden yes, the prayer I didn't think would matter—shape, form, and transform me until I learn to dance your God-rhythms in all that I do.

*Go into the world...* Notice the small things today—the tiny efforts, the half-formed prayers, the mustard seeds in your life and others'. What's being planted that you've overlooked? Notice where something is growing—quietly, secretly, surprisingly. Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 4:35-41**

That evening, Jesus says to his followers, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." So, they leave the crowd behind, get into the boat with him just as they are—no gear, no glamour, just trust. Peter, Andrew, and the Thunder Bros, James and John, all experienced boaters, push off from shore. Other boats follow. Suddenly, the wind rises.

A violent storm explodes on the sea. Waves crash over the sides of the boat. It is nearly swamped, and things look dire—really dire.

Meanwhile, Jesus is in the back, head on a cushion, fast asleep—at peace in the chaos. The problem is that the boat is controlled from the back, so Jesus is in the way! Being asleep at the wheel—quite literally—Jesus is going to get everyone killed! His disciplined followers shake him awake. "Teacher," they shout, "don't you care that we're drowning?"

Jesus stands and rebukes the wind: "Peace. Be still." The wind rests. The waves settle. Stillness, like a heavy blanket in winter, drapes itself over the lake. Jesus turns to his disciplined followers and says, "Why are you afraid? Do you still not trust?"

His followers fill with awe—not fear of the storm, but reverence of him. "Who is this guy," they whisper, "that even the wind and sea obey him?"

*Where is Jesus as I scroll social media?  
How dare he sleep amidst this storm?  
Jesus, do you not know? Do you not care?  
Our world is dying!!!*

*Raging without apology,  
the storm continues (as storms do),  
with no power to interrupt its voracious hunger—  
swallowing our certainty and our peace.*

*Turning to Jesus we discover:  
peace is not the absence of waves—  
it is the voice that stills them  
and the trust to listen when that voice speaks.*

*Speak, O Jesus, speak:  
and we will listen,  
that we may sleep and be at rest,  
even if only for a night.*

God, it's me. Speak into our storms. Speak peace when panic rises. Speak calm when control crumbles. Speak trust when our world is rocked, and we think we are going to die. And when we are tempted to believe you have forgotten us, awaken awe and wonder within us. Deepen our ability to know that you got this. You got us. And always will.

*Go into the world...* Notice the storms—inner, outer, and shared. Notice when you are afraid that The Action is sleeping? Notice where peace is already present, just waiting to be spoken aloud? Notice who around you needs someone to help them weather the waves? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 5:1–20**

Jesus and his disciplined followers arrive on the other side of the sea, in the country of the Gerasenes—Gentile land, outsider terri-

tory. As soon as Jesus steps out of the boat, a man comes running from the tombs. He's possessed, shattered, tormented. He lives among the dead, shadowed by tombs. No one can control him anymore—not even with chains, not with guilt or shame either. The townies have tried to restrain him, but he always breaks free—howling night and day, cutting himself with stones, lost in a storm no one can see: real scary stuff. When the man sees Jesus from a distance, he runs toward him—not to harm but to kneel. He falls at Jesus' feet. He screams with a voice not fully his own: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of The Action? Swear you won't torture me!" (Jesus had told the unholy spirit to come out of the guy.)

Jesus asks the unholy spirit, not the man, "What is your name?"

The spirit responds, "I am 600! I am organized and lethal. I am the tip of the spear, the backbone of destruction." The unholy spirits beg not to be cast away. Nearby, there was a large herd of pigs. The unholy spirits plead, "Send us into the pigs." Jesus grants them permission. The spirits leave the man and enter the pigs—the entire herd rushes down the steep bank into the sea and drowns. The herdsmen witness all of this. They run into town to tell what they have seen. The townspeople come to see for themselves. They find the man—clothed, calm, in his right mind—sitting with Jesus. They are afraid. Not of the demons, but of the healing—too much power, too much disruption. They ask each other, "What kind of man has such power?" Then they ask Jesus to leave.

As Jesus steps into the boat to leave, the man who had been freed begs to come with him. But Jesus doesn't need more followers but for the man to be well. He says to the man, "Go home. Tell your people what The Action has done for you—how compassion found you broken and made you whole." And the man does just that. He tells the story all over the Decapolis (the name of

the area that had ten Roman communities on that side of the sea). People are amazed.

*Healing begins when we face the many:  
when social media noise is silenced,  
when the rage machine is unplugged,  
when desire for revenge, so all-consuming,  
transforms into something beautiful.*

*Beautiful the voice when we hear the One,  
that stills the drumbeat of intrusive thoughts,  
that slows the pulse and releases tension,  
that substitutes Legion for Healer,  
allowing God-rhythms to become the Beat.*

*While others diagnose from a distance,  
fearing the change healing brings,  
fretting over calls for restorative justice,  
forgetting the Call  
that summoned them from before Creation.*

*Jesus sends away,  
to let our sanity be our sermon,  
to let our calm be our calling,  
to live the God-life,  
responding to the summons to be the beloved we are.*

God, it's me. When the many around us shout—fear, rage, despair, shame—silence them with your loving embrace. O Action, as your beloved, may we not feel the need to hide our brokenness as to be healed in community, to escape discomfort as to enter holy disruption, to explain away suffering as to hold it in love, to follow you only into safe places as to witness boldly among the broken.

*Go into the world...* Notice those who live on the margins—mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Notice who around you is chained by shame, illness, or isolation? What story of healing have you been given to share? Where are you being sent to carry compassion? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 5:21–43**

Jesus crosses the sea again, and the crowd—thick with need—meets him at the shore. Jairus—big man on campus, a synagogue leader, a man of privilege and position—approaches Jesus and falls at his feet, pleading:

“My little daughter is dying. Please come. Lay your hands on her so that she may live.” Jesus goes with Jairus.

As they go, the crowd presses in. It’s all kind of chaotic. Among the crowd is a woman—unnamed, isolated, unhealed for twelve years, even though she has spent all she has on doctors and only got worse. She has “an issue with blood,” which means she is unclean in the eyes of Torah. And anyone she touches will also be impure. The woman sneaks up behind Jesus, saying to herself, “If I just touch his robe...” She does it! She touches Jesus’ robe. Jesus is now unclean, too. But her bleeding stops. And she knows it—immediately—she is healed, made whole and complete.

Jesus stops, too. “Who touched me?” he asks.

His disciplined followers are confused. “Who isn’t touching you? Everyone’s grabbing at you! Everyone wants a piece of you.”

Jesus keeps looking, keeps waiting. The woman finally comes forward, trembling—she just knows she’s busted, but says to herself that it was worth it. She fesses up, tells the whole truth. And Jesus looks at her, really sees her, and then says, “Daughter, your trust has made you whole. Go in peace. Be well.”

While Jesus is still speaking, people come from Jairus’ house with bad news: “Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher now?”

But Jesus tells them, “Be not afraid. Just trust.” He takes Peter, James, and John with him into the house. Inside, people are weeping and wailing. The grief is raw—after all, she was just a child. Jesus says to the grieving, “She’s not dead. She’s sleeping.” They laugh at him. Jesus kicks them out and only lets her father, mother, and his followers inside. He takes her hand and says, “Talitha koum,” (which is Aramaic for “Little girl, get up”). And she does! She gets up and walks around. It turns out that she’s twelve years old, as many years as the woman had been ill. Everyone is overcome. Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. And then, tenderly: “Get her something to eat.”

*Twelve years of bleeding.*

*Twelve years of living.*

*Two daughters, both beloved.*

*A girl’s death,  
a woman’s trust,  
a crowd’s confusion.*

*One touched the fringe.  
He stopped the march.  
He called her Daughter.*

*One lay dead.  
He spoke her name, held her hand.  
He didn’t shout but whispered. “Little girl, get up.”*

*The holy interrupted.  
The urgent paused.*

*Horizons of hope realign.  
Vistas of eternity unveil.*

*Chronos stops for kairos.  
Time doesn’t rule the One who heals.*

God, it’s me. I live and move and have my being amidst the chaos of crowds—a cacophony of culture wars that seem endless (and which have persisted much longer than 12 years). Help me to see that you are in the midst of these crowds: Christ within culture, Christ against culture, Christ transforming culture, Christ above culture.<sup>23</sup> Grant me the courage to discern when to flow with the crowds and when to plant a flag and say, “This shall not stand.” Grant me the wisdom to perceive where I can see your face among the nameless and hurting, and where you call for me to lift my eyes to your face, where you are seated at the right hand of the Action.<sup>24</sup> Whisper to my spirit that I may hear your voice and not be crushed by grief and despair. Take my hand that I may stand to serve anew.

*Go into the world...* Notice who reaches out silently, afraid, unnoticed. Notice who’s waiting at the edge of death—literal or spiritual. To whom are you being called to stop, speak, or extend a healing hand? To whom might you say, “Talitha koum”? Notice. Pray. Act.

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<sup>23</sup> These are four of the five categories described by H. Richard Niebuhr in his seminal work, *Christ and Culture* (Harper Books: New York, 1951).

<sup>24</sup> c.f. Colossians 3:1.

## Mark 6:1-6

Jesus returns to Nazareth, his hometown, the place where he had learned to walk, to work with wood, to worship The Action, and care for neighbors. His disciplined followers go with him. On the Sabbath, he begins to teach in the synagogue. People are astonished—but then suspicions creep in. “Where did he get all this wisdom?” they ask. “What kind of wisdom is this? How are miracles happening through him?” And then comes the whispering, “Isn’t this the carpenter? Mary’s son? The brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Aren’t his sisters still here?” Familiarity closes their hearts. The hometown folk are offended by Jesus. Not because he failed, but because he dares to rise.

Jesus says, “A truth-teller is honored everywhere except in their hometown, among their relatives, and in their own house.” He does no great wonder in Nazareth, just a few healings. And it’s his turn to be astonished—at their disbelief and hardness of heart.

*They knew his hands,  
calloused from carpentry,  
but couldn’t see the holy in hands that fixed chairs.*

*They knew his face, lined like their own.  
but they couldn’t hear The Action  
in the voice they’d heard shout for his brothers.*

*They couldn’t accept that the carpenter’s son  
was also the Kin-dom’s door.  
Familiarity shaped the God-life into a lifeless blob.*

*They missed him—not because he was too strange,  
but because he was too familiar.*

*They wanted a Messiah with mystery,  
not one with dirt under his nails.*

*The reality is: truth-tellers don’t wear crowns.  
They wear hometown scorn like a second skin.*

*Miracles can be missed by those who have already  
stopped listening and only pretend to see.*

God, it’s me. Forgive me for all the times I have scoffed at something because it lacked pedigree. Forgive me for all the times I have scorned those who serve denominations that don’t require Greek and

Hebrew. Forgive my arrogance that leads me to miss seeing you—in the hyperactive eighth-grade boy, in the sun-drenched older street person, in passions and ideas and practices that are not my own. Give me eyes to see your “God winks” as they occur. Give me ears to hear your “Spirit whispers” that require my stillness to hear. Give me an open heart that accepts rather than questions your “Spirit nudges” that usually show up at inopportune times. Help me get out of my own way so that I might follow the Way of Jesus.

*Go into the world...* Notice how you respond to the familiar—family, coworkers, neighbors. Where have you grown numb to God’s presence? What local prophet have you dismissed because you thought you knew them too well? What miracle might be waiting in the ordinary? Notice. Pray. Act.

## Mark 6:7-13

Jesus calls the Twelve and begins to send them out—two by two—knowing that discomfort shared leads to courage. He gives his Sent Ones authority over unholy spirits and also gives them limits: “Take nothing for the journey—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals, but don’t bring a second coat.” Then he says, “When you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. If any place won’t welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them.”

So, the Sent Ones go out—no “y’all come”—they seek to “go and show” the Good News of the kin-dom. The Sent Ones tell people to turn their lives upside-down and inside-out. They cast out unholy spirits who inflict brokenness on their hosts. They anoint the sick with oil and make them whole, for this is what Jesus had told them to do. And Jesus told them to do it, claiming the authority he had entrusted to them, but without arrogance.

*Beyond those who can do it on their own—  
no friends nor family needed,  
no coaches nor mentors:  
rugged individualism meets self-discipline.*

*It all sounds so lonely.*

*I prefer a partner—someone to share in the struggle,  
iron sharpening iron, giving and receiving  
comfort and courage and resolve.*

*A band of brothers,  
a sisterhood of the traveling pants.<sup>25</sup>  
The kin-dom isn't about lone heroes but community—*

*I and thee becoming a “we,”  
“we” smarter and stronger than “me,”  
oil in our hands, trust in our hearts, walking together.*

*Lonely sucks.*

*God, it's me. Make me a friend in ministry, trustworthy  
and true, someone others can depend on, someone willing  
to be accountable to the mission of serving those in  
need. O Action, send to me friends in ministry; indeed,  
lead me toward the gift of a community with whom  
and through whom we can all serve together: Blessed  
to be a blessing! Then, infuse our holy community with  
a holy compassion for the world, as we go and show the  
Good News of the God-life.*

*Go into the world...* Notice what you are carrying that Jesus  
might be inviting you to leave behind? Notice who you are  
traveling with—spiritually, emotionally, vocationally?  
Notice who helps you walk in trust? To whom are you  
being sent? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 6:14-29**

King Herod hears about Jesus, whose fame is spreading. People are whispering: “It’s John the Baptist, raised from the dead.” “It’s Elijah!” “It’s a new truth-teller like those from the past!” But Herod is troubled. He says, “It’s John, the one I beheaded, come back.”

Before being intrigued by Jesus, Herod had flirted with John the Baptizer. But then things soured between Herod and John. Herod had arrested John—bound him, imprisoned him—because John had told him the truth: “It’s not lawful for you to marry your brother’s wife.”

This is how it went down: Herodias, the wife, hates John for what he says and wants him dead. But Herod, strangely, fears him, for Herod knows John is right with The Action and the common people—even more, Herod knows John is set “holy”—set apart for The Action’s service. So, Herod protects John and even finds much of

what he says interesting, provocative, and compelling. Then comes Herod’s birthday: a banquet, a performance, Herodias’s daughter dancing for the guests. She pleases the king. In front of everyone, Herod, tipsy—probably drunk—from the banquet, makes a reckless vow: “Ask me for anything, up to half my kingdom.”<sup>26</sup>

The girl runs to her mom and inquires what to ask from the king. Mom says, “Say, ‘I want the head of John the Baptist—now, on a platter.’” Herod is distressed. But he had made the promise and would lose face in front of his friends if he backed down. So, Herod sends for the executioner. John is beheaded in prison. Soldiers bring John’s head on a platter and give it to the girl, who gives it to her mother. When John’s followers hear what goes down, they come for the body and lay it in a tomb.

*The king knew the truth and silenced it.  
He feared the man who made  
his heart beat with God-rhythms.*

*The king liked listening but not obeying,  
liked the sound of holiness but not its demands.  
And John’s head served as a side dish to lust and pride.*

*This happens when ego betrays virtue,  
when truth dances too close to power’s insecurity,  
when we deny what we all see:*

*Some kingdoms are built  
on shame, not strength, on silence, not justice.  
But you can’t kill a word once spoken.*

*Truth-tellers’ voices echo upon whispers and coffee chats,  
in sanctuaries and mosques and even media airwaves,  
until Herod meets his match.*

*God, it's me. Give me the courage of John to speak  
truth to power and hope to humility. May my witness  
seek not to protect my reputation, but to guard my  
integrity, to embrace the truth and embody it because  
I follow the way of Jesus. In the face of lust and  
power—and the lust of power—may my words and  
actions do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with  
you,<sup>27</sup> O Action.*

<sup>25</sup> The references here are to a Netflix series and a movie both of which highlight fellowship and camaraderie.

<sup>26</sup> I don’t use my customary word, “kin-dom,” because Herod’s government truly is a hierarchical, patriarchal, monarchical kingdom.

<sup>27</sup> c.f. Micah 6:8.

*Go into the world...* Notice where truth is being silenced—by culture, by power, by fear. What truth-tellers do you seek out and to whom do you listen? What truth must you speak? And what cost are you willing to bear for the sake of faithfulness? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 6:30-44

The Sent Ones return tired but alive with stories. They gather around Jesus and tell him everything they have done and taught. He says, “Let’s chill for a while.” They had been so busy, they hadn’t even had time to eat.

Jesus and his disciplined followers get in a boat and go to a quiet place. But the people see them go and run ahead—a veritable stampede of spiritual thrill seekers—so many of them and from every town. It’s chaos.

When Jesus sees the crowd, his inward self reveals his heart, compassion spilling out like a fountain.<sup>28</sup> The people are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus teaches them—again—and does not stop until the day is nearly over. Then his disciplined followers say to Jesus, “This is a deserted place. It’s late. Send the people away so they can buy food.”

Jesus responds, “You feed them.”

They blink and then protest: “That will cost half a year’s wages!”

Jesus asks, “What do you have? Go look.”

The disciplined followers return with an accounting: “Five loaves, two fish—not much.” Jesus tells his followers to have the people sit down in small groups on the green grass. They’re in the desert, but somehow there’s green grass enough for a vast crowd, as the truth-teller Isaiah had promised.<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus takes the loaves and fish, looks up to heaven, blesses the people and breaks the bread. There are 5,000 men present, not counting women and children. Counting everyone, 12,000 are fed—the new Israel. Everyone eats. All are satisfied. Afterward, twelve baskets full of leftovers remain. The symbolism hugs the new Israel.

*I remember the TV commercial—  
LIFE breakfast cereal.*

*What kid will eat a cereal  
that doesn’t look like a sugar orgy?*

*“You do it!” says a boy. “No, you do it!” says another.  
“I know!” says the first,  
“Let’s get Mikey! He’ll eat anything.”  
But life cannot be outsourced.*

*Jesus asks, “What do you have?”  
Not, “What do you fear? What do you hope?”  
Not, “Do you have enough?” but,  
“What’s in your hands that’s useful for the God-life?”*

*Right here, right now, for the people around you,  
who hunger and thirst for food and drink and, yes,  
who hunger and thirst for righteousness, too.  
What are you doing with the God-life?*

*Life cannot be outsourced.*

*God, it’s me. Make me an instrument of your peace,  
prayed St. Francis. It’s my prayer, too, to be an  
instrument of peace and mercy and justice, which  
sounds pretty lofty, I suppose. So, for today, I’ll set  
my sights lower: Make me a good friend, a kind person,  
a caring presence. Give me opportunities to show up  
for someone in need, to share a story of your love, to  
listen to another’s frustration. O Action, help me to  
notice your Spirit nudges and then act upon them.*

*Go into the world...* Notice hunger in others and within yourself. Who are you being called to feed? What do you already have: love, a word, a meal, a moment? Share what you have, no matter how large or small, and trust that in The Action’s mercy, it will be enough. Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 6:45-56

Right after the meal, Jesus makes his disciplined followers get into the boat and go ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he stays behind to dismiss the crowd. Then Jesus goes up the mountain to pray. Alone, with stillness, with the wind, and with his *Abba*.

When evening comes, the boat is in the middle of the sea, and Jesus is alone on the land. Jesus sees his followers straining at the oars—the wind is against them.

<sup>28</sup> The Greek word used is *splagchnizomai* and is translated as “compassion.” Literally it conveys an image of “spilling one’s innards.” Later writers associated the liver, kidneys, etc. as the seat of affections. In modern English, we often use graphic

colloquialisms to talk about “spilling our guts,” pouring our heart out.”

<sup>29</sup> c.f. Isaiah 35:7-9.

In the early morning hours, he approaches them—walking on the sea. He appears to be just passing by, but this is no ordinary walk. “Pass by” is what The Action did when Moses stood in the cleft of a rock.<sup>30</sup> Now it is Jesus, and he is “passing by,” but his disciplined followers don’t yet understand the metaphor being enacted. They see Jesus and panic, believing he’s a ghost, and cry out in terror—not just one of them but all of them—so afraid.

Immediately, Jesus speaks, “Courage. It is I. Be not afraid.” Then Jesus climbs into the boat. The wind quiets, fierce gale to a gentle breeze in the time it takes for him to sit. His disciplined followers are astounded. They still don’t get it—still don’t understand the metaphor of the 12 loaves, still don’t understand the enacted metaphor, still need their hearts to open a bit more, still not ready to receive all that Jesus has to give them.

Jesus and his followers finish crossing the lake. They land at Gennesaret and moor the boat. As soon as they step ashore, people recognize Jesus and run to him from throughout the whole region, bringing the sick on mats to wherever they hear he is. Villages, towns, fields—wherever he goes, the fearful and desperate lay the hurting before him and beg to touch even the edge of his coat.

Everyone who touches him is made whole.

*Believing...and still with doubts.*

*Loving...and still with flashes of hatred.*

*Trusting...and still filled with fear.*

*Does “still” ever give way to “stillness”?*

*When will I release my fear?*

*When will Fear release me?*

*When will stillness begin to live in me?*

*In stillness, I discover sacred rest in arms that hold,  
a heart ready to be assured,  
a mind accepting mystery.*

*In stillness, I begin to notice:  
fierce gale or gentle breeze share a common source,  
resurrection living amidst crucifixion.*

*In stillness, I begin  
to see, to hear, to understand:  
to notice when the divine passes by.*

*God, it’s me. Wake me up to all the times and all the ways you “pass by” so I may recognize you in my life. Awaken within me a mindfulness that helps me notice your presence in the quiet of the mountain and amidst the roar of the storm. And as I learn to see and hear your footsteps, may I walk the same way and invite others to join me.*

*Go into the world...* Notice where you feel up against the wind. Where are you rowing and getting nowhere? Who is walking toward you even now, disguised by fear? What might you see if your heart opens to the Spirit’s presence? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 7:1-23**

The Intense and some Scrupulous gather around Jesus. They’ve come from Jerusalem. They notice that some of Jesus’ disciplined followers eat with unwashed hands—not according to tradition. (The Intense and many others follow ritual washings: hands, cups, kettles, even dining couches—not for hygiene, but holiness.) So, they ask Jesus, “Why don’t your followers live by the tradition of the elders? Why do they eat with defiled hands?”

Jesus responds: “Isaiah the truth-teller was spot on when he spoke about you:

This people talks a good talk—  
lots of hallelujahs but not a lot of heart.<sup>31</sup>

You ignore The Action’s purpose when you absorb the culture’s practice. You have a fine way of setting aside The Action’s Word in order to keep your customs. For example, Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’<sup>32</sup> but you allow someone to say, ‘Oh, I already pledged my money to The Action,’ and watch as mom or pop suffer. You dissect the Word to the point of desiccation.”

Then Jesus calls the crowd over and says, “Listen up and understand this: Nothing from outside defiles a person. It’s what comes out from within that defiles.”

Later, inside the house, his disciplined followers ask him to explain what he means. They cannot imagine a world in which food shaming is not typical, expected, and considered a moral good. Jesus says to them, “Are you still so dull? Food doesn’t go into the heart—it passes through the body.” (With these words, Jesus declares all foods

<sup>30</sup> C.f. Exodus 33:18-23, where The Action’s *shekinah* glory is partially revealed to Moses as The Action “passes by.”

<sup>31</sup> c.f. Isaiah 29:13.

<sup>32</sup> c.f. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy. 5:16.

clean, which for the disciplined followers was hard to fathom.) Then he says: “What comes out of a person defiles them: evil thoughts, sexual malpractice, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lust, envy, slander, arrogance, foolishness. All of it comes from the inside, from twisted thinking, a shriveled heart, a wheezing spirit, and a soul turned inward upon itself. That’s what defiles a person.”

*The danger isn’t dirty hands—but unexamined hearts.  
Unwashed fruit doesn’t rot the soul but  
bitterness, nurtured in silence, blooms into poison.*

*The wound is not what enters but what festers.  
Holiness isn’t about filters but about roots.  
And the rot begins where we refuse to look.*

*It’s not your plates but your pride.  
It’s not your diet but your disdain.  
It’s not your washing pots but wounding of others.*

*The real unclean is what spills from the soul.  
Jesus sees it all—straight into the heart—  
not to shame, but to make whole.*

God, it’s me. I live and move and practice my faith as one whose tradition’s motto is “Presbyterians do it decently and in good order.” Woe is me! For I am immersed in church polity and responsible for enforcing ecclesiastical rules! How close I am to the fires of purgation! Okay, perhaps that is overstated, yet I know the temptation to be blind to the spirit of the law while seeing its letter 20/20. O Action, help me to keep the main thing the main thing: Your love in our midst reaching into the life of the world. May I avoid placing polity over people.

*Go into the world...* Notice your inner world today. What rises when no one is watching? Where is the Spirit calling for a cleansing that goes deeper than ritual? What kind of fruit is your life producing—and what root is feeding it? Notice. Pray. Act.

## Mark 7:24–30

Jesus gets up and goes to the region of Tyre, which is Gentile territory, allegedly unclean, a place the “good religious folk” believe is filled with vermin. Jesus enters a house and wants no one to know he’s there. Can you blame him? People constantly want something from him. But Jesus can’t stay hidden, not even in the sticks.

A woman comes. She’s Syrophenician<sup>33</sup> by birth—a Gentile outsider. The woman falls at his feet, begging him to cast an unholy spirit out of her daughter. She’s interrogating<sup>34</sup> Jesus! Just badgering him. In a pique Jesus says, “Let the children eat first. It’s not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” which essentially means that his mission is to serve the people of Israel.

The woman is having none of such nonsense. She replies, “Yes, indeed, Sovereign, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She has reminded Jesus of his purpose: to bring healing to people, all people, especially anyone who stands (or kneels) before him.

Jesus smiles<sup>35</sup> at her, chagrined, chastened, and grateful. He sees the woman and says to her, “Because of what you’ve said, go, the unholy spirit has left your daughter.” The woman returns home and finds the child lying peacefully in bed—whole and complete, her true self restored.

*I have suffered the burn, like a slap across the face,  
inflicted not with open palm  
but with open heart.*

*Words that felt like rebuke  
and were, really and truly,  
deserved, scalding my conscience.*

*Like diving into a mountain lake,  
the impact prickles at first,  
skin objecting, cells constricting,  
and then opening to receive.*

*The sting transforms, if received,  
effervescence pulsates throughout,  
spirit now opening—  
remedy radiating, touching heart and mind.*

<sup>33</sup> Modern day Lebanon and Syria.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek word used is *erota*, which means “ask” but from a context of privilege—the woman is presuming or insisting on a positive affirmation from Jesus.

<sup>35</sup> The Greek only indicates that Jesus looks toward the woman when he speaks. The description of his affect is interpretive and speculative.

*I know my brothers  
(some of them)  
resist words of truth,  
refuse the blessing of the sting.*

*Even when words are spoken in love,  
they hear only anger, fury, and wrath.  
Fearing their imminent demise,  
they silence the voice speaking the words.*

*But the only demise is their privilege,  
not their person,  
privilege that needed to go a while ago,  
its rotting corpse having long spoiled.*

*What shall you do, O Brother,  
when invited to dance the God-rhythms of new life?*

God, it's me. Speak to me your truth through voices long neglected: through women and children, through poor and oppressed, even through voices whose grammar or accents mark them as non-native English speakers. Whether the lines be religious or ethnic or gendered, may I welcome as spiritual guides those who cross these lines, for the God-life doesn't obey boundaries. In ways that I need to hear, open me to these voices. Together, shape us into your beloved community, form us into the Body of Christ, and transform us—all of us—for the sake of the transformation of the world.

*Go into the world...* Notice the lines—spoken and unspoken—that divide “insiders” from “outsiders.” Where is mercy needed most? Who is kneeling at your feet, asking for crumbs of compassion? What does bold faith sound like in your neighborhood? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 7:31–37**

Jesus leaves the area of Tyre and heads even farther north, along the Mediterranean coast to Sidon,<sup>36</sup> before circling back to the Sea of Galilee. His trek is about 100 miles, even farther than the 75 miles between Jerusalem and the Sea. He's headed to a Roman area in the region known as the “Ten Cities” or “Decapolis.”

Given his route, Jesus enters this Gentile area from the north rather than from Judea and Jerusalem. His disciplined followers wonder about the circuitous route they take.

Jesus arrives in the Ten Cities. People bring him a man who is deaf and who can barely speak. (It appears traveling incognito hasn't worked.) The people beg Jesus to lay his hand on man. Jesus takes the man aside—away from the crowd. (He's trying to travel incognito and doesn't want an audience.) He touches the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue. It's all quite visceral—the embodied touch of a healer. Then Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs deeply—not in frustration but in deep, holy longing. He says, “*Ephphatha*,” which means “Be opened.” Immediately, in the very instant, the man's ears open, his voice is freed. The man speaks clearly, confidently, joyfully.

Jesus tells the people not to spread the news. (Good luck with that, Jesus.) The more Jesus insists, the more they proclaim it. They are overwhelmed with amazement. How can they not share what they have witnessed with their eyes and ears and hearts? “He has done everything well,” they say. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!”

*Pastor Ann saw the man tapping his foot anxiously,  
as she pulled into the church parking lot.  
She knew her hope for a quiet Monday morning  
had just flown away,  
like one of the crows perched on the telephone wires.*

*Exiting her car, Ann walked toward the church office.  
Ken, a widower in his mid-seventies,  
adrift these past two years since losing Louise,  
met her before she got into the building:  
“Pastor, it's my granddaughter. I need help.”*

*Desperately needing some coffee,  
Ann invited Ken to come into her office,  
where she had him sit across the coffee table from her,  
with the office door slightly ajar,  
as Ken poured out his soul (and his saga).*

*The saga unfolded, as sagas do,  
slowly, in excruciating detail, with plenty of detours.  
All the while, Ann kept her frustration hidden,  
for she had released it into Jesus' hands,*

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<sup>36</sup> Modern Lebanon.

*while she did Jesus' work.  
Ken, finally finished talking,  
and looked down at his feet, as if embarrassed,  
having just vomited anxiety all over the pastor's office.  
Ann allowed the moment to pass,  
then reached across the table to take Ken's hand.*

*Ken will never forget what Ann said when she prayed.  
Ann will never remember exactly what she had said,  
only that she had tried to be present with Ken,  
in the moment and with compassion,  
doing Jesus' work and needing coffee.*

God, it's me. I confess that sometimes I try to take a detour, seek the long way around to avoid a direct engagement with ministry. I feel within myself there are days on which I do not have sufficient "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love" to meet the moment. But moments come (as they do), whether I am ready or not. So, I thank you that I am not alone in doing Jesus' work—you are with me and give me wisdom and courage, patience and perseverance, and the ability to do what I cannot if left to my own resources. Thank you, O Action, that I am not left to my own resources; may I trust you to be the God who provides.

*Go into the world...* Notice what is closed—ears, mouths, hearts—that needs to be opened and set free. Where are you being invited to listen, to speak, or to touch? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 8:1-10**

Another large crowd gathers; this time on Gentile land. These "Foreigners to the Covenant" and "Strangers to The Action's Promises" have nothing to eat. Jesus calls his disciplined followers and says, "I have compassion for these people. They've been with me three days now and have nothing left. If I send them home hungry, they'll collapse, for some have come a long way."

His disciplined followers balk, their mouths dry, as they suspect what's coming. They wonder, "Can Jesus do the same miracle of feeding multitudes among the Gentiles that we just saw among our own people? Should

he do it among them? After all, they are our sworn enemies?"<sup>37</sup> Finally, his followers ask, "How can anyone feed these people here, in such a wilderness?"

Jesus asks, "How many loaves do you have?"

His followers answer, "Seven."

Jesus tells the crowd to sit down. Then he takes the seven loaves, gives thanks, breaks the loaves, and gives them to his followers to distribute. There are also a few small fish. Jesus blesses those, too, and has them handed out. Everyone eats. All are satisfied.

Afterward, there are seven baskets of leftovers. Four-thousand people are fed at The Wilderness Diner. After dinner, Jesus sends them all home and immediately gets into the boat with his disciplined followers. He has places to be and people to see, not to mention make whole and complete. He tells his followers to point the boat toward Dalmanutha—back to Israelite territory.

*Again, the people are hungry.*

*Again, he sees.*

*Again, his heart goes out to them.*

*Not annoyed. Not weary. Just moved.*

*Again, his followers doubt.*

*Again, he asks, "What do you have?"*

*Again, what seems small becomes more than enough.*

*Compassion doesn't keep score.*

*Jesus' heart pulses for the famished.*

*Jesus' love repeats itself over and over.*

*Jesus blesses, breaks, and gives.*

*Oh, that I could persevere with such constancy!*

God, it's me. Give me the stamina to show up—day in and day out, in every season, every year. Show up when tired, when bored, when feeling defeated. Show up when distracted, when doubting, when believing I'm already good enough. O Action, may I reflect the constancy of Jesus' concern, care, and compassion in what I do and when I do it—namely, when my brother or sister is in need.

*Go into the world...* Notice who is hungry—physically, spiritually, emotionally. Where is compassion calling you

<sup>37</sup> The followers' wondering is not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context. The cultural assumption of most Israelites of

the day was that The Action only cared about their own people but not Gentiles.

to stop, to see, to feed? What loaves and fish are already in your hands? Notice. Pray. Act.

**Mark 8:11-21**

The Intense come and begin to argue with Jesus. They demand a sign from heaven as a way to test him. Jesus sighs again, like he did with the man he made whole—deeply, from the soul, with holy longing—and says, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? I tell you the truth: no sign will be given.” He leaves them, gets back into the boat, and crosses to the other side.

The disciplined followers realize they’ve forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf. As they sail, Jesus warns them: “Beware the pernicious influence of both the Intense and Herod. They have different agendas and embrace conflicting principles, yet they conspire together; their whispers are poisonous.”

Jesus’ disciplined followers stammer, confused, “He’s saying this because we forgot the bread?”

Jesus hears their thoughts and says, “Why are you talking about bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and not see? Ears and not hear? Don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for five thousand—how many baskets were left?”

They answer, “Twelve.”

“And the seven loaves for four thousand—how many baskets then?”

“Seven.”

He says, “Do you still not understand?”

*Jesus sighs for the Intense  
as he sighed for the deaf man—  
one broken in body and others broken in soul.*

*The Intense wanted a sign from the sky but  
Ignore the bread in their hands.  
Jesus sighs: not angry but grieved.*

*Miracles get missed when  
minds fixate on scarcity and  
hearts harden with worry.*

*“Remember,” he says.  
“Remember the baskets.  
“Remember the abundance.  
“Remember me.”*

*The God-life is not about getting a sign.*

*It’s recognizing you’re living in one.*

*God, it’s me. Open my eyes and ears, my heart and mind, that I may see the wonder of your blessings all around—in creation and compassion, your abundance and loving-kindness like dew upon the morning grass. I rejoice in daily miracles of your love, shared in bread and cup, received as a Body prepared by you to shine the light of your love into the world.*

*Go into the world... Notice what you’re anxious about. Where are you demanding signs instead of remembering stories? What baskets of blessing have already been gathered in your life? What loaf lies quietly in your boat? Notice. Pray. Act.*

**Mark 8:22-26**

Jesus and his disciplined followers come to Bethsaida. Some people bring a blind man to Jesus and beg him to touch the man. Jesus takes the man by the hand and leads him out of the village (he doesn’t need to make a spectacle). He spits on the man’s eyes and lays his hands on him. Jesus asks the man, “Do you see anything?”

The man looks up and says, “I see people, but they look like trees walking around.”

Jesus again places his hands on the man’s eyes. This time the man’s vision clears. He sees everything plainly. Jesus sends him home and says, “Don’t even go into the village.”

*Healing sometimes comes in layers—  
a pebble in the pond creating circles of transformation.*

*Sometimes the journey into the God-life is a  
spelunking expedition, descending into dark caverns.*

*Sometimes the journey ascends,  
sherpa guides leading the way and carrying the weight.*

*Sometimes all it takes is for a man to spit in your face  
and care enough to make sure it worked.*

*Even our vision of grace may start in shadow  
before sharpening into joy.*

*God, it’s me. I am not who I was. I am not who I will become. I am who my choices and your grace have made*

me—rascal and righteous, a sinner of your saving and saint of your transforming. Deepen my insight into your mysteries. Heighten my appreciation for your blessings. Intensify my desire to live into the calling you have placed upon my life.

*Go into the world...* Notice where your vision is still partial—of others, of yourself, of God. Where is Jesus still working in you? Where is the second touch needed? And who needs a hand to lead them gently out of the village? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 8:27-9:1

Jesus and his disciplined followers walk toward the villages around Caesarea Philippi,<sup>38</sup> a city built by the Jewish regional leader Phillip and named to honor both Caesar and himself. Its most famous landmark was a large cave looking over a spring: locals called the cave “The Gates of Hell” and believed it was a place of spiritual power. On the way to stand before the gates of hell, Jesus asks his followers, “What are people saying about me? Who do people say I am?”

They answer, “People say lots of things. Some say you’re John the Baptist, some Elijah, some that you are one of the truth-tellers.”

“But what about you?” he asks. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answers, “You are the Anointed One!”

Jesus warns them all not to tell anyone. For now, this is to be their secret, at least until they understand the full significance of what his title means. Then Jesus begins to teach them what it means to say he is the Anointed One. “It means suffering,” he tells them. “The Son of Humanity must suffer—he will be rejected by the Elite, the Intense and the Scrupulous. And, working together with the Collaborators, he will be killed. But after three days rise again.” Jesus says this plainly. He doesn’t stutter.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. This does not go well for Peter. Jesus turns, looks at the others, and then rebukes Peter in return: “Get behind me, Accuser! You do not dance the God-rhythms or desire the God-life! You’re only thinking in human terms.”

Jesus calls the crowd over, along with his disciplined followers, and goes even deeper with his teaching about what it means to call him the Anointed One. He wants everyone to understand, especially his disciplined followers, that the “job” is not about fame and glory but duty and service, redemptive suffering that transforms all things (and all people). He tells the people, “If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny their own will—not just forget it but forsake it—then take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus said this aware that his listeners’ only understanding of the cross was Roman, for crosses were the Roman instruments of torture and control over the entire nation.<sup>39</sup> What could Jesus mean?

He continued to teach: “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it—let your former, false self perish, be utterly destroyed, that you might discover your transformed, true self, the person The Action has called you to become from before the beginning of time. Whoever loses their false self for my sake and for the sake of the Good News will save it.

“What good is it to gain the whole world and forfeit your true self? What can you give in exchange for your deepest, truest self? Shame distorts what it touches. Suppose you believe the big lie that I don’t unveil the God-life for you, that I do not or cannot teach you to dance the God-rhythms, that trusting in me isn’t the Way to your deepest, truest self. In that case, you have swallowed the bait of this unfaithful and corrupt generation; you’re fighting against the transforming *dunamis*<sup>40</sup> I offer you. I cannot bear witness to my *Abba* and the divine messengers while you stand next to me rejecting and repudiating every word I speak. Yet here is the truth: Some of you will embrace the God-life, perceive its deepest truth, and envision its most magnificent beauty before you taste death.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The rest of this sentence is not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context.

<sup>39</sup> This sentence is not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context.

<sup>40</sup> *Dunamis* is the Greek word meaning “power” from which we derive the English words dynamic and dynamite.

<sup>41</sup> The paraphrase aims to offer an alternative interpretation to the usual quid pro quo, tit-for-tat views given for Mark 8:38. Such explanations often act as a threat: “You better speak kindly about

Jesus or else!” However, the Greek word used, typically translated as “ashamed,” is *epaischunomai*, a compound word. *Aischunomai* means “disgraced because someone put their trust or loyalty in the wrong thing or person.” One might think of someone who supported a colleague for a job only to find out the person they supported was either incompetent or a criminal. Or, in ancient times, someone who supported a king or Caesar who was later overthrown. To this is added the prefix *epi*, which emphasizes the meaning. The interpretive paraphrase attempts to demonstrate

*No sugarcoating, no seduction.*

*Jesus preaches, "The path to life goes through death."*

*Through surrender.*

*Not the cross you choose.*

*The one that finds you.*

*The cross of truth-telling in a world built on lies,*

*of love in a world of weaponized fear,*

*of letting go in a world that idolizes control,*

*of resurrection predicated on crucifixion.*

*Rome's cross, the emblem of Empire,*

*wields the sword, inflicting tyranny, but*

*overcome by Communion and Community.*

*"Follow me," Jesus calls, "not your idea of me."*

*"Get behind me," he commands,*

*not in anger, but admonishment—*

*fearless, unflinching, forgetting*

*neither who nor whose we are.*

*For we encounter the cloud that speaks,*

*the silence that follows,*

*surrounded by divine radiance,*

*and we are transformed.*

God, it's me. I pray for the strength to be ready for the moment: to stand for Jesus, to stand with those whom Jesus calls "the least of these," to stand for all that is required by the rule of your Sovereign love. In these days of tumult and division, where brother speaks against brother and sister against sister, give me the clarity to see and the conviction to follow those who do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.<sup>42</sup>

*Go into the world...* Notice where you are tempted to control your path, preserve your image, or sidestep suffering. What does it mean to take up your cross today? What life might be waiting on the other side of surrender? Notice. Pray. Act.

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that publicly supporting Jesus will never lead to disgrace, and, conversely, Jesus' support for those who actively reject or repudiate him is muffled, stifling them from receiving, embracing, and being transformed by the God-life. Jesus' words appear to me to be less of a threat and more a truth about what happens in divine-human relationships.

<sup>42</sup> c.f. Micah 6:8.

## **Mark 9:2-13**

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and leads them up a high mountain by themselves. There, Jesus is transformed before them, his clothes become dazzling white, brighter than anything could bleach them. Elijah, advocate for prophetic truth-telling, appears. Moses, advocate for Torah, appears. They are speak with Jesus. What a conversation!

Peter interrupts, terrified but sincere: "Rabbi, I'm glad we're here. Let the three of us build three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Peter is anxious and doesn't know what else to say.<sup>43</sup> He thinks a shrine can contain the *shekinah* radiance<sup>44</sup> of this moment.

Then a cloud overshadows them, like a divine hug. Peter, James, and John encounter the divine presence, just as Moses did while on Mount Sinai.<sup>45</sup> A voice whispers thunder from the cloud: "This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to him." Suddenly, Peter, James, and John look around—and no one is there but Jesus. (Peter finally realizes no shrine can contain this divine radiance.)

As the four men come down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to share what they've seen or heard until after the Son of Humanity rises from the dead. Peter, James, and John obey but debate what "rising from the dead" means. They cannot agree on a single meaning, so they decide to ask Jesus.

Jesus answers their question with a question, "Why do the Scrupulous say Elijah must come first?" And then he answers his own question, "Elijah does come first, to restore all things—hit reset on the creation to re-establish justice and right relationships. But why is it written that the Son of Humanity must suffer and be rejected? Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased—just as it is written."<sup>46</sup>

*To grasp this moment and hold on,  
even build a church or donate stained glass windows.*

*Who wouldn't be tempted?*

<sup>43</sup> This parenthetical comment and the one in the next paragraph are not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context as Peter's possible, internal responses.

<sup>44</sup> *Shekinah* has the sense of the English "glory" and also connotes an encounter with the divine presence.

<sup>45</sup> c.f. Exodus 34:29ff.

<sup>46</sup> c.f. Malachi 4:5.

*But human hands can't horde glory.  
It lives and moves, comes from above.  
Glory presses on—so must we,  
to be transformed, set free,  
carried down into the valley and unleashed,  
even on the road to suffering.*

God, it's me. When I behold your glory, teach me to listen. When fear tries to build walls around wonder, invite me into deeper trust. Where I want to stay, send me to whom you need me to encounter. Where I hear your voice, let it root in me. Where mystery surrounds, grant me peace, not control, that I may experience the sacred rather than try to explain it.

*Go into the world...* Notice the sacred moments that tempt you to stay where it's safe and shining. What might Jesus be calling you to carry down into the everyday? To whom are you being called to attend and offer love and compassion? Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 9:14–29**

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down the mountain, Jesus notices a large crowd surrounding his disciplined followers. The Scrupulous are there, too, arguing with his followers. As soon as the crowd sees Jesus, they run to him. They have questions. He asks, “What are you arguing about?”

Someone from the crowd speaks up: “Teacher, I brought my son for you to help. My boy has an unholy spirit that makes him mute. It seizes him, throws him to the ground, where he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your followers to drive it out—but they couldn't.”

Jesus says, “You untrusting people! How long must I make my home among you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” The father brings the boy. As soon as the unholy spirit sees Jesus, it throws the boy into convulsions. The boy falls to the ground, rolling and foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asks the father, “How long has this been happening to him?”

The father replies, “Since childhood. It has often thrown him into fire or water to destroy him. If you can do anything, anything at all, have compassion on us and help us.”

Jesus responds, “If? If I can? Everything is possible for the one who trusts.”

Immediately, the father cries out, “I trust! Help my lack of trust!”

Jesus sees the crowd gathering fast and rebukes the unholy spirit: “You, unholy spirit, I command you, come out of the boy and never return!” The unholy spirit shrieks, convulses the boy violently, but obeys. It leaves the boy. A sacred silence descends upon the gathered crowd. The boy lies still. Many wonder, “What did Jesus do to the boy?” Some say, “He's dead.” But Jesus takes the boy by the hand, lifts him up, and the boy stands.

Inside the house, Jesus' disciplined followers are both chagrined and frustrated. They ask him privately, “Why couldn't we cast it out?”

Jesus replies, “Some unholy spirits resist and persist. They only leave through prayer.”

*Carrying his son, his sorrow, and his last flicker of hope,  
he encounters Jesus armed with doubt and despair.  
Jesus has the father right where he needs him!*

*Some trauma takes time to heal—years even—  
rewriting the script harm has embedded within us.*

*Some hurts require a balm in Gilead,  
which is difficult to find on a map.*

*Some brokenness flees only through prayer—  
not as magic but as surrender.*

*Jesus foreshadows resurrection,  
the encounter with him infusing trust and hope  
that the father carries with him forever.*

God, it's me. I trust! I do! Much of the time. On a good day. When all is going well, I confess: on other days, trust is more difficult—when my bills pile up, my kids are sick, my body aches, my colleagues are ornery, my customers unreasonable, my, my, oh my! Listening to myself, I sound like quite the whiner. Forgive me, O Action, restore my trust in your love and resurrect my hope in your goodness. I believe! Help my unbelief!

*Go into the world...* Notice where trust and doubt live side by side. Notice the times you reach for Jesus with trembling hope? What spirit needs to be cast out—not with force, but

with prayer? Notice when resurrection stirs, even if it first looks like collapse? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 9:30–37

Jesus and his followers pass through Galilee. He doesn't want anyone to know—because he is teaching his closest followers, the disciplined ones who will need to know what it really means to walk the Way. Jesus warns them a second time about the suffering that is to descend upon him, “The Son of Humanity is being handed over to people who will kill him, and three days after death, he will rise.” But his disciplined followers don't understand, and they're fearful. They remain silent.

When they reach Capernaum, they enter the house. Jesus asks his followers, “What were you arguing about on the road?” They are silent, feeling chagrined. On the way, they had been arguing about who among them was the greatest, as they each thought of themselves as large and loud, best and brightest. So, Jesus sits down, taking the formal teaching position of a rabbi—calls the Twelve—and begins a new lesson: “If you want to be first, be last. Be the servant of all.” Then Jesus picks up a child, places the child among them, and holds the child in his arms. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not just me but the One who sent me.”

*Silent I stood.*

*“Speechless” is more apt.*

*Tears welling, voice catching in my throat.*

*Holding my children,*

*recently driven from their mother's womb,*

*life relentlessly pursuing its horizon.*

*Small, red, and wrinkly, with but wisps of hair,*

*they weighed almost nothing and absolutely everything—*

*the heaviest weight I had ever lifted.*

*In my arms I held the greatest.*

*Not large (yet) but loud!*

*I was the servant.*

*In the coming days and years,*

*I would wipe tears and vomit, even shit*

*willingly, lovingly, gladly (at times).*

*The kin-dom doesn't rise  
on strong backs  
but in vulnerable arms.*

*On the Way of Jesus, greatness  
measured not by how high we reach,  
but by how low we bend.*

God, it's me. I learn less from lectures than from your embrace—through which I have discovered your vision of true greatness. O Action, make me great according to the way of Jesus! When I am tempted by status, drawn to be noticed, or addicted to (favorable) comparisons, hold me close in your love so I may learn again and again to welcome the child, the stranger, the foreigner, and even my enemy. Rather than climb ladders, may I learn to kneel in love before those whom you send my way (that I may walk your way).

*Go into the world...* Notice where the hunger for importance shows up—in yourself and in others. Who are the “little ones” around you today—those who need welcome, those who are overlooked? How might you bend low in love? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 10:1–12

Jesus leaves Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, and heads south to the region of Judea and across the Jordan River. Crowds gather around him, again, and as is his custom, Jesus teaches them. Some of the Intense approach to test Jesus. They ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (The question is disingenuous; the Intense know that Moses allows it. Heck, even the crowds know the correct answer.)

Jesus replies with a question of his own, “What did Moses command you?”

The Intense answer, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her.”

Jesus responds, “You are technically correct but you miss the larger point. It is because your hearts are hard that Moses gave you this law, for he knew human frailty. But from the beginning of creation, The Action's ideal has been for relationships that deepen and endure. As it is

written in Genesis,<sup>47</sup> ‘God made them male and female. For this reason, one shall leave their father and mother and be joined to one another, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they and be joined to another, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So, they who marry are no longer two, but one. What God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Later, in the house, his disciplined followers ask Jesus about his teaching. He explains to them his teaching in the wider context of what men are doing: “You know the practice of many husbands these days. They divorce their wives because adultery is a capital offense,<sup>48</sup> and they want to avoid death. It is their lust for another woman that leads them to disregard their vows. Therefore, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. The sin they seek to hide is exposed by their action. And though it is not allowed today, if a wife were to divorce her husband and marry another for selfish reasons, she commits adultery.”

*The Intense ask about law; Jesus speaks of love.  
They want loopholes; he speaks of longing that  
points to something deeper, older, truer,  
the sacred “Yes” that binds two souls  
in shared vulnerability.*

*Jesus imagines covenant, not contract.  
Not to trap but to free.  
Not to shame but to protect.  
Not rules to wield but relationship to honor.*

*Jesus names hardness of heart  
as the wound that shatters.  
He desires healing for both  
the harmed and the hardened.*

God, it’s me. I pray for the courage to walk in shared vulnerability, for the patience to continue to walk when the road is steep, and for the comfort in knowing that I do not walk alone. My beloved and I walk together, with you our companion. Deepen our love as year turns to year. As we enter our “third third” of life, may our future be brighter than our past, even as night comes and, with it, eternal rest.

*Go into the world...* Notice where relationships are straining, breaking, or healing. What does it look like to

honor covenant—not just in marriage, but in friendship, community, and care? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 10:13-16**

People bring little children to Jesus so that he might bless them. But his disciplined followers scold the parents—as if Jesus has more important things to do. When Jesus sees this, he becomes indignant at his followers. He says, “Let the little children come to me. Don’t stop them, for the rule of Sovereign Love belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth: Whoever does not welcome the God-life like a little child is missing the point of being one of The Action’s beloved. You will never learn to dance the God-rhythms until you accept that you are absolutely and utterly loved.” Then Jesus gathers the children into his arms, lays his hands on them, and blesses them.

*She liked to stand on her mom’s lap and look around,  
short, blond curls bouncing left and right,  
until she caught someone’s eye.*

*“Look at me!” the eyes gleefully twinkled.  
“Look at me, look at you!” they sang with mirth,  
until wrinkled visage broke into a smile.*

*The boys hunted like ravenous wolves,  
searching for distraction, or leftover communion bread,  
until forced to sit so a teacher can tell them of Jesus.*

*Boys and girls, howling their glee on the playground,  
dirt and sweat commingling with joy,  
until asked to help the custodian set up chairs.*

*I now attend church in a 55+ community,  
occasionally seeing a grandchild,  
nostalgic for those moments of holy distraction.*

*Slowly, I perceive that we—you and I—are to be  
those who howl, whose gray curls bounce,  
for we are absolutely and utterly loved.*

God, it’s me. I thank you for children—not just for my children, for all children. For the quiet and shy and rowdy and rambunctious. I pray I will model for them what it means to trust and welcome and delight in your love. I pray that our churches might be safe havens

<sup>47</sup> c.f. Genesis 2:24.

<sup>48</sup> c.f. Leviticus 20:10.

and wise guides that lead them to experience the God-life. O Action, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

*Go into the world...* Notice the children around you. Who is being pushed aside or silenced? What would it mean to receive the kin-dom with their kind of trust and wonder? Who needs to be blessed, simply and sincerely? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus sets out on the road, a man runs up, kneels before him, and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says, “You surely know the wisdom of the rabbis, that no one is good but The Action alone. Why do you call me good? Indeed, rather than worry about my goodness, take care to assure your own. You know the so-called ‘second tablet,’ the commandments about how we are to live with one another: Don’t murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Don’t defraud. Honor your father and mother.”

The man replies eagerly, “Teacher, I’ve kept all these since I was young.”

Jesus looks at him—loves him—and sees that he lacks one thing: to live the “first tablet,” the commandments that say The Action shall be placed first in one’s life. To help the man see that he has misplaced his priorities, Jesus says to him, “You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Hearing these words, the man’s face falls. He walks away grieving because he has many possessions.

Jesus looks around and says to his disciplined followers, “How difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the rule of Sovereign love!” His followers are shocked, for the wisdom of the rabbis declared that riches are a sign of blessedness. So, Jesus says again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kin-dom! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kin-dom.”

Jesus’ disciplined followers are even more astonished and ask, “Then who can be made whole and complete, their true selves?”

Jesus looks at them and says, “For humans it is impossible, but not for The Action. All things are possible through Them.”

Peter, anxious to assure himself and everyone else that they will be okay in the kin-dom, speaks up, “What about us? We’ve left everything to follow you.”

Jesus replies, “I tell you the truth, no one who has released their hold<sup>49</sup> on something will fail to have it return to them in the beloved community. All who have left a house or siblings or parents or children or fields for me and the good news participate in the beloved community, the gathering of my people, and receive the blessings of sharing a life together, even the persecutions, and, in the age to come, will share life anew, life abundant, and life forever. And many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

*The man was no Francis,<sup>50</sup>  
who famously disrobed in the Assisi square,  
and returned his fancy clothes to his father.*

*The man was no Julian of Norwich,<sup>51</sup>  
who famously prayed for deathly sickness  
and three wounds.*

*The man was neither Teresa of Calcutta  
nor Shane of the Philadelphia Claibornes,<sup>52</sup>  
both devoted to eradicating poverty.*

*The man was like most of us:  
didn’t want to do without,  
preferred to bask in comfort.*

*He forgot his need to walk with Jesus:  
to unclench his fists, stop clinging to profits,  
to let his life become fulfilled by grace.*

*As I look in the mirror, I wonder: “Am I that man?”*

<sup>49</sup> The Greek word used is *apheimi*, which can be translated as “left” or “let go” but is *primarily* translated as “forgive.” I find fascinating the association of releasing our goods and releasing the hurts we have experienced from others.

<sup>50</sup> St. Francis famously stripped naked in the city square in front of Bishop Guido and the citizenry of Assisi. The bishop wrapped his cloak around Francis.

<sup>51</sup> Julian was an English anchoress who, in 1373, wrote the earliest English language book by a woman, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

<sup>52</sup> Shane Claiborne is an evangelical Christian who founded an organization, The Simple Way, devoted to social justice through taking Jesus’ words seriously.

## Mark 10:32-45

Jesus and his disciplined followers are traveling again—heading to Jerusalem. Jesus walks ahead. Some of his followers are amazed; others afraid. Jesus gathers the Twelve, his close followers, and tells them for a third time what will happen: “The Son of Humanity will be betrayed into the hands of the Elite and the Scrupulous. These will condemn him to death, hand him over to the Romans, who will mock, spit at, and flog him until they finally murder him. Yet after three days he will rise.”

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

Jesus replies, “What do you want?”

They answer, “Let us sit in the places of honor when you come into your kingdom,<sup>53</sup> at your right and left.”

Jesus answers, “You have no clue what you are asking, for you speak of the rule of Sovereign Love as if its purpose is power and control, but the Action’s kin-dom is no earthly kingdom! Can you drink the cup I drink? Or be baptized with my baptism?”

They say, “We can!”

Jesus says, “You will. You will drink the cup of service and be baptized with my suffering, but to grant places of honor is not mine to grant. Honor belongs to those for whom it is prepared.”

The other followers are angry when they hear about this conversation. Jesus gathers them again and says, “You know how human rulers lord it over others. The most powerful act as tyrants. But it must not be so among you. Whoever desires greatness must be a servant; to be best is to serve most, for even the Son of Humanity did not come to be served but to serve—and to give his life as a ransom payment, to restore freedom from sin and liberty for justice to all.”<sup>54</sup>

*Ancient kings can't compare to a modern president.  
The hero soldier of old destitute next to a rock star.  
Even glamour and glitz have seen inflation!*

*But the ancient servant and the modern,  
both remain true to their calling:  
care and compassion, service and sacrifice.*

*James and John ask for glory:  
seats of power and places of prestige.  
The others are angry—not because it's wrong,  
but because they want the same.*

*So, Jesus redefines greatness:  
Not status, not control, but  
servanthood seeded in suffering,  
shaped like a cross.*

*God, it's me. Make me a servant in heart and attitude,  
not just in name and words. May I care with genuine  
compassion, real concern, and true kindness, not just  
claim to be caring. Let “thoughts and prayers” be  
transformed into service and self-sacrifice. Help me  
release the need to be noticed, affirmed, and  
celebrated, so I can honor the dignity and worth of  
others, and in doing so, realize that you have already  
given me these gifts.*

*Go into the world..* Notice where power is at play around you and within you. Where are you grasping for recognition? Who around you needs to be served, not impressed? What does it look like to drink the cup Jesus holds out to you today? Notice. Pray. Act.

## Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciplined followers arrive in Jericho, just east and down the mountain from Jerusalem. As they leave the city with a large crowd in tow, a blind beggar sits by the roadside. His name is Bartimaeus, meaning “son of honor,” but others mock him as “son of impurity.”<sup>55</sup> When Bartimaeus hears that it is Jesus of Nazareth, he begins to shout for Jesus using not just his

<sup>53</sup> The use of “kingdom” rather than “kin-dom” is intentional, as James and John seem to have an earthly kingdom in mind rather than Jesus’ rule of Sovereign love.

<sup>54</sup> The Greek word used is *lutron*, which means “ransom” and refers to the purchase of a slave’s freedom, etc. It became the theological basis for the *Christus Victor* atonement theory.

<sup>55</sup> The etymology of the name “Timaeus” is uncertain. It may refer to the Greek word *timeh*, meaning “honor” or “price,” but in an Aramaic context could be a variant of the Hebrew word for “unclean” or “impure.” The paraphrase plays with both meanings.

name but also a political title reserved by Israelites for The Action's promised one, the Anointed: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many try to hush him—telling him to be quiet, for who is this unclean man to call out for Jesus. But Bartimaeus shouts even louder: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus' followers are frustrated by his badgering and the crowd bemused by their frustration. Then, Jesus stops, and everyone turns toward Bartimaeus. Is he in trouble? What will happen to this obnoxious beggar?

Jesus says, "Bring him to me."

So, his followers call Bartimaeus: "Take heart. Get up. The Teacher is calling for you." Throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus jumps to his feet and wades through the crowd to Jesus.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus says, "Teacher, I want to see."

Jesus replies, "Your trust has made you whole. Return to your life as an honorable man." Immediately, Bartimaeus regains his sight—and follows Jesus on the road.

*I spent a summer in Philly: the projects my office,  
Kids playing streetball in front of broken windows,  
leaning against cars whose wheels had been jacked.  
My dad was horrified.*

*We drove the streets in his rental,  
stares of distrust following us down Broad Street.  
Waving to a kid from Bible club leaning against a car,  
I jabbered along about how my summer was going.*

*I've wondered about that summer over the years.  
Its meaning has moved in my memory,  
from "look what I did!"  
to "did I really see?"*

*The blind man was  
sidelined, silenced, and shamed,  
but Jesus  
sees, hears, and honors him.*

*Did I honor those kids,  
or just tell them Bible stories?  
Did those kids see right through me,  
and was I actually the blind man?*

*God, it's me. Open my eyes to see the world through  
Jesus' eyes, to hear cries of lament with Jesus' ears,  
to feel the crush of people's despair with Jesus' heart.  
Then, give me the courage to act with compassion—  
not to change all the world but to do the one thing  
before me that you call me to do: no matter how small  
or how large. May I honor you as I honor others.*

*Go into the world...* Notice where people sit unseen. Who is crying out for mercy? What silence is being enforced upon them? Who does Jesus want you to see and honor today? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 11:1-11**

As they approach Jerusalem—near Bethany, a couple of miles away, and Bethphage in the suburbs of Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives—Jesus sends two of his followers ahead. He says, "Go into the village. You'll find a colt no one has ever ridden tied up in the back alley. Untie it and bring it. If anyone asks why, say: 'The Anointed One needs it and will return it soon.'"

The two followers go and find the colt, tied by a door outside in the street. As they untie it, some people ask, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answer just as Jesus told them—and the people let them go. The followers bring the colt to Jesus and throw their cloaks over it. Jesus sits on the colt.

Many others spread their cloaks on the road, as people of old did before for king Jehu.<sup>56</sup> Others spread palm branches on the road, as people of old did for Judas Maccabeus, the conqueror of the Greek armies.<sup>57</sup> And the voices of those who go before Jesus and who follow after him cannot be contained:

Huzzah and Hallelujah! Praise and adoration!  
Blessed is he who carries The Action's banner!  
Blessed is the coming kin-dom of David!  
Praise and adoration! Huzzah and Hallelujah!

Jesus enters Jerusalem and goes directly to the Temple. He looks around at everything, but since it is already late, he leaves with the Twelve and goes back to Bethany.

*No war horse, no sword, no trumpet blast.  
Just a borrowed colt and cloaks for a saddle.*

<sup>56</sup> c.f. 2 Kings 9:13.

<sup>57</sup> c.f. 1 Maccabees 13:51.

*The road is built of people's hope and longing.*

*The crowd expects a warrior king, and  
not yet understanding  
he will not conquer as they want.*

*He will not overthrow by force, but  
welcomes only the offering of trust.  
They know not what's coming.*

*Not yet.*

God, it's me. I love good celebrations: birthdays, weddings, my team winning the championship! I can imagine the energy, the electricity, of the crowd that gathered for Jesus: expecting Messiah, shouting for the One they believed would lead the people to freedom. How sorely disappointed they would be as the week unfolded. O Action, teach me to test my expectations against your revealed character. Teach me to want what you desire, to long for what you have spoken, to work for things you have said are the way of Jesus. And if, at the end of the day, I can shout, "Huzzah and Hallelujah!" may it be so.

*Go into the world...* Notice how you welcome Jesus. Are your hosannas rooted in hope or in control? What kind of Savior are you looking for—and will you follow him even when the parade ends? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 11:12-25**

The next day, as they leave Bethany, a couple of miles from Jerusalem, Jesus is hungry. He sees a fig tree full of leaves but without fruit, for it is not the *kairos* for figs. The time of national blessing is not now; Israel is bereft, broken, lacking even the buds that would presage faithfulness. He says to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." His disciplined followers hear his words but do not understand that Jesus speaks of Israel, for they have forgotten the words of the truth-tellers Hosea and Nahum, that figs are symbols—more than just a meal.<sup>58</sup>

Jesus and his followers arrive in Jerusalem. Jesus enters the Temple and begins to drive out those selling and buying the animals required for sacrifice—selling them at extortionate prices. He overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves. He will not allow anyone to carry goods through the Temple. He teaches them: "Is it not written, 'My house is sacred space, devoted to prayer for all nations'? Your practices are obscene and make it a den of thieves." The Elite and the Scrupulous hear Jesus' words and renew their efforts to destroy him, even death if necessary. They are afraid because the crowds love him and are enthralled by his teaching. When evening comes, Jesus and his disciplined followers leave the city.

In the morning, as Jesus and his followers pass by the fig tree, they notice its roots have withered. Peter remembers Jesus' words from the previous day and says, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

Jesus answers, "Trust The Action! I tell you the truth, as you look across the valley to Zion, you see the vastness and beauty of the Temple."<sup>59</sup> The life of Israel is centered there on that mountain: redemption and atonement and the forgiveness of sin are found there, or so you think. But I say to you, trust that you can say to Zion, yes, even to the Temple mount, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea.' As you trust and do not doubt, the work accomplished in the Temple will be done in your heart through prayer. I tell you the truth, what you request in prayer, even redemption and atonement and the forgiveness of sins, will be yours. And remember this as you stand praying for your own forgiveness: you are to forgive others. If you have anything against anyone, forgive them. As you open your heart in mercy to others, your heart remains open to receive the forgiveness that The Action desires to shower upon you."

*The tree is leafy but fruitless.*

*The temple is full but faithless.*

*He curses what looks alive  
but bears no nourishment.*

*He overturns tables,  
not just wood, but systems.*

<sup>58</sup> c.f. Isaiah 28:4, Hosea 9:10 and Nahum 3:12.

<sup>59</sup> Readers often neglect the context for Jesus' words, often translated as, "Say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the

sea.'" (NIV) The mountain to which Jesus refers is visible and atop it sits the Temple, the source and center for all religious activity.

*He rejects what looks holy  
but exploits the poor.*

*He desires the prayers of all nations,  
He offers the forgiveness that sets people free.*

*Jesus is hungry—  
for justice, for honesty, for the real thing.*

God, it's me. Give me the wisdom to look behind and beyond the surface to the heart of a thing: to words that lead to actions, to actions that reflect your justice, to your justice that brings wholeness and peace--shalom. Give me the courage to question systems and confront them if needed, even to overturn unjust systems that oppress and abuse the poor. Give me the serenity that comes from prayer, as I learn the trust that can move "mountains" and become proficient in the work of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

*Go into the world...* Notice the places where there are many leaves but little fruit—externally and within. What does The Action long to overturn or restore in your life? What prayer, what forgiveness, what trust is being asked of you today? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 11:27-33**

Jesus and his disciplined followers return to Jerusalem. As he walks in the Temple courts, the Rulers, the Scrupulous, and the Old Ones approach him. They ask, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"

Jesus responds, "Tit for tat. You asked me a question, so I'll ask one back. Answer me, and I will answer you. Was the baptism of John from heaven or people?"

Those aligned against Jesus discuss it among themselves: "We need to be careful how we answer. If we say, 'from heaven,' he'll ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'from people,' the crowd will turn on us because everyone believes John was a truth-teller." In all their scheming and conniving, they never consider responding honestly and with authenticity—never

contemplate telling the truth. So, they answer Jesus, "We don't know."

Jesus replies, "Then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things."

*In this broken era of bots and botched democracies,  
when AI can make me Superman, Lex Luthor, or both,  
how can we know what's real?*

*What happened to "Here I stand;  
I can do no other  
unless convinced by the Word of God,"<sup>60</sup>*

*and "Ask not what your country can  
do for you but what you can  
do for your country?"<sup>61</sup>*

*Do we want an answer, conversation, or control?  
Like the crowds around Jesus, do we dodge conviction,  
eluding truth now, as then?*

*I will persist in searching for  
the good, the beautiful and true, pursuing my heart,  
examining my conscience, committing to what is real.*

*The truth that comes from heaven,  
doesn't beg for validation.  
It simply acts from love.*

God, it's me. I desire to know the truth, speak it, and live it in all that I do, for I know that biblical truth is not merely an idea but a way of being, a habit of the heart and mind and spirit.<sup>62</sup> May your Divine Spirit infuse my heart with courage, my mind with clarity, and my spirit with compassion, that I may live fearlessly and faithfully, even as I stand for what is just and good and true.

*Go into the world...* Notice the "echo chambers" in which you and others reside. How does your echo chamber influence both how you think and, as importantly, how you feel and act? Notice the temptation to focus on other people's echo chamber while ignoring your own. Do an

"truth," which leans toward action: truth is known through its fruit. Western culture is more influenced by the Greek than the Hebraic understanding, which often influences how we interpret Scripture.

<sup>60</sup> These are words famously spoken by Martin Luther.

<sup>61</sup> These are words famously spoken by President Kennedy.

<sup>62</sup> Biblical scholars delineate between the Greek understanding of "truth," which, following Aristotle, leans toward conceptual and propositional statements, and the Hebraic understanding of

honest, courageous self-examination of any hypocrisy you may be embracing. Notice. Pray. Act.

**Mark 12:1-12**

Jesus tells the Rulers and the Scrupulous a story about a vineyard, a symbol the truth-tellers from ages past use to describe Israel:<sup>63</sup> An owner plants a vineyard, builds a wall, digs a winepress, and constructs a tower from which to keep watch and protect the vineyard. Then the owner leases it to tenants and goes away. When harvest time comes, the vineyard owner sends a servant to collect some of the fruit. But the tenants seize the servant, beat him, and send him away empty-handed. So, the owner sends another servant—they strike this second servant, raining both insults and fists on the head. The owner sends yet another servant, who is killed. Over and over, the owner keeps it up: sending servant after servant, some are beaten, some killed. Finally, the vineyard owner sends a beloved son, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ But the tenants say, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him so the inheritance will be ours.’ The tenants seize the son, kill him, and throw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do?”

The Rulers and Scrupulous respond, “The owner will come, destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others.”

Jesus replied, “Yes, indeed. Have you not read this scripture:

‘The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone—  
this is The Action’s doing,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes?’<sup>64</sup>

The Rulers and Scrupulous realize Jesus tells this story against them; they are the servants! They want to arrest Jesus, but they fear the crowd. So, they leave him and go away.

*Hypocrisy blinds—  
calling the indolent overworked,  
creating enemies where none exist,  
pretending there is calm while protests erupt.*

*When infected with hypocrisy,  
anger feels like reason,  
greed is called charity,  
cruelty parades round as compassion.*

*I witness hypocrisy and notice:  
those filled with ego feel humble,  
trading insults become sweet nothings between lovers,  
gaslighting has the competitive fervor of an Olympic sport.*

*Did George Orwell write about  
ancient Elite or modern Influencers?  
Such bliss it is to look out the window at others,  
while avoiding any glimpse in the mirror.*

God, it’s me. Protect me from the sin of hypocrisy—literally wearing a mask in order to hide my true self.<sup>65</sup> O Action, free me from the chains that bind me to my false self! Release me to be the person you have seen I will become, a person of trust, who walks the way of Jesus even when the road gets rocky. And when I am confronted by hypocrisy in others, may I both remember that I, a sinner, live in a glass house, and that my only obligation is to live with integrity before you, act with compassion toward all, and speak the truth in love when called upon to do justice, for you alone are my Sovereign.

*Go into the world...* Notice what has been entrusted to you. How have you honored that trust? Do you hold the trust firmly but lightly, with ready hands? Or do you strangle the trust by holding it tightly, with guarded fists? Notice. Pray. Act.

**Mark 12:13-17**

Some of the Intense and some Collaborators decide to make a “devil’s bargain” and work together. Ordinarily, these groups are mortal enemies, for the Intense are virulently opposed to Roman occupation, and the Collaborators support the Jewish government that cooperates with the Romans—an odd couple to be sure.<sup>66</sup> They slither up to Jesus to trap him. They hiss their words

<sup>63</sup> c.f. Isaiah 5, et. al.

<sup>64</sup> c.f. Psalm 118:22-23.

<sup>65</sup> The Greek word for hypocrisy, *hypokrinomai*, originates in the Greek theater where an actor would use a mask to play multiple characters.

<sup>66</sup> This sentence is not in the Greek text but added to provide interpretive context.

at Jesus, “Teacher, we know you are sincere and show deference to no one. You regard people with equality and without partiality. You teach The Action’s way of liberty and justice for all! So, tell us—is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

Jesus sees through their hypocrisy. He knows the Intense consider paying taxes to Caesar an act of idolatry and treason. He also knows that the Romans will consider any teaching against paying taxes as a reason for arrest. The serpents before him await his demise. Jesus says to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring me a coin. Let me look at it.” They bring a coin; it is a Roman coin. Jesus asks, “Whose image is on this coin, and what does the inscription read?”

They answer, “It is Caesar’s image, and the inscription reads, ‘Son of God.’”

Jesus looks at them all and says, “Give Caesar’s image to Caesar, but give to The Action the image<sup>67</sup> that belongs to Them.” The Intense and the Collaborators slither back to the pit from which they came.

*Enemies collaborate.*

*Compliments poison.*

*Questions’ answers cease to matter.*

*Who set the rules for this game?*

*Partisans choose sides: “Us” versus “Them.”*

*Winning is the endgame.*

*All answers divide.*

*What game is played?*

*Jesus reframes the interrogation:*

*Whose image is stamped on you  
not by the emperor but by The Action?*

*Who’s not playing this game?*

God, it’s me. You who are not fooled by power or performative religion, teach me where my true allegiance lies: with you and you only. I may be swayed by many forces, shaped by multiple systems, but I am stamped with the divine image only by you. I am made in your image, so show me how to live with open hands and an open heart. Let me give what is owed in this world without giving myself to this world. May I live

amidst this culture, even amidst these days, without giving away my soul.

*Go into the world...* Notice where you see competing demands between the world’s “coins” and The Action’s “image.” What part of your life still belongs more to “Caesar” than to Jesus? Whose image do you reflect today? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 12:18-27**

Some of the Elite, who teach there is no resurrection, come to Jesus with a question. “Teacher,” they say, “Moses wrote that if a man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow to raise up children for him: This is the Law! But what if there were seven brothers. The first marries, then dies, leaving no child. The second marries the widow and then dies, then the third, and so on and so on, but none of the seven have children. Finally, the woman herself dies. So, in the resurrection, whose wife will she be? After all, all seven were married to her.”

Jesus replies, “You neither know the Scriptures nor The Action’s *dunamis*. When people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, for all intimacies are with The Action, and they are like angels in heaven. As for the dead being raised, have you not read about what happened to Moses in the story of the burning bush? The Actions says: ‘I am the Creator: of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah’?<sup>68</sup> The Action is not Sovereign to decaying flesh and inert spirit but to those living and breathing and dancing God-rhythms, even in death. You do not see because you cannot perceive.”

*Gaslighting. Modern term, ancient trick.*

*Questions snap like a mousetrap,*

*alleging lawful logic,*

*while lips twitch with a smirk.*

*Jesus, uncornered, unconcerned, never outclevered,  
does not succumb to Scripture poisoned by sarcasm.*

*He does not argue—he proclaims:*

*The Action is active—always and forever.*

*Yesterday, today, and into all tomorrows.*

<sup>67</sup> c.f. Genesis 1:27.

<sup>68</sup> c.f. Exodus 3:6.

God, it's me. Help me to see through the duplicity of others, especially those who have no desire for a real dialogue. May I reject all attempts to draw me into a false narrative, to accept "alternative facts," to engage in conversations without authentic sharing. Instead, may I open myself to all dialogue where "I" and "thee" might explore our connection as "we." May I value learning from another by listening to the experiences that inform their perspective, the narrative they tell themselves about how the world works, and the interests that create purpose and meaning for them. May I honor all dialogue that listens deeply and is heard deeply, dialogue that seeks to know and be known. Otherwise, give me the courage to not waste my time and "just say no."

*Go into the world...* Notice where you need hope that goes beyond argument? Where might The Action be calling you to stop arguing and start living? Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 12:28-34**

One of the Scrupulous comes near and hears the debate between Jesus and the Elite. Seeing that Jesus answers wisely, he asks: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

Jesus answers, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'<sup>69</sup> And the second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>70</sup> There is no other commandment greater than these."

The Scrupulous says, "You are correct, Teacher. To love God with all the heart, and all the understanding and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, this is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus sees that he answers wisely, he says to the Scrupulous: "You are not far from the rule of Sovereign love." After that, no one dares ask Jesus another question.

*The world watches in horror as we descend  
from depths of name calling,  
to threats of violence,  
to an assassin's bullet.*

*Accusations abound!*

*Reciting and exciting rhetoric,  
vehemence and vitriol begetting rage,  
rage descending deeper into the abyss.*

*Who will deliver us?*

*When will this nightmare end?*

*Where do we go from here?*

*What, then, shall we do?*

*To ritual? Rule-keeping? Politics? Theology?*

*Or to the heart and mind, to the soul open to another:  
all of me for all of you; all of you for all of me.*

*Does love really win?*

God, it's me. Teach me to love today. Teach me to love the person next to me in bed, across from me at the register, next to me on the subway, above me on the pecking order, below me, too. Teach me to love the talking head I see on TV, the neighbor walking the dog, the houseless person holding a cardboard sign at the streetlight, and, even, the goofball I see in the mirror. Teach me to love—now and always, today and all tomorrows, even this hour, this minute, this second.

*Go into the world...* Notice what tugs at your heart, impassions your soul, intrigues your mind, and engages your strength. Notice, also, your neighbor. Who is your neighbor today—and how are you being invited to love them? Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 12:35-40**

While Jesus is teaching in the Temple courtyard, he asks, "How can the Scrupulous say the Anointed One is from David's family, a descendant, indeed, a son? David himself, by the Divine Spirit, said, 'The Sovereign said to my Sovereign, 'Sit in the place of honor and authority, at my right hand, until I place your enemies under your feet.' If David calls The Anointed One his 'Sovereign,' how can he be his son?'" The large crowd listens to him with delight, for they know Jesus is merely provoking the scruples of the Scrupulous.

As Jesus continues to teach the crowd, he turns serious: "Beware of the Scrupulous, who like to walk

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<sup>69</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 6:5.

<sup>70</sup> c.f. Leviticus 19:18.

dressed in their finest threads, stylish to the hilt, greeted with respect in the marketplace, having the best pew in worship and places of honor at banquets. Yet, they devour widows' savings and foreclose on the homes of the poor—all while saying long and lofty prayers. Don't be fooled by them, for great is their judgment."

*Messiah is more than a son, a name, a throne.  
Just as some religious folk are less—*

*Because they love the seats of honor,  
but leave empty chairs at the tables of the poor.*

*Because they bless with their mouths,  
but curse with their systems.*

*Because while pretending to be holy, they do harm,  
then hide behind hallelujahs.*

*The greater the mask, the deeper the judgment.  
True holiness is never hungry for applause.*

God, it's me. In a world addicted to gaslighting, I am somewhat chagrined to read about Jesus gaslighting the Scrupulous. Yet, I trust the circumstances required it and that his motives were pure. I promise not to use his example as justification for my own attempts to mess with people's heads. Instead, I will take for my lesson not to allow others to bully me—not physically, of course, but also not socially. Like Jesus, I will stand against bullies and set boundaries that call all to behavior that is just and kind. O Action, in your mercy, hear my prayer.

*Go into the world...* Notice where your assumptions about Jesus may be too small. Where is he inviting you into mystery, into deeper listening, into delight? What if Jesus is more than you ever expected or imagined? Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 12:41-44**

Jesus sits down across from the Temple treasury. Thirteen, trumpet-shaped, copper canisters stand to collect people's offering. Jesus watches the crowd put money into the canisters, the clink of metal coins sounding like popcorn popping. Many rich people throw in large amounts. Then a poor widow comes and puts in two

copper coins, two small clinks to add to the chorus of fundraising—worth only a fraction of a penny. Jesus calls his disciplined followers to attention: "Do you see that woman over there. I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are giving to the treasury. The others gave out of their abundance, but she, from her poverty, has given sacrificially everything she had—all she had to live on."

*Jesus sees what others ignore:  
worth not measured by wealth but by sacrifice,  
wealth that finds true treasure through generosity,  
treasure not in what is given but in the heart that gives.*

*Jesus hears what others disregard:  
two raindrops hitting the mighty river,  
their soft "plink, plink" sounding like a thunderclap,  
to the One whose ears are attuned to gratitude.*

*Jesus looks upon the widow,  
affirming her quiet generosity  
that mirrors her heart and  
reflects her trust in The Action's provision.*

*She gives not what is safe,  
but what is sacred:  
She gives herself,  
and Jesus sees her.*

God, it's me. Increase my trust in your provision that I may learn the widow's ways of generosity. Enhance my imagination, not for what can go wrong, but for all that is going right as I surrender myself to the way of Jesus. May I reflect your goodness and grace through my gratitude and giving, that others may encounter you and be drawn into the God-life.

*Go into the world...* Notice the quiet givers—the ones who go unseen. Notice also your own attitude when giving—not just what is easy to give, but what comes from the center of your life. How easy or difficult is it to trust while giving? Where do you focus when giving: on yourself, on others, or on The Action? Notice. Pray. Act.

#### **Mark 13:1-13**

As Jesus comes out of the Temple, one of his followers looks at the huge, ginormous stones of the

Temple<sup>71</sup> and says to him, “Teacher, look what large stones and magnificent buildings!”

Jesus replies, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left on another; all will be thrown down.”

Later, as he sits on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus privately: “Tell us, when will this happen? What will be the sign that all these things are about to be fulfilled?”

Jesus teaches them about the future. He specifically focuses on the *kairos* when the rule of Sovereign love will be made whole and complete: “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Anointed!’ And they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.<sup>72</sup> There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginnings of the labor pains.”

*The temple looks solid.  
The stones seem permanent.  
But they're not—so what is?*

*The world feels certain, until it isn't.  
Not what but who—who is solid?  
Who is certain?*

*Jesus, who speaks a promise echoing into eternity:  
This will all fall. And when it does,  
don't run to false messiahs, don't give in to fear.*

*The shaking is not the end.  
The chaos is not death.  
It's labor, just the beginning—*

*The Action birthing something new.*

*Stay awake.*

*Breathe.*

God, it's me. I hear preachers and politicians spout so-called “Christian Nationalism,”<sup>73</sup> and I worry—not about myself but about the masses of people who fall under their perverse sway. I fear their twisted version of the Gospel leads them into idolatry, supplanting the Nation for you and a political ideology for your teachings. Lead us not into temptation, O Action, but deliver us from this evil!

*Go into the world...* Notice what feels solid—and what is starting to shake. What old structures in your life are no longer holding? Where do you sense the labor pains of The Action's new thing? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 13:14–23**

Jesus continues to teach but changes his focus. He tells his disciplined followers what will happen to Jerusalem as the nation continues to pursue the path of Militarism, Nationalism, and Messianism: “When you see the Temple violated, its honor impugned and purpose made vulgar (those of you reading this after the fact know what I mean)<sup>74</sup> then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. The one on the roof must not go down or enter the house to take anything. The one in the field must not turn back to get a cloak, for there won't be time to gather it.

“Woe to those who are pregnant and to those nursing infants in those days! Pray that the time comes not in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of creation until now and never will be again.<sup>75</sup> If The Action had not shortened those

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<sup>71</sup> Some stones weighed as much as 80 tons (160,000 pounds) and stood over 6' by 6' by 15'.

<sup>72</sup> Once again the use of “kingdom” instead of “kin-dom” is intentional to convey the political reality of secular movements.

<sup>73</sup> Christian nationalism fuses Christian identity and national identity, advocating for the government to promote or enforce Christian values. Proponents often assert that their nation was founded as a Christian one and that its laws and institutions should reflect this heritage. One example of Christian Nationalism is the way it distorts legitimate patriotism (love or support of country) into an idolatrous nationalism (placing national goals above religious ethics and principles).

<sup>74</sup> c.f. Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11.

<sup>75</sup> The example of the atrocities of the siege of Jerusalem are fully described by Josephus. He declares that “the misfortunes of all men, *from the beginning of the world*, if they be compared to those of the Jews, are not so terrible as theirs were, nor did any age ever produce a generation more fruitful in wickedness *from the beginning of the world...* The horrors of war and sedition, of famine and pestilence, were such as exceeded all example or conception. The city was densely crowded by the multitudes which had come up to the Passover. Pestilence ensued, and famine followed. The commonest instincts of humanity were forgotten. Acts of violence and cruelty were perpetrated without compunction or remorse, and barbarities enacted which cannot be described. Mothers snatched the food from the mouths of their husbands and children, and one actually killed, roasted, and devoured her infant

days, no one would survive.<sup>76</sup> But for the sake of those whom The Action had chosen, the days were shortened.

If anyone tells you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Anointed!’ or, ‘Look! There is the Anointed!’—do not believe it. False messiahs and false truth-tellers will appear and perform incredible, wondrous acts to deceive, if possible, even those whom The Action has chosen. So, beware and stay alert! I have told you everything in advance.

*You’ll be handed over: hated and betrayed.  
Don’t be afraid and don’t plan speeches.  
Let the Spirit guide you.*

*Flee if you must, but don’t lose your soul.  
Run for safety but stay anchored in love.  
Your suffering, though sharp, won’t last.*

*On the darkest days, false saviors arise.  
They are not the One—hold fast to what he told you.  
Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly, and endure.*

*Endure! You will find you’ve been carried all along.*

God, it’s me. When panic rises, be my stillness. When danger comes, guide my feet. When all I can do is walk away or keep silent, walk with me and help me hold my tongue. O Divine Master, may I not so much seek to predict the future as to live alert in the present, to look for signs and wonders as to follow your voice, to protect my comfort as to guard my integrity, for trouble comes and you watch over my coming and going all the days of my life. Therefore, I lift my eyes to you, from whence comes my help.<sup>77</sup>

*Go into the world...* Notice the challenges and confusions that test your faith. Where are you tempted to panic, to chase flashy answers, to quit? What would it mean to

endure today—not by your power, but by the Spirit? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 13:24–31**

Jesus continues to teach about the rule of Sovereign love and shifts his focus back to the fullness of the *kairos*, using the poetic style of truth-tellers from past ages.<sup>78</sup>

In those days, after the suffering, the sun goes dark, the moon gives no light, the stars fall from heaven, and the powers in the heavens are shaken. People will see the Son of Humanity coming in clouds with great power and glory. He will send out the celestial messengers and gather his chosen ones from the four winds—from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven: every tribe and every clan, all races and all ethnicities,<sup>79</sup> each and everyone who is called into the God-life.

Learn this parable from the fig tree: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things happening, you know that the Son of Humanity is near—right at the gates. I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

*Today I attend our “Cross-Cultural Extravaganza,”  
a celebration of “racial-ethnic” congregations.  
Am I a token white person?*

*Presbyterian I am, in the United States,  
older, whiter, and more educated  
than the general populace.*

*What am I to hear in Jesus’ words of celebration—  
the four corners of the earth dancing to God-rhythms,  
younger, darker, and more diverse?*

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son...Dead bodies filled the houses and streets of the city, while cruel assassins rifled and mangled with the exultation of fiends. The besieged devoured even the filth of the streets, and so excessive was the stench that it was necessary to hurl 600,000 corpses over the wall, while 97,000 captives were taken during the war, and more than 1,100,000 perished in the siege. (See Josephus, *Bell. Jud.* vi. 9. 3.)

<sup>76</sup> Interesting note about how scholars date the writing of an ancient text: This sentence begins with a past tense verb “had not”

and concludes with a future tense “would survive.” This suggests to biblical scholars that the writer is describing what has already happened (the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.) before shifting back to when Jesus was speaking in present tense in the former time.

<sup>77</sup> c.f. Psalm 121.

<sup>78</sup> c.f. Isaiah 13:10, Joel 2:10, Daniel 7:13-14.

<sup>79</sup> Race is a social construct describing physical traits; ethnicity is a social construct focusing on cultural and heritage distinctions.

*Four corners of the earth will be dancing  
to God-rhythms when Jesus arrives—  
visible, plainspoken—  
not to scatter, but to gather, to bring us all home.*

*Branches soften, leaves unfold: Summer's near.  
Hope sweeps in from earth's four corners.  
Earth knows how to hope, and so can we.  
Let us dance the God-rhythms together.*

God, it's me. Instead of scanning the sky for disaster, may I watch the trees for renewal. Remind me to notice the tender branch, the first leaf, and the quiet signs of your nearness. Let your words root in me more deeply than the fear the world may sow. May I not worry so much about predicting when "the end" will come but trust your enduring Word, cultivating attentiveness to its truth: I am your beloved, and you have placed me in this world to be a blessing to those I meet today.

*Go into the world...* Notice little signs of renewal: an act of courage or compassion? A softened heart or spoken truth? What in your life today might be the "first, budding leaf" that foretells hope? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 13:32-37**

Jesus continues to warn his disciplined followers about the fulfillment of the *kairos*, "But about that day or hour no one knows. Not me. Not the celestial messengers. Not the big-haired preachers. Not even the town drunk. 'No one' means no one. Only The Action knows. As for you, your calling is to be alert and stay woke.<sup>80</sup> For you do not know when the *kairos* will come.

"It is like someone going on a journey: They leave home and put their servants in charge, each with a task, and command the night guard to stay alert. That's you, the guard. Your calling is to stay awake, be alert, remain vigilant—for you do not know when the owner of the house will return, in the evening or at midnight, when the cock crows or at dawn. Whenever it is, don't let the homeowner find you sleeping when they arrive suddenly. What I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

*Hope is not passive.  
It is alert, attentive, alive.*

*We are not asked to predict, but to prepare.  
Not to decode the mystery, but to dwell in it—*

*awake each hour, awaiting dawn's arrival—  
and, with it, resurrection, consummation?*

*Keep your post, tend your task.  
Be found ready through right relationships.*

*While the world slumbers, we, the  
wakeful, watchful, even weary, wait in love.*

God, it's me. You who comes in the quiet hours—teach me how to stay awake, with a steady heart, with listening ears attuned to lament, and eyes that see into deepest darkness, with hands that have both a firm grip and a tender touch, and a faith that waits when nothing moves. O Divine Master, may I let go of the desire to know (which really is all about control) and trust your *kairos* will come and I'll be found doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with you, my Sovereign.

*Go into the world...* Notice what dulls your spirit—what makes you sleepy to the Spirit's nudges. What would it look like to "stay awake" today with hope and attentiveness? To what task is The Action calling you today? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 14:1-11**

It is two days before Passover (also known as the Festival of Unleavened Bread) that remembers Israel's hasty departure from Egypt and celebrates The Action's deliverance of Their people from slavery. The Rulers and Scrupulous are searching for a way to arrest Jesus—to shut him up for good—but they want to keep their conspiracy quiet. They say, "Not during the festival—or the people may riot." (They know the festival is a time of national pride mixed with religious fervor: Jerusalem during Passover is a powder keg ready to explode.)<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> The Greek work *agrupneo* means "awake," so I am taking a wee bit of poetic license with the paraphrase.

<sup>81</sup> This parenthetical sentence is not in the Greek text but added for interpretive context.

Meanwhile, in Bethany, Jesus is at the house of Simon the leper. As Jesus sits at the table, a woman comes with an alabaster jar, pale and luminous, full of expensive, scented ointment—pure nard—used for acts of devotion. The woman breaks the jar and pours it on Jesus' head.

Some of the men grow angry. "Why this waste? This ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, almost ten months of wages, and the money given to the poor!" The men scold the woman.

But Jesus says, "Leave her alone. Why are you troubling her? She has done a beautiful thing for me." Then Jesus quoted Deuteronomy, "You will always have the poor with you." He knew his disciplined followers would know the rest of the verse, "Therefore, I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'"<sup>82</sup> Jesus reminded his followers, "You can show kindness to them whenever you wish, and you should, but you will not always have me. The spiritual axiom applies to all: 'Do what you can, not what you cannot.'<sup>83</sup> This woman has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is proclaimed in the whole world, her devotion will be remembered."

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, goes to the Rulers to betray Jesus. When they hear it, they rejoice and promise him money. Judas begins to look for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them.

*The men scheme in whispers,  
corruption hidden,  
manipulating the crowds:  
Death is scheduled.*

*She walks into a room full of men,  
does not ask permission, does not speak,  
no measuring, no restraint,  
just a flood of fragrance that spills into eternity.*

*In the silence, her act speaks louder than any sermon.  
She loves before the grave.  
She honors before the glory.  
The men call it waste.*

*Jesus calls it beautiful.*

*God, it's me. Teach me the kind of holy devotion willing to give my full Self and my treasure for your honor. Yet, let me not neglect the continuing commandment to love and give to those in need. May I live with the bold humility of the woman (or is it humble boldness?) in all I do, and in how I do it. May glory, honor, and praise be given to you, O Crucified One.*

*Go into the world...* Notice what you've been keeping to yourself. What offering have you withheld, calculating the cost? What might it mean to "do what you can" in love, right now, while it matters? Break the jar. Tell the story. Be remembered by love. Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 14:12-26**

On the first day of Passover, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, Jesus' disciplined followers say to him: "Where do you want us to go to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

He sends two of them, saying, "Go into the city. A man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, 'Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my followers?'' The owner will show you a large upstairs room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciplined followers go into the city, find it just as Jesus tells them, and prepare the meal.

That evening, Jesus arrives with the Twelve. As they are reclining and eating, he says: "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."

Jesus' followers begin to grieve deeply. They are stunned and say to him, "Surely not I?"<sup>84</sup>

Jesus says: "It is one of the Twelve, one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Humanity goes as it is written about him, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed! It would be better for that one not to have been born."

While they are eating the Passover, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them, saying, "Take, this is my body." Then Jesus takes the third ritual cup, the cup after supper that is commonly called "the Cup of Redemption." Jesus gives thanks and gives the cup to

<sup>82</sup> c.f. Deuteronomy 15:11.

<sup>83</sup> This axiom, taken from medieval spiritual writers and mystics, is not in the Greek text but seems congruent with Jesus' message in this passage.

<sup>84</sup> I am amazed Jesus' followers' first instinct is to look in the mirror rather than out the window. My experience is that people's instinct is to point the finger at others: "Is it you?" Or, "It is you!"

them. All of them drink from it. He says, “This is my sacrifice poured out for many, sign of the covenant promised by the truth-teller Jeremiah,<sup>85</sup> symbol of the God-life that dwells in the human heart. I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that Day when I share it as beloved community in the kin-dom.” After singing the final hymn of the Passover meal, they go out to the Mount of Olives.

*Betrayal sits at the table,  
but so does grace.  
The covenant is not made with sanctimony and fire,  
but with crumbs and wine.*

*Jesus blesses what will be broken.  
Pours what will be spilled.  
Feeds those who will flee.  
Still, he feeds.*

*Not for power, nor for vengeance,  
for covenant, for relationship:  
love served in pieces, sipped from cup, becoming  
a welcome heart for the indwelling Word.*

God, it's me. Let me receive your sacrament in a worthy manner: cognizant of your love and the lament of the world; recognizing that I am a sheep of your pasture, a sinner in need of your redeeming, made a saint by your grace. As I have been blessed, may I be a blessing to all whom I encounter, committed to sharing holy community through Jesus and offering holy compassion in his name.

*Go into the world...* Notice the sacred in the ordinary: bread, cup, table, song, other people. What tables are you avoiding because you fear being exposed or wonder if you belong? What parts of you are ready to take, to bless, to break, to share? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 14:27-42**

On the Mount of Olives. Jesus says to them, “You will all fall away; for it is written,

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<sup>85</sup> c.f. Jeremiah 31:31-34.

<sup>86</sup> c.f. Zechariah 13:7.

<sup>87</sup> The Greek words used are *eckbamtheistai* and *ademonein*, which translate as “troubled and distressed” (NIV) and have the connotations of being astonished and hating what is happening.

I will strike the shepherd,  
the sheep will scatter.<sup>86</sup>

And after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

Peter says to Jesus, “No way! Ain't going to happen! Even if everyone else falls away, I will stand beside you.”

Jesus says to Peter, “I tell you the truth, this very night, in just a few hours, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.”

Peter insists, “Nope, nope, nope. Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you.” And all of his followers say the same—each one of them becoming guilty of failing their vow.

Jesus and his followers come to an olive orchard called Gethsemane. Jesus says to his followers, “Sit here and wait for me while I pray.” Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him, and begins to be greatly distressed and troubled; he is both astonished that his ministry has come to this end and loathes what is about to happen.<sup>87</sup> Jesus tells Peter, James, and John, “My soul is sorrowful, even to death; abide with me, and keep watch.” Going a little farther, Jesus falls to the ground and prays that if it is possible that the trauma to come might pass over him. He prays, “*Abba*, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me. Yet not what I want but what you will.”

Jesus returns and finds Peter, James, and John sleeping. He says to Peter (though he doesn't use the name that he, Jesus, had given him but his former name, indicating that Peter had not yet become a new creation), “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into trial. The spirit wills, and the flesh wastes.”

Again, Jesus goes away and prays, saying the same words. And again he finds his followers sleeping—their eyes are heavy—and they are without excuses, not knowing what to say to their Sovereign.

Jesus returns a third time and says, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The *kairos* has come. Look! The Son of Humanity is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise!<sup>88</sup> Let us walk toward my destiny, for my betrayer is at hand.”

<sup>88</sup> The Greek word used is *egeiresthe*, which can mean “rise” or “raise” and is used also to convey “resurrection” (c.f. 1 Corinthians 15:21, et.al.). Jesus could have said (Mark could have written *anistemi*, “to stand.”) I believe the use of this verb is

*Sitting vigil with the dying,  
grim visages upon the family,  
seconds seem like minutes, minutes like hours.*

*Sadness gathers, permeating the room,  
turning our voices into whispers, if not stealing them,  
but not stilling our prayers.*

*Kairos draws near;  
attention turns from the beeping machine  
to the breath—our own and our beloved’s.*

*The time is almost upon us.  
Nothing we can do to stop time, or  
what is about to come.*

*“Let us pray....”*

God, it’s me. I have sat vigil with friends and families—lost in love and hope, sharing beloved community rooted in you. Such moments are sacred ground. I pray I will be found ever faithful to those in need of my presence, accepting of my prayers. As well, I pray that when the time comes when I have such need, I will welcome the communion of my siblings in Jesus who pray for me in the hour of my passing.

*Go into the world...* Notice what cup is being placed before you—not one you would choose, but one that leads to deeper faith. Where are you being asked to stay awake, to stay near, to stay true? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 14:43-52**

Immediately, while Jesus is still speaking, Judas—one of the Twelve—arrives. With Judas is a gang armed with swords and clubs. The gang had been sent by the Rulers, Scrupulous, and Old Ones. Now Judas, the betrayer, had given them a sign, saying, “The one I kiss on the hand is the man; arrest him. Lead him away under guard.” As soon as Judas arrives, he goes up to Jesus and says, “Rabbi!” and kisses him on the hand. Then the gang of thugs grabs Jesus and arrests him. One of Jesus’ followers standing nearby draws a sword and strikes the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

Jesus says to the gang, “Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me as if I were a bandit? I was with you in the Temple teaching daily, and you didn’t arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” Then all of Jesus’ followers lose their discipline and desert him, fleeing in fear. A certain young man is following Jesus, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. When the gang sent to arrest Jesus tries to seize him, he leaves the cloth behind and runs away naked, a living metaphor of what had just occurred.

*Christian Nationalism ascends,  
our nation descends into tribalism, militarism, fear—  
mirroring Israel in Sheol:  
gray, translucent, a mere shadow of its glory.*

*Glory without substance,  
waves like a flag in a stiff breeze,  
seams tear, shredding dignity,  
like a man running naked into the night.*

*Night ascends,  
religion and violence embrace,  
betraying truth, rejecting peace,  
creating rage and fear, but mostly fear.*

*Fear turns affection’s kiss into camouflage—  
nothing exists that is not a mirage.  
What will become of the people who place  
God under nation?*

God, it’s me. You who stand undefended—forgive us when we run. Forgive, also, the kiss that wounds, the sword that defends, the cloak we try to hold on to. We are all in the story—fleeing, striking, hiding, grasping for a way out. Yet you stay. You face the mob, refuse violence, and let yourself be taken. Somehow, this is your glory. For it is in our fleeing that your faithfulness shines, it is in our failure that your mercy ascends, it is in your surrender that salvation dawns.

*Go into the world...* Notice where betrayal has touched your life. When have you betrayed beauty with words that sounded like kindness? When have you fled from love because the cost felt too high? What moment of courage

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proleptic, which is a literary device where a future event is anticipated or described before it occurs.

passed you by? Name the moment to Jesus and let him free you from it. Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 14:53-65

They take Jesus to the high priest, and all the Rulers, Old Ones, and Scrupulous gather. Peter, wary yet courageous, follows at a distance, right into the courtyard. Peter sits with the guards, warming himself by the charcoal fire. The Rulers and the whole council are looking for testimony against Jesus. They want to put him to death. But they find no convincing testimony because the witnesses' stories don't agree. Some are obviously lying. Some stand and give this false testimony: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple made with hands, and in three days build another, not made with hands.'" But even on this point, the witness testimony does not agree.

Eventually, the high priest stands in the middle of all the Rulers to interrogate Jesus personally, "Have you no answer? What is it they testify against you?" Jesus is silent and does not answer, as Isaiah the truth-teller foretold.<sup>89</sup> The high priest asks Jesus directly, "Are you the Anointed One, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Jesus replies, "I am." And Jesus continues by linking himself to the Son of Humanity who stood before the Ancient of Days, as told by the truth-teller Daniel: "And you will see the Son of Humanity seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven."<sup>90</sup>

The high priest tears his clothes as a sign of lament, for, as he believes, his ears have just heard blasphemy. The high priest cries out, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All the Rulers condemn Jesus as deserving death. Some begin to spit on him, blindfold him, strike him, and say, "Prophecy!" The guards take him and beat him.

*The trial begins with lies,  
twisted words and mismatched stories,  
fear masquerades as law, the law seeking fear.*

*And Jesus, silent.  
Asked the only question that matters:  
"Are you the One?"*

*Jesus does not dodge,  
does not delay,  
is not defeated.*

*He speaks the truth his accusers dread:  
"I AM."  
The Action's Name upon his lips.*

*Chaos erupts: furor mixed with fear.  
Robes tear. Spit flies. Fists land,  
blurring Daniel's vision.*

*Angels do not intervene.  
This was always going to be the end,  
and the beginning.*

*God, it's me. Grant me the serenity to remain silent when standing amidst a swirl of lies, the courage to speak truth to power, and the wisdom to know when either is your will. Faced with a tsunami of fake news, leaders' disassembling, and the deconstruction of a once proud republic, may I seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with you. Here I stand, I can do no other unless convinced by your Word.<sup>91</sup>*

*Go into the world... Notice where lies take hold, and where truth demands quiet courage. What does it cost you to stand with Jesus in a hostile room? Where are you being asked to say, "I am with him"? Notice. Pray. Act.*

### Mark 14:66-72

While Jesus is on trial upstairs, Peter is below in the courtyard. One of the high priest's servant girls sees Peter warming himself and looks closely at him and says, "You were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth."

Peter denies Jesus, "I don't know what you're talking about." He moves to the forecourt. A rooster crows.

The servant girl sees him again and starts telling those standing around, "This man is one of them!" Again, Peter denies Jesus.

A little later, those standing around say to Peter, "Surely you're one of them—you're a Galilean."

highly (and likely) intentionally provocative, as the response suggests.

<sup>91</sup> These are the words that Martin Luther spoke at his tribunal when arrested for heresy.

<sup>89</sup> c.f. Isaiah 53:7.

<sup>90</sup> c.f. Daniel 7:12-13, specifically, and 7:9-14 and 12:1-3 more broadly, where we see "the Ancient of Days" and "one like the Son of Humanity" who take up and are given, respectively, the eternal throne of heaven and earth. Jesus' words, therefore, are

Peter begins to curse and swear, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about!” A rooster crows a second time. And Peter remembers what Jesus told him: “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” Peter breaks down, fractured inside, utterly devastated. Dropping to his knees, Peter wails in lament.<sup>92</sup>

*Have you ever failed  
so perfectly, so epically, so utterly that  
redemption is not just improbable but impossible?*

*Falling, falling, falling into dark Abyss  
from which no light can escape: a moral black hole  
pulls all gravity, even grace, into its maw.*

*Peter weeps, not because he’s weak,  
but because he loves and fails—  
perfectly, epically, utterly.*

*His tears  
become the baptismal waters  
of a redemption that must, for now, wait.*

God, it’s me. Free me from shame’s hold upon my heart. Free me from guilt both deserved and grasped. Free me to trust that the Good News, your Good News, is not mere rhetoric but a transformational journey away from the darkness of the Abyss and toward the light of Eternity. Free me through your love. Free me for your love, that others may learn of your Good News that claims us all.

*Go into the world...* Notice the moments you’re tempted to distance yourself from Jesus. What would it look like to stay close—even when it’s risky? And if you’ve denied him, hear the rooster and weep—but know: the story is not over. Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 15:1-15**

As soon as morning comes, the chief priests, finished with their sham trial, become more of a lynching party, with their whole gang invited to join in. Guards bind Jesus, lead him away, and hand him over to the Roman

Governor Pilate for questioning. Pilate questions Jesus. “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus answers, “Your words,” as the chief priests hurl accusations at Jesus.

Pilate waves them off and asks Jesus, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you! What did you do to rile up your own people so much?” But Jesus makes no further reply. Pilate is amazed.

At the festival of Passover, Pilate’s custom was to release one prisoner for the crowd—anyone they ask. There is a man named Barabbas, whose name in Aramaic means “Son of Father.” Barabbas instigated a rebellion against Rome and committed murder during the uprising. The crowd arrives and begins to ask Pilate to do what he always does: release a prisoner. Pilate asks them, “Do you want me to release the King of the Jews?” (Pilate knows the accusations against Jesus are bogus and that it is out of envy that the chief priests have handed Jesus over.) But the chief priests stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead.

Pilate says, “Then what should I do with the one you call the King of the Jews?”

The people gathered in the courtyard shout, “Crucify him!”

Pilate asks, “Why? What evil has he done?”

But the stooges recruited by the chief priests shout all the more, “Crucify him!” Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, releases Barabbas. And after flogging Jesus, he hands him over to be crucified.

*Truth stands silent as violence roars.  
The crowd is offered mercy and chooses mayhem.  
Barabbas goes free as Jesus takes his place.*

*The crowd shouts and the system folds: justice is lost.*

*No evil is found.*

*No one stops the injustice.*

*Not the priests, not Pilate, not us.*

*Jesus is flogged, handed over: Still, he does not run.*

*Pilate, ever pragmatic,  
like so many politicians before and since,  
washes his hands on a cross-shaped decision.*

*Power being more practical than truth.*

does not indicate if Peter dropped to his knees; this is added as interpretive context to express the poetic sense of the moment’s intensity.

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<sup>92</sup> The Greek verbs used in this sentence are *epiphalon*, meaning to fracture and break (think: Wily E. Coyote being hit with an anvil) and *klaio*, meaning to weep or cry in the customary, loud weeping common to middle eastern culture when expressing grief. The text

God, it's me. Amid these chaotic days, teach me when to speak and when to remain silent. When the powerful trade truth for popularity, let me stand with the crucified. When innocence is sacrificed for convenience, let me not stay silent. When the Gospel sounds like loss, reveal the deeper love unfolding. Whether I speak or stay silent, may I always stand against all religious oppression and civil tyranny, even if I stand alone—except with you by my side.

*Go into the world...* Notice who's being handed over, and for what reasons. Where do you see injustice carried out in the name of order, fear, or tradition? What would it mean to stand with Jesus when the crowd chants otherwise? Notice. Pray. Act.

### Mark 15:16–32

The soldiers lead Jesus into the courtyard of the palace—that is, Governor Pilate's headquarters—and call together the religious leaders of Israel to stand alongside the Roman power. Soldiers dress Jesus in a purple cloak, twisting some thorns into a crown, and place it on him. The soldiers begin to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They strike his head, spit on him, and kneel down in mock homage. After mocking him, they strip him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes back on him, then they lead him out to crucify him.

The soldiers exert their absolute and total control over the populace, compelling a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who is coming in from the country, to carry Jesus' cross. (Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus.) The soldiers bring Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means "Place of the Skull." They try to give him wine mixed with myrrh, but Jesus does not take it. They crucify Jesus.

The soldiers then divide his clothes, gambling for them to decide who gets what. It is nine o'clock in the morning when they crucify Jesus. The inscription of the charge against him reads: "The King of the Jews." Along with Jesus, the soldiers crucify two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who pass by<sup>93</sup> hurl insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "Ha! You who would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days—save yourself! Come down from that cross!"

In a similar way, the Rulers and Scrupulous mocked him among themselves, but not to his face as they feared the Roman soldiers. To one another they said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Anointed One, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and trust in him." Even those who are crucified with him taunt him.

*Thorns crown his head.  
Blows bruise his brow.  
Spit insults his cheek.*

*Still, he is King.*

*The journey to the Cross unfolds before him—  
not to honor but humiliate.  
not in reverence but ridicule.*

*Still, he is King.*

*"Come down," "Prove yourself," onlookers chide.  
"Be the king we want," they belittle, for  
they want him to be...little, not who he is.*

*Still, he stays with them.*

*He once asked his friends,  
"Stay with me one hour."  
His friends couldn't do it, not even for an hour.*

*Still, he stays with us.*

God, it's me. Make me steadfast amidst the tumult of daily living. Through challenges and opportunities, may I speak with kindness, serve with compassion, and act with integrity. When tempted to allow my heart to turn inward in anger, bitterness, or hatred, may the eyes of my heart remain on you, on your love, and on your mercy toward me: your beloved.

*Go into the world...* Notice who is mocked, who is burdened, and who is crucified by injustice. Notice who is being handed over by the authorities and for what reasons. Where do you see injustice carried out in the name of order, fear, or tradition? Notice. Pray. Act.

or perhaps Mark is using the phrase ironically, as the people's insults are the antithesis of the divine presence. I do not have an opinion, just have an observation.

<sup>93</sup> This is a curious use of "pass by," which in Exodus 33:22 and Mark 6:48 indicates the presence of the deity. Is this Mark's subtle nod to *dei*—the Greek word that means "the divine necessity"—

## Mark 15:33-41

At noon, darkness covers the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock, Jesus cries out in a loud voice: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabathani?" Which means: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Some bystanders hear him and say, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah."

Someone runs, fills a sponge with the cheap, sour wine Roman soldiers drink,<sup>94</sup> puts it on a stick, and offers it to him to drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." (He offers Jesus drink because crucifixion caused fierce, painful thirst, and he wanted Jesus to linger, to give time for Elijah to rescue him.)<sup>95</sup>

Then Jesus gives a second loud cry and breathes his last. The curtain of the Temple is torn in two, from top to bottom, the veil between heaven and earth sheared, the direct vision into the divine heart now a living possibility.

When the Roman centurion, a Gentile standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, sees how Jesus dies, he becomes the first person to acknowledge Jesus' full identity. He confesses: "Truly this man was The Action's Son."

There are also women watching from a distance. Among them are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These women were also Jesus' followers and provided for him when he was in Galilee. Many other women are there who have come up with him to Jerusalem.

*Darkness at noon.*

*Creation holds its breath.*

*The world blinks.*

*The Action is missing.*

*Something tears*

*not only in the Temple*

*but in the heavens,*

*and my heart.*

*The soldier is the first to see him truly.*

*Women follow closely.*

*Where are the Twelve?*

*Where am I amidst this soul desolation?*

*I cannot bear a world where*

*I abandon and am abandoned, where*

*I find neither The Action nor my true self.*

*I long to begin again.*

God, it's me. You who cry out into the silence—teach me to pray when answers do not come, when I am not rescued, when I am not spared—even when I am forsaken. Forgive me when I run from the dark, when I rush to explain, when I cannot bear to witness the holy unraveling of what I thought was your goodness. O Divine Master, may I not so much seek to avoid despair as to enter into it with you, to escape grief as to let it open me to my need, to speak answers as to hold the question gently. For it is in your last breath that my first breath begins, in your absence that I seek your presence, in your death that the God-life is revealed.

*Go into the world...* Notice where darkness hovers, where grief speaks, where silence remains. Who stands faithfully amidst pain? Where is the veil thin between heaven and earth? Where might you say with awe, "Truly, this is the divine in my midst"? Notice. Pray. Act.

## Mark 15:42-47

When evening comes, Joseph of Arimathea arrives. It is the day before the sabbath.. Joseph is a respected member of the Jewish leadership council, one of the Rulers, and he himself is waiting for the kingdom to be established. Joseph dares to go to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. Pilate is surprised that Jesus is already dead—crucifixion usually takes much longer. Pilate calls the centurion and asks if Jesus is dead. When Pilate hears confirmation, he gives Jesus' body to Joseph.

Joseph buys a linen cloth: pure and pristine.<sup>96</sup> He takes Jesus' corpse down from the cross, yanking the nails from his wrists and feet, the rusty nails a bit bent, the wood as rough as expected. Jesus' body is lighter than Joseph imagined it would be. Still, Jesus is dead weight, so Joseph struggles. He calls for his servants to help him, for Joseph is a wealthy man and doesn't need to do this alone. The

<sup>94</sup> Most likely the beverage was *posca*, wine vinegar mixed with water that soldiers, servants, and slaves could afford.

<sup>95</sup> The parenthetical sentence is not in the Greek text but added to provide interpretive context for the social dynamics of how people responded to Jesus' first loud cry.

<sup>96</sup> The descriptions of Jewish burial rituals in this paragraph are added to provide interpretive context.

ritual of death is a shared experience, he reminds himself. Together, Joseph and his servants wrap Jesus in the linen and lay him in a tomb cut into the soft, Judean limestone making it possible for burial crypts to be above ground and accessible to family. Little did Joseph know that the Jewish burial custom of allowing the body to decompose so that the bones could be entombed in a clay jar would not occur. Joseph assumes this would be Jesus' final resting place, and he intends to give Jesus all the respect he is due. Joseph then rolls a stone against the tomb's door.

Joseph's work complete, he walks away, watched by Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the Younger and Joses, who see where the body is laid.

*I know this ritual well—  
closing the casket, rolling it to the hearse,  
six strong arms carrying it to a hole in the ground,  
while I walk, slowly and somberly, before it.*

*A ritual of sorrow and sanctity—  
a finality for which few are prepared, fewer are eager,  
which comes to us, ready or not.  
I do all within my power to honor the deceased.*

*Joseph, caring and courageous,  
asked for the body of a rebel,  
sentenced for “blasphemy and sedition.”<sup>97</sup>  
Associating with sedition is not an easy choice.*

*Some things are not a “choice” but a stand taken—  
“I can do no other.”  
“This shall not abide.”  
“It matters not the consequence.”*

*Caring for Jesus was, for Joseph, such a stand.  
How could he do otherwise?  
How can you?  
How can I?*

*Joseph honored the dead  
and so prepared for the living.  
Some rituals lead to a surprise.*

*God, it's me. When hope ended, Joseph dared to act—  
not with certainty but with kindness. He carried you  
like a lost child, wrapped you in dignity, and laid you to  
rest. Teach me to love in the aftermath of others'  
grief, to honor when the shadows lengthen, and dusk  
turns to night, and to trust not in what is seen but in  
your mercy. May I not so much seek to protect myself  
from sorrow as to share it with others, to find quick  
answers as to stay with holy questions, to conquer  
death as to plant seeds of hope in the soil from which  
resurrection awaits to spring into life.*

*Go into the world...* Notice the quiet bravery of bereavement. What sacred tasks lie before you in the aftermath of loss? Where are you being called to share grief or to serve in the void it leaves behind for others? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 16:1-8**

When the sabbath is over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome buy spices so they can go and anoint Jesus' body—an act of sacred ritual borne upon their love for Jesus. They come to the tomb just after sunrise, early on the first day of the week, a week they believed was to be the first week of a year of mourning, but which was to be revealed as the first day of the New Creation. They say to each other, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But when they look up, they see that the stone—which is very large—has already been rolled back. They enter the tomb and see a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. They are amazed and astonished<sup>98</sup> to see him, as he should not be in the tomb.

The young man says to Salome and the Marys, “Don't look so astonished! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. As he told you in advance, he has been raised. He is not here. Look! This is the place they laid him. Indeed, go, tell his disciplined followers and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”

<sup>97</sup> c.f. The Brief Statement of Faith, *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

<sup>98</sup> The Greek word used is *exethambethesan*, which is defined as “amazed” or “astonished.” The Greek does not hint at fear as

found in some translations. The young man uses this same verb when responding to the women in the next verse.

And the women go out and run from the tomb, trembling with ecstasy.<sup>99</sup> But in their state of awe and reverence, the women say nothing to anyone.<sup>100</sup>

*Some moments are timeless—ecstasy and joy—  
some moments beckon through shadows.*

*Salome and the Marys look for the dead  
only to discover the doorway to the living.  
They tremble at the possibilities.*

*And then the Story, as Mark tells it, ends:  
no “appearances,” no “Good News” proclaimed.  
Why don’t the women tell anyone?*

*Maybe that’s the point—resurrection  
always ahead of us, pulls us from graves and grieving,  
the Story refuses to end.*

God, it’s me. You are not where I left you—not in my comfortable memory, not in my cherry-picking of Scripture verses that make glad my heart, not in anything that adds to my own convenience. “He is not here,” I am told, and you are not. You are moving before me: transforming death into life, turning hatred into love, teaching a kin-dom of peace in a world of war. You are not where I left you but are where I am going. May I learn to recognize you when I get to where you are: seeking your face, listening for your voice, joining in the work of your hands, and always—yes, always—sharing your heart. As I walk away from your Empty Tomb, may I discover the presence of the God-life.

*Go into the world...* Notice the places where death seems final—where the tomb is sealed, where the stone looks too heavy. When have you expected finality only to discover mystery? What stones have already been rolled away, while

you were still worrying? What if in every encounter, resurrection has already begun? Notice. Pray. Act.

### **Mark 16:9–20<sup>101</sup>**

Jesus, risen early on the first day of the first week of the New Creation, appears first to Mary Magdalene, the one from whom he cast out seven demons. Mary goes and tells his companions—who are grieving and weeping—but when they hear that Jesus is alive and that Mary has seen him, they do not accept her truth.

After showing up to Mary, Jesus appears in another form to two of the disciplined followers as they walk into the country. These two followers return and tell the others, but the others do not trust this report either.

Later, Jesus appears to the Eleven as they recline at the table. He rebukes his followers for their lack of trust and stubborn hearts because they do not trust those who saw him after he was raised. Jesus says to them: “Go into all the cosmos — all that is seen and unseen, every creature great and small — and proclaim the good news to the whole creation — not just humanity, but the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and everything that walks, hops, or crawls across the ground. The one who trusts, who takes on my identity, and is immersed in my beloved community, will be made whole and complete. The one who does not trust, who rejects becoming their new, true, and whole self, chooses judgment. And these signs will accompany those who trust in me: they will confront evil and brokenness and not be overwhelmed. They will pursue health and wholeness for all and discover the God-life.

Then Jesus, after speaking to them, is taken up into heaven and sits at the right hand of The Action. His disciplined followers go out and proclaim the good news everywhere, while The Action works with them and through them, confirming that the message has *dunamis*, which points to the transformational impact of the Good News—all things becoming New Creation through the Word spoken in Jesus.

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<sup>99</sup> The question of the women’s emotional state continues. The Greek words used are *ekstasis*, translated as “ecstasy” or “ecstatic,” and *tromos*, translated as “trembling.” Paul often combines “fear and trembling” to describe the experience of being overwhelmed with awe in the presence of God rather than a fear-based definition of one’s emotional state, c.f. 1 Corinthians 2:3, 2 Corinthians 7:15, Ephesians 6:5, Philippians 2:12, et.al. It seems plausible that traditional translations express at least a patriarchal prejudice and perhaps a misogynistic interpretation of the women’s emotional responses.

<sup>100</sup> The Greek word used is *phobeo*, which is usually translated as “fear.” This is the first verb used in the passage that specifically connects the women’s responses to fear. However, a legitimate, alternate definition for *phobeo* is “to be in awe.”

<sup>101</sup> As most English translations will note, the oldest Greek manuscripts end with 16:1-8 (the “first ending”). Mark 16:9-20 (the “second ending”) appears to have been added by the Church because they could not conceive of a Gospel without a description of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

*He is risen—still they doubt.  
He appears—still they hesitate.  
He sends, and they go.*

*Resurrection doesn't wait for perfection.  
It sends the slow, the skeptical, the stubborn  
to everyone and everything.*

*Resurrection is not reserved for us.  
All creation is caressed:  
The birds of the air and the wolf of Gubbio.<sup>102</sup>*

*Jesus ascends but does not leave.  
He is among us still—  
in signs, in stories, in every trembling yes.*

God, it's me. Here I am, send me. To those who don't easily trust and also those who actively resist Good News. To those who grieve and those who second-guess. To all creation—high and low, far and near—until you become all in all and heaven descends to earth. May I find my purpose in your sending—proclaiming your will as I embody your way, practicing trust as I share your Truth, displaying love as I share your Life.

*Go into the world...* Notice who Jesus appears to first—those dismissed, those discouraged, those doubting. Who in your life sounds similar to one of these? To whom is Jesus sending you to share Good News? Notice. Pray. Act.

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<sup>102</sup> St. Francis famously preached Jesus to the birds of the air and the wolf of Gubbio, but said of humans, "Preach the Gospel always and, if necessary, use words."

## Appendix A: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Bible Study

### Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

1. *Round 1—NOTICE*

Write<sup>103</sup> and then share five (5) "I notice..." statements about the passages' textual or literary content (e.g., "The word joy is repeated," "The speaker is Moses," "The younger son went to a distant country"). Focus only on the text's content but not meaning or ethics (e.g. Not, "I think this means," or, "What I hear God saying is..."). There will be an opportunity to focus on meaning and action in later steps.

**Focus = DATA and DETAILS**

2. *Round 2—WONDER*

Write and then share four (4) "I wonder about..." statements or questions. Questions can focus on textual content, theological meaning, or ethical expression (e.g. "I wonder about how this passage relates to Psalm 119?" "I wonder why David was so angry?")

**Focus = INQUISITIVENESS**

3. *Round 3—THINK*

Write and then share three (3) "I think..." statements about what this passage means. These three statements are the cognitive and intellectual expressions of your engaging Scripture (e.g. "This passage expresses God's mercy," or, "God hates injustice").

**Focus = CLARITY AND COHERENCE**

4. *Round 4—VALUE*

Write and then share two (2) "I value..." statements that describe the two values to which you are being called by the passage (e.g. "I am called to express humility," or, "God wants me to value corporate unity"). There may be many values implicit in the passage, but only write the two values to which you are most strongly being called today.

**Focus = CORE CONVICTIONS**

5. *Round 5—COMMIT*

Write and then share one (1) "I commit..." statement that says one action to which you will commit as a response to this passage (e.g. "I will give you my full attention when you speak," or, "I will honor the sabbath this week by...").

**Focus = ACTION**

6. Close by praying for each other!

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<sup>103</sup> Writing can be done either before or during the study.

## Appendix B: 3P Bible Study

### Format

1. *Choose a facilitator.* The person who leads can be the same person each week or rotate among participants. The facilitator's job is not to teach but to create a safe space for everyone to share their perceptions and understanding of the material without being interrupted, talked over, or argued into silence. For all activities, participants may share or pass.

2. *Round 1—PARAPHRASE*

Have each participant choose one passage of Scripture from the assigned text that stood out for them. It may have stood out because it inspired them or challenged them. It may have stood out because it caused them to wonder or answered a question. Invite each participant to share the passage that, for them, stood out and speak to why they chose the passage they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections of a passage for the group to discuss. For each verse or section, invite participants to respond with what they notice, appreciate or wonder about. Invite participants to respond also to the core comfort, conviction, or challenge they hear in the verse or section.

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one to three verses or short sections from an English Bible. Invite participants to write their own paraphrase. If they choose to do so, participants may share their paraphrase with the group.

3. *Round 2—POETRY*

Have each participant choose one passage of poetry from the assigned text that stood out for them. How did the poem speak to them? What insights into Scripture or life did the poem invite? Invite each participant to share the poem that, for them, spoke to them.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two poems for the group to discuss. How does the poem tell the Scripture "slant"? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) Facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a poem based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

4. *Round 3—PRAYER*

Have each participant choose one prayer from the assigned text that stood out for them. What in the prayer spoke? Did the prayer evoke "amen" or "may it never be," or some other kind of response? Invite each participant to share the prayer that, for them, stood out and why they chose the prayer they did.

(Alternate I) The facilitator chooses one or two prayers for the group to discuss. How does the prayer reflect the Scripture? How does it flow from Scripture to life? What insights or wonder does it invite? What questions or challenge does it provoke?

(Alternate II) The facilitator chooses one or two verses or short sections from Rhythms. Invite participants to write a prayer based on the verse or section. If they choose to do so, participants may share what they write with the group.

5. *Round 4—3P FREE-FOR-ALL*

Invite participants to share something they have written from the assigned text. It may be their own paraphrase, a poem, or prayer. Invite each participant to share something they have written.

6. Close by praying for each other!

## Appendix C: Writing Exercises

### Poetry Writing Exercises

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Haiku that focuses on the word or phrase.

Five syllables

Seven syllables

Five syllables

The Haiku may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

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2. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a Cinquain that focuses on the word or phrase.

One word

Two words

Three words

Four words

One word

The Cinquain may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

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3. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your poem. (C) Write a free verse poem that focuses on the word or phrase. The poem need not rhyme but it may. The poem can have one stanza or several. The point is not to explicate or summarize the word or phrase but to engage the Word. The poem may express wonder, insight, challenge, inquiry, lament, rejoicing or whatever the Spirit leads!

Write!

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**Prayer Writing Exercise**

1. (A) Choose a passage of Scripture. (B) Choose a word or phrase from the passage. This word or phrase will be the focus of your attention and the expression of your prayer. (C) Write a prayer that uses one of the literary themes listed below:

<b>ACTS Prayer</b>	/	<b>Colloquial Alternative (different order from ACTS)</b>
Adoration		Please!
Confession		Thank you!
Thanksgiving		Oops!
Supplication		Wow!

(D) Additional challenge: using the same passage, choose one of the other literary themes above and write another prayer. It's okay to write four prayers that each have a different literary focus!

Write!

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Write!

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Write!

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**Paraphrase Exercises**

**Matthew 5:21-22 (NIV):** “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,<sup>61</sup> and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’<sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister<sup>61</sup> will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’<sup>61</sup> is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

**Matthew 5:21-22 (TIP):** “From age to age it has been taught, ‘Murder someone and you will be judged.’ But I take it further: even anger is a kind of murder; to degrade another a form of killing. To call your beloved a ‘Fool!’ is to invite the fires of purification, for surely you are missing the grace of offering life to one another. Life shared in friendship is among the greatest gifts we can give.”

**Your Paraphrase:**

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**Mark 8:31-32 (NIV):** He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.<sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

**Mark 8:31-32 (TIP):** Then Jesus begins to teach them what it means to say he is the Anointed One. “It means suffering,” he tells them. “The Son of Humanity must suffer—he will be rejected by the Elite, the Intense and the Scrupulous. And, working together with the Collaborators, he will be killed. But after three days rise again.” Jesus says this plainly. He doesn’t stutter.

**Your Paraphrase:**

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**Luke 1:1-4 (NIV):** Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled<sup>1</sup> among us, <sup>2</sup>just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup>With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

**Luke 1:1-4 (TIP):** The Story has been told many times in many ways: of divine love alive among us, walking beside us, living, breathing, being. This is the Story told by those who were there, of the things they saw with their eyes, things they heard, touched, felt, experienced. These trustworthy eyewitnesses are servants of the Word. This is the Story to which I have disciplined followers my life, O Friend of The Compassion. I share this Story with you so that you too may know it, so that you too may know Them: The Compassion who loved, the Man who lived, whose light shined upon us.

**Your Paraphrase:**

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**John 1:1-3 (NIV):** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

**John 1:1-3 (TIP):** In the beginning was the Verb, and the Verb was with The I WILL BE, and the Verb was The I WILL BE. The Verb was in the beginning and the source of creation—the WHOOSH! that ignited the cosmos, the generative energy that unleashed everything: every atom and every quark and even the dark matter in between. Neither what is, nor what has ever been, nor what will someday be came about by accident but through divine intention and purpose: spoken into being by the Verb.

**Your Paraphrase:**

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**Acts 10:12-14 (NIV):** It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup>Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup>“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

**Acts 10:12-14 (TIP):** The blanket was covered with every variety of beast from earth and sky, those considered clean and unclean, those deemed pure and impure. A voice spoke: “Take and eat, Peter. All of it is sacred.” Peter rebelled against the voice, “Never! My lips have never been soiled by such vile impurity.”

**Your Paraphrase:**

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## Appendix D: Reading Plan for Rhythms of the God Life - Mark

### Mark

Week 1:	Introduction and Mark 1
Week 2:	Mark 2:1-3:12
Week 3:	Mark 3:12-5:43
Week 4:	Mark 6-7
Week 5:	Mark 8-9
Week 6:	Mark 10-11
Week 7:	Mark 12-14:11
Week 8:	Mark 14:12-16

## About Rhythms of the God-Life

“...an interpretive paraphrase rooted in the Greek text that gives wings to God’s Word through paraphrase, poetry, and prayer. By providing cultural insights to help the reader understand the Word’s meaning, *Rhythms* seeks to capture the beat and harmony of the original text yet also convey wisdom, ethics, and hope for today.”

“...a comprehensive study of biblical scripture, and a confronting, immersive read...with an ability to fascinate even the less experienced reader on the subject through an accessible authorial voice and an in-depth analysis of the language....[The author’s] choices of focus allow deeper analysis on the history of the text, and creates a layered approach that can be used in a contemporary setting. It is a compelling and well researched read, showing the author’s deep knowledge and understanding. The assured writing style, attention to detail, and clarity of the research set out in the work make this work one that will intrigue and fascinate.”

### Mark 1:1-8

The beginning—not of a book, but of The Way—the Good News of Jesus, The Action’s Anointed, Their Beloved, Their Embodied. A story that begins not with a birth but with a voice. A story that starts with a drumbeat already mid-march: a truth-teller shouting in the wilderness, the voice echoing off canyon walls...

Enter John: Looking like Elijah and sounding like thunder. Not dressed in Prada but in camel hair; not sipping cocktails but foraging locusts and wild honey. He preaches a new justice: Come clean and get wet. Not just ritual but revolution. He doesn’t offer comfort. He doesn’t offer excuses. He offers change, and the people come, from Jerusalem and Judea, the curious and the convicted, lining up to confess and plunge into water. Repentance as protest. Baptism as birth.

But even the preacher knows he’s the warm-up act. “I’m not the One,” he says. “Don’t fixate on me.

I’m not even worthy to untie his sandals. I dunk in water—he’ll flood you with Spirit.” Not purification; power. Not cleansing; consummation. Not rules; resurrection.

*Not in the temple’s hush  
nor behind polished pulpits,  
through desert winds and wild locust breath  
comes the Word.*

*He cries out:  
Come clean, come honest, come hungry.  
Let the waters drown your delusions  
and raise you into justice.*

*This thunder is no lullaby, but a lion’s roar:  
Turn around! Get ready! Clean house!  
No nursery rhymes here but cannons unleashed,  
a wild voice calling us home.*

## About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe is Pastor to the Presbytery for the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and the Presbytery de Cristo. He earned his Doctor of Ministry from San Francisco Theological Seminary, receiving the Outstanding Contribution to Ministry award for his dissertation in which he coined the phrase “blended worship.” He is also the author of *Waging Peace: Developing Interpersonal Skills for Conflict Transformation* and numerous devotional works and curriculum that can be downloaded at [www.BradMunroe.org](http://www.BradMunroe.org).

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“IN THE BEGINNING  
WAS THE VERB...”