Chapter 1

The First Call to Discipleship
Mark 1:1-20

The Text in Context

Mark the evangelist believed that the story of Jesus was so extraordinary that he needed to invent a new literary genre. He called this "gospel," a term that brackets his prologue (1:1 and 1:15). It is an action-based hero-narrative, but, unlike Roman biographies, it draws its main characters not from the elite classes but from plain folk. Jesus is portrayed as a healer and exorcist, but, unlike popular tales of magicians common to that period, Mark's story downplays the miraculous, emphasizing instead the empowerment of Jesus' subjects ("Your faith has healed you," 5:34, 10:52).

In his work Mark drew upon many contemporary narrative styles, including various parts of the Hebrew Bible, apocalyptic literature, didactic rabbinic stories, Wisdom sayings, and even Greco-Roman tragedy. But his "gospel" represented a new voice in the literature of antiquity. Because it is a narrative, we can and should approach it with the native skills we routinely use to interpret stories. (For an exercise in applying these skills to Mark's prologue, see Appendix 1.)

Read Mark 1:1-3

The story's title is: "The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ" (1:1). Ancient writers frequently established their credentials at the outset by appealing to recognizable authorities (think of the credits in a film's opening moments). Mark's title uses two terms that would have been familiar to his audience.

Gospel was a term associated with Roman propaganda. News of a military victory on the far-flung frontiers of the Pax Romana, or of the accession to power of a new emperor, was trumpeted as "glad tidings" throughout the empire. Caesar was eulogized as a "divine man" on coins and in emperor-cults. In contrast, Mark offers decidedly non-imperial "good news" about Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish "Christ." By using such rhetoric, Mark was engaging the struggle for hearts and minds through the popular media of the Mediterranean world.

Mark's title also echoes Genesis 1:1, suggesting that he wished to reclaim and renew the great story of God's creative activity in the world. Creation, he seems to be arguing, continues wherever the story is told and lived again. This is emphasized in 1:2, as an offstage voice cites the Hebrew scriptures, Mark's most important legitimating authority. "Isaiah" promises a re-opening of the "Way," calling to mind the foundational narrative of Israel, the Exodus journey of liberation. "I am sending a messenger before you to guard you on the Way" (Exodus 23:20). In Mark's story, this Way will become synonymous with discipleship: As Israel followed the angel in the wilderness, we will be invited to follow Jesus.

This promise generates dramatic tension: Something is about to happen. But what—and where? The citation is in fact a combination of two prophetic texts. Verse 1:2 is a paraphrase of Malachi's warning of God's imminent appearance "in the Temple" (Malachi 3:1). This oracle portends judgment against those who oppress. It specifically indicts the Temple, which was supposed to function as a central storehouse from which the agricultural surplus of the community was to be redistributed, as a mechanism for "robbery" (Malachi 3:8-10). Jesus will echo this charge when he visits the Temple later in Mark's story (Mark 11:17; see Chapter 16).

Mark 1:3 now cites Isaiah 40:3, which announces a messenger in the wilderness—exactly where John the Baptist shows up (1:4). Through this deft editorial combination of Malachi and Isaiah, Mark has introduced a major theme of his gospel. It is the tension between two archetypically opposite symbolic spaces: Temple and wilderness—center and margins.

Read Mark 1:4-8

The action begins with John the Baptist preaching repentance (1:4-6). John's costume is symbolic, invoking the memory of the great prophet Elijah who challenged kings, as will John (read 2 Kings 1:1-17). But Elijah's story lacked "closure," since he disappeared into heaven at the Jordan (read 2 Kings 2:6-14). This "missing in action" status meant that his presence might erupt into history again—and here is John-as-Elijah at the Jordan! Moreover, Malachi promised that God would send Elijah "before the great and terrible day of the Lord" to turn the people around (Malachi 4:5f). And here is John exhorting the people to "repent"—which means "turn around"! The reader's expectations are heightened, but we are off balance. Does this story herald the beginning or the *end*?

In 1:5, Mark reports that "all of Judea and Jerusalem" came out to John in the wilderness. Here the tension between center and margins becomes explicit. According to the national myth of the Judean Temple-state, Jerusalem was center of the world, a place to which all nations would someday come to submit (see Psalm 2:6, 14:7, 48, 69:35f, 87, 102:15-22; Isaiah 4:5f, 18:7, 60:10-14). But Mark reverses directions: Salvation is being regenerated not at the center but at the margins. This is why the people as a whole must turn around!

John immediately introduces the gospel's main character: a "stronger one" who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:7f). This raises more expectations. But Jesus' appearance onstage is initially unremarkable. He is from "Nazareth in Galilee," an unknown village in provincial northern Palestine, further underscoring the marginal geography of this prologue. Yet it is to this obscure figure, from these doubtful social origins, in this remote place, that the divine voice speaks.

Read Mark 1:9-13

In the account of Jesus' baptism, the narrative is suddenly invaded by dramatic imagery. Jesus rises from the Jordan's waters to a vision of the "heavens rent asunder" (1:10), an allusion to another prophetic text: "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make known your name to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence, working unexpected miracles" (Isaiah 64:1f).

Does Jesus' identification as "beloved Son" by the mysterious voice from heaven designate him as the messianic ruler of Psalm 2:7? Or does the descent of the dove point us rather to Isaiah's Suffering Servant: "I will put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1)?

This heavenly intervention is the first of many instances in which Mark draws upon the symbolism of apocalyptic literature. In Mark's time, apocalyptic was the popular language of political dissent. It envisioned the "end of the world"—that is, the world ruled by the powers. Following his baptism Jesus is driven by the Spirit further out into the wilderness, where he engages in a struggle with the "ruler of this world" (1:12f). The struggle symbolizes the apocalyptic war between good (the angels and Jesus) and evil (Satan and the wild beasts). It is the first of many Markan allusions to the book of Daniel, a Jewish apocalyptic tract that exhorted resistance to Hellenistic imperialism two centuries before Mark. Daniel portrays oppressive rulers as "beasts" and speaks of angels contending with the "princes of kingdoms" (see Daniel 7:1-7, 10, 12:1).

But is there yet more to this strange temptation episode? Is it possible to interpret Jesus' journey deep into the wilderness as a kind of "vision quest"? Among native peoples still today the vision quest is at once an outward adventure beyond the margins of society; an inward passage of purification and self-encounter; and a journey "in the spirit" to discover the identity and destiny of one's people. Might Jesus be somehow interiorizing and reliving the experience of Israel? "For forty days" (1:13) is clearly meant to invoke Israel's forty years of "testing" in the wilderness.

Israel's identity commenced when it escaped from Pharaoh: "I will bring my people out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). Similarly, Jesus' identity has just been confirmed at baptism: "You are my son, the Beloved" (Mark 1:11). Now he, like his ancestors, must struggle in the wilderness to discover what this vocation means. Jesus re-traces the footsteps of his people to their "place of origins," the Exodus wilderness, in the hope of discovering where they went wrong. He faces again the forces that lured his people into idolatry and injustice, because to forge a different future he must confront the past. Jesus undertakes a radical quest to uncover the root-causes of his people's problems.

Read Mark 1:14-15

Jesus begins preaching "after John was arrested" (1:14), a tale of political intrigue that Mark will return to later in the story (6:14-30; see Chapter 8). Jesus takes up John's challenge to "turn around and believe the good news," but adds something startling. He claims that the "kingdom of God" has arrived (1:16; we will use the less patriarchal phrase "sovereignty of God" in this book). Much has been made of this phrase by theologians over the centuries, but few have acknowledged its most obvious background: the anti-kingship traditions of early Israel.

The Sinai covenant envisioned a decentralized style of self-governance: Because YHWH was king over Israel, royalist politics were precluded. For example, after the kings of Canaanite city-states are vanquished (see Joshua 12), the victorious military leader Gideon rejects attempts to make him king: "I will not rule over you... YHWH will rule over you" (Judges 8:22f). Instead, "judges" administer the tribal confederacy.

1 Samuel 8 narrates the decline of this system because of internal corruption and external military threats. Disillusioned with their experiment in self-determination, the people go to the great judge Samuel to demand that he "appoint for us a king to govern us, like other nations" (1 Samuel 8:5). "They have not rejected you," says God to Samuel, "they have rejected me from being king over them" (8:7).

God then instructs Samuel to warn the people about "the ways of the king," which include: forced conscription, militarism, state expropriation of labor and resources, an economy geared to the elite, and taxation (8:11-17). The grim litany concludes: "And you will be his slaves." The moral of this story: In choosing a centralized monarchy, the people freed from slavery recreate Pharaoh's society of domination.

By reasserting the sovereignty of God, then, Jesus is taking sides in the debate within the biblical tradition between those who saw the monarchy as blessed by God and those who saw it as a step backward. He seeks a renewal of the "confederate" roots of free Israel (see Chapter 4).

But Jesus is not proposing a utopian dream that can be realized only in another place (heaven) and/or time (the afterlife). The gospel leaves no room for otherworldly religion: "The time is now; the sovereignty of God is here" (Mark 1:15).

Read Mark 1:16-20

In the prologue, events unfold in a rapid sequence of prediction and fulfillment. "Isaiah" announces John, who announces the "stronger one," who announces the sovereignty of God. We expect something momentous to happen—yet in Mark's next scene Jesus is shown merely talking to some common laborers (1:16ff)! In Mark's narrative strategy, anti-climax functions to subvert our expectations, in order to open us to new possibilities. In the call of the fishermen, the sovereignty of God is realized—because Mark identifies it with the discipleship adventure.

This is the first of three invitations to follow Jesus in Mark, episodes that drive the major "plot line" of the narrative. The other two occur in the middle (8:34ff; see Chapter 11) and again at the end of the gospel (16:6f; see Chapter 25). In 1:16 we see Jesus choosing his students, a reversal of the normal practice of rabbinic recruitment in Mark's day. He encounters these men at their workplace, a family fishing business, yet calls them to abandon their trade for a new vocation.

An apt paraphrase of Jesus' invitation is: "Follow me and I will show you how to catch the Big Fish!" (1:17). In the Hebrew Bible, the metaphor of "people like fish" appears in prophetic censures of apostate Israel and of the rich and powerful:

> "I am now sending for many fishermen, says God, and they shall catch [the people of Israel]..." (Jeremiah 16:16)
>
> "The time is surely coming upon you when they shall take you away with fishhooks..." (Amos 4:2)
>
> "Thus says God: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt. ...I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales..." (Ezekiel 29:3f)

Jesus is, in other words, summoning working folk to join him in overturning the structures of power and privilege in the world!

"They left their nets and followed him" (1:18, 20). In antiquity, the demand to leave the workplace would have entailed more than the loss of economic security. It represented a rupture in the social fabric of the extended family. But there is more: The verb "to leave" is used elsewhere in Mark to connote release from debt! As a later episode will make clear (10:28f; see Chapter 14), this "leaving" alludes to the discipleship community's practice of social and economic redistribution. The call to discipleship demands more than an assent of the heart; it invites an uncompromising break with "business as usual."

THE WORD IN OUR WORLD

Our world is divided as never before. Dichotomies between rich and poor people and nations are vast. Separation between racial and ethnic groups, between women and men, between the powerful and the excluded, are increasing. For example, *Forbes* magazine reported in July 1994 that the world's 358 billionaires had collectively accumulated personal capital worth more than the total income of 45 percent of the world's population—2.5 billion people!

The experience of wilderness is common to the vast majority of people in the world. Their reality is at the margins of almost everything that is defined by the modern Western world as "the good life." This wilderness has not been created by accident. It is the result of a system stacked against many people and their communities, whose lives and resources are exploited to benefit a very small minority at the centers of power and privilege. It is created by lifestyles that deplete and pollute natural resources. It is created by the forced labor of impoverished farmers who strip steep mountainsides in order to eke out an existence from infertile terrain while the most arable land produces profit for a few families. Wilderness is the residue of war and greed and injustice.

The urban wilderness is a belt of misery around cities like Lima and Mexico City or a core of poverty in the heart of Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles. These are places where people from the margins gather seeking a modicum of economic or social security and too often find just the opposite. The wilderness is the dwelling place of the world's 23 million refugees and far too many of the world's children. It is most common in the Southern Hemisphere but increasingly is found in wealthy countries in the industrialized North as well. Globalization of the economy, based on freedom without accountability, is exacerbating the spread of this wilderness. That is how the system survives: One group of people thriving at the expense of others and the earth; one belching on the other's hunger; one powerful because the others have no power.

Life in modern wilderness places such as the pauper's cemetery at Rabinal is intense, stark, fragile, bereft of comforting distraction. Survival is not assured—even the plants by the gravesites are wilted. Yet a deeper gaze reveals that this wilderness can be an empowering place.

On the margins of society, an encounter with self and truth is inevitable. Out of the Rabinals of our world have emerged people who are very clear about who they are, where life is, and what their destiny should be. These are people determined to speak the truth to the centers of privilege and control. In facing death, they have found life; on the cross of dehumanized existence, they are embracing resurrection.

One of the first steps of hope for people in such wilderness places is to understand that their situation reflects social and political forces, not the divine will. Many faith communities in such places use a tool of social analysis called the center/margins exercise to help them understand their social reality. It can be adapted to various situations, from one's local neighborhood to the world as a whole. In this exercise, social reality is portrayed as a circle whose center is defined as the place where power and access are concentrated in the hands of dominant groups and institutions. The circumference or margin of the circle is occupied by persons and groups who are dominated or oppressed.

In Mark's world, for example, the Jerusalem Temple would be placed at the center of the circle; the wilderness would lie at the margins. In our world, the industrialized, "developed" societies of the North Atlantic, Japan, and the Pacific rim countries may generally be equated with the center, with the United States at the hub. The poorer nations of the Southern Hemisphere represent the margins. "First" and "Third" worlds have been used as labels on this contemporary map of the global distribution of power.

In fact, however, we can identify centers and margins within both the "First" and the "Third" worlds. For example, one can see widespread impoverishment in New York, London, and Tokyo, and extreme wealth in São Paulo, Bangalore, and Nairobi.

While the margin has a primarily negative political connotation as a place of disenfranchisement, Mark ascribes to it a primarily positive theological value. It is the place where the sovereignty of God is made manifest, where the story of liberation is renewed, where God's intervention in history occurs.

Here the modern disciple should find much food for thought. What invitation do we hear to journey to the wilderness—to the margins? What would that mean concretely in our lives?

The first disciples were invited by Jesus to a new *location* and a new vocation. They were called to join him "on the road" in a struggle to overturn the existing order of inequality. Across the intervening centuries, this invitation has been reiterated time and again. The discipleship adventure beckons. Yet its context is the stuff of everyday life and work—ennobled by a commitment to the community and to the sovereignty of God.

Chapter 2

Jesus the Healer
Mark 1:21–2:12

THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

The first major narrative section of the gospel begins (1:16) and ends (4:36) by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In this section Mark paints a portrait of Jesus' public ministry in and around the Galilean city of Capernaum. This series of episodes exhibits the three essential characteristics of Jesus' mission: the healing and exorcism of marginalized people, the proclamation of God's sovereignty and call to discipleship, and the resulting confrontations with the authorities.

Read Mark 1:21-28

Conflict erupts in Jesus' first public action, a dramatic exorcism in a Capernaum synagogue. Here we encounter for the first time a "miracle story." The modern debate over whether or not we can "believe" such stories is not only misplaced, it fails to address the function of this kind of narrative. The possibility of extraordinary manipulations of the physical (or spirit) world was never questioned in antiquity.

Nevertheless, the "miracle" lay not in the act, but in what the act symbolized. Mark goes to great lengths to discourage us from seeing Jesus as a mere popular magician. Not only does Jesus constantly discourage people from fixating upon his acts of healing or exorcism (see 1:44, 3:12, 5:18f, 5:43, 7:36), he actually exhorts his disciples (and the reader) to look into the deeper meaning of his actions (8:17-21).

Let us begin by noticing the significance of the setting in 1:21ff. Jesus has moved from the wilderness margin to the heart of the provincial Jewish social order—the holy time and space of a synahave you asked for healing or been confronted by demons? Where have you known the terror of a dangerous crossing to the other side? Whom have you met there? Who has offered or withheld hospitality? Wherever the story has impacted you as blessing, challenge, or insight, illustrate that now in a graphic depiction of your own discipleship story. Use images and issues raised in the first half of Mark's gospel.

OUR DISCIPLESHIP JOURNEY

Mark's dramatic stories of sea crossings suggest that the journey of solidarity will not be easy, neither the crossing nor the encounter with those we meet on the other side. We all recognize a border when we cross from one nation into another. But other borders define us as well: racial and ethnic borders; borders between genders and people with different sexual orientations; class boundaries evident as we move from one neighborhood into another.

A border can be a barrier that separates us or a meeting place, a wall from which we defend ourselves or a place of contact. A border can define our comfort zone as well as the limit beyond which we will not venture. A border can be a place of violence or a place of justice, respect, and the mutuality of giving and receiving. It can be a place of stereotypes or of understanding. Our experience of borders is largely defined by how we view the one on the other side.

If hospitality and respect for difference were among the social and political values at play in our world, borders would not be so critically important. But too often, political, ethnic, religious, or racial boundaries are tools for those who have wealth and power to avoid redistribution of any kind. Borders thus become instruments for exclusion and marginalization—camouflage for injustice or human rights violations. How can we challenge and overcome the oppressive use of borders that exclude, limit, or dehumanize others?

What are the borders that define our social existence? Is Jesus asking your community to cross to the other side? What might that journey look like in our lives? It may be literally going to another country and experiencing solidarity with those who speak a different language. Yet that may be easier in some ways than the task of crossing to the other side of our own community.

Maybe there are people in our congregations with whom we feel unsafe or uncertain as to how we are to relate. Perhaps there are borders even in our families, or in our deepest selves. Perhaps we are called to cross over to a part of our own humanity that we have been unable to accept or even to acknowledge.

We understand the human need for borders and boundaries that help us know who we are and who we are not. We all need safe and familiar places. But how do we view the one who stands on the other side of the border? We are constantly faced with individuals and communities who dress, speak, think, and act differently from us. Sometimes those differences are appealing to us. We feel enriched, honored, and enlivened by the encounter with those who are different. In other cases, however, we make assumptions about those who differ from us, feel threatened by them, allow fear to shape our perception.

The most dangerous aspect of these feelings is that often we are unaware of them. We marginalize the "other" without realizing it. The first step of the journey to the other side, then, is to face honestly our own feelings about the people we encounter there.

Take some time to reflect on the following questions. Write your responses in your discipleship journal:

> Who were the "others" in the community of your childhood and youth? Perhaps they were poor people, homeless people, people of a different race, or unwed mothers. How did your family relate to them? Who are the outcasts in your family and what made them so?
>
> How do you believe your family or ethnic group was viewed by those of different race, class, or religion?
>
> What borders have you crossed in your life? What has been your experience of the other side of humanity both in your childhood and in your adult faith journey? What have those experiences taught you about crossing borders? Has this experience been mutually acceptable to those on the other side of the border? What guidelines did you have for being on the other side?

III

THE DISCIPLESHIP "CATECHISM"

OPENING MEDITATION

(A journal entry of one of the authors) Deny yourself. What do you mean deny yourself? No! I say LIVE. Mark, you've got it wrong! Life—every speck of it—was created good. You would squelch it with centuries of "deny yourself"!

Yes, I have "denied myself," in that deep and misdirected way—almost until death. And a voice within me says, "Precious sister, live." This is a true voice, clear and sweet and strong. I am not mistaken in knowing this voice to be Light, to be Life, to be God. The God that I am growing to hear does not tell me to deny my *self*.

And what of those who run after buying things, and after "looking good," and after "military might," and after being "better than"? If we would all learn to hear the voice of God that says "live" instead of building plastic castles, then the world would not know the agony in which it writhes. Of that I am sure.

Yet there is truth in what you say, Mark. A colleague told a story of her visit to Soweto two years before institutionalized apartheid ended. A small group of black people who live in Soweto, together with a small group of white people from Johannesburg, had formed a church in Soweto. They worshiped together, seeking reconciliation. My friend said, "Both the white people and the black people were conscious that they might have paid for this with their lives." So, for them, Mark, your story rings true. They were denying self, taking up a cross, and following. . . .

Perhaps the answer is that in some contexts—for example, that of the reconciling church in Soweto—to follow Jesus requires one to deny self and take up the cross; but in our context, where circumstances are not so brutal, to follow means something else. *No, this notion does not hold water.* In our land too our brothers and sisters are murdered daily by poverty; mothers lose their children at the hands of racism; people are strangled with billboards and commercials, plant closings, and mandates to inject violence and sex into television programming. Certainly we live in a culture no less broken or cruel than did Jesus, for whom living a different way led to torture and death.

Mark, I know you to be right also in a more personal way. When has my life been its clearest, truest, most deeply centered? In times of deep giving—including risking my life. Is there something significant about denying self out of love rather than out of obligation? To be a disciple in Jesus' context meant not only following the teacher's example, but also having a loving commitment to him that surpassed all other commitments. Maybe here I catch a glimpse?

Yet still, Mark, you are a paradox. (Perhaps if I accept you as paradox, rather than hungering for resolution, I will hear you more clearly.) The paradox is that I also know life to be at its truest and clearest in times of simple intimacy. My heart sings and my soul dances in spaces of touching others deeply; times when I do *not* deny myself and take up the cross, but rather relish in the wonder of simple life and love; when I unfold and swim deeper into self or into another. These too are times of knowing God.

It is in seeking my life this way that I find it. And I believe that the angels rejoice with God in those times. In seeking myself underneath the rubbish that has been piled on, in letting myself sing the glorious song of love, and freedom which is given to all creatures—in this do I find life. And God rejoices.

Chapter 11

The Second Call to Discipleship
Mark 8:22–9:1

THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

We have arrived at the midpoint of Mark's story. The first half began heralding a "Way" (1:2), and closed with a question addressed to the disciples and the reader: "Do you not yet understand?" (8:21). The second half opens "on the Way" (8:27), with yet another query: "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29a).

Do we really know who Jesus is, and what he is about? It is a shock to discover here that Peter's "correct" answer (8:29b) is silenced (8:30). This is followed by a "confessional crisis" (8:30-33) and Jesus' second call to discipleship (8:34ff), which together represent the fulcrum upon which the whole gospel balances. Mark's thesis is most clearly revealed here: Discipleship is not about theological orthodoxy but about the Way of the cross.

This section is punctuated by three "predictions" in which Jesus speaks of his impending arrest, trial, and execution by the authorities (8:31, 9:31, 10:33f). After each portent Mark indicates that the disciples have failed to comprehend. This in turn issues in three teaching cycles, each of which revolves around a paradoxical antithesis:

> "Whosoever would save her life will lose it…" (8:35)
>
> "If anyone would be first, he must be last…" (9:35)
>
> "Whosoever would be great among you must be your servant…" (10:43)

Throughout Mark, Jesus' use of "whosoever" functions as an appeal to the audience, as if there is a blank space we are challenged to fill in with our name. This is an "interactive" story!

This triple cycle has the catechetical character of a "school of the road," as Jesus and his disciples journey from the far north of Palestine to the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Chapter 12

From Vision to Impotence
Mark 9:2-29

THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

Read Mark 9:2-8

The second call to discipleship is confirmed by the Transfiguration vision that immediately follows. The setting of this episode ("after six days Jesus...led them up a high mountain," 9:2) calls to mind one of the foundational stories of Exodus Israel:

> God said to Moses: "Come up to me on the mountain and stay there while I give you the stone tablets—the law and the commandments...." And Moses went up the mountain, and the glory of God settled on the mountain of Sinai; for six days the cloud covered it, and on the seventh day God called to Moses from inside the cloud. (Exodus 24:12, 16)

The Transfiguration represents the second "apocalyptic moment" in Mark's narrative. Just as Daniel's visions were explained by a man in glorified clothing (Daniel 10:5ff), so here the inner circle of disciples behold Jesus in shining white clothes, the apocalyptic symbol of martyrdom (see Revelation 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13).

Jesus is portrayed in conference with the two great heroes of Israel: Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets (9:4). Perhaps they are encouraging Jesus, just as they themselves were exhorted by the voice of God during times of discouragement. Moses, rejected once by his own people, had to ascend the mountain a second time, but returned with his face transfigured (read Exodus 34:29-35). And Elijah, fleeing from the authorities he had challenged, was told, "Go out and stand on the mountain before God," who exhorted him to return to the struggle (read 1 Kings 19).

Peter, meanwhile, misunderstands for the second consecutive time (9:5). Still operating from a framework of tradition and triumphalism, he would institutionalize the moment by establishing a "tabernacle" for the three leaders. While constructing cults of admiration may be an age-old human religious impulse, Mark clearly disapproves of it (9:6). So Peter is again challenged, this time by the divine voice itself.

The first time a voice from the cloud intervened in Mark's narrative was at Jesus' baptism (1:11; see Chapter 1). The same testimony is now commended to the clueless disciples: "This is my beloved son" (9:7). But it is specifically Jesus' second call to discipleship that is endorsed here: "Listen to him." The episode's conclusion underscores the reliability of Jesus' teaching while dismissing Peter's attempt to institutionalize the Presence: "They looked around but no longer saw anyone but Jesus with them" (9:8).

Read Mark 9:9-13

As this group returns down the mountain we may recall what Moses saw upon his descent from Sinai (see Exodus 32). What happens here, however, is not Israel dancing around a golden calf but the disciples' deepening bafflement.

Jesus warns his companions that they won't understand the vision they have just witnessed until after the Human One has been raised from the dead (9:9). Mark tells us that the three disciples "held fast to the word" (that is, Jesus' word of the cross, 8:32) "while questioning among themselves what 'rising from the dead' meant" (9:10). This may well be Mark's instructions to the reader concerning the abrupt ending of his gospel. We will indeed "wonder" about the message that Jesus is risen (16:6); what is clear, however, is that we are still called to discipleship (see Chapter 25).

Despite having just been instructed by the voice from heaven to listen to Jesus, the three disciples are still preoccupied by the authority of the scribal class: "Why do the scribes say...?" (9:11). The belief that Elijah "must first return" to save the people from judgment would have been drawn from the closing verses of the book of Malachi: "Behold I send you Elijah the prophet...he will turn their hearts...lest I come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5).

Its attribution to the scribes here may imply that the ruling elite understood this as a guarantee that they would be spared "the great and terrible Day of the Lord."

Jesus has bad news for this point of view, for as the gospel's prologue argues, "Elijah has come" (9:13; see Chapter 1). And as Mark narrates in 6:13ff, "Elijah" was executed by the authorities because they refused to "turn around." Mark thus closes the circle of argument begun in 8:28 concerning the "prophetic script":

A How is it written about the Human One

B that he will suffer and be repudiated

C But I tell you Elijah has come

B1 and they did to him what they pleased,

A1 as it is written of him.

Jesus (also known as the Human One) and John the Baptist (also known as Elijah) share the inevitable political destiny of truthtellers.

Read Mark 9:14-29

Jesus returns from the mountain to find the rest of the disciples *also* arguing with the scribes (9:14)! Here, however, the issue is not scribal teaching but the disciples' own impotence. Though commissioned to exorcize (3:15), and successfully doing so earlier in the story (6:7), the disciples are here ridiculed by the crowd for not being "strong enough" (9:18). This is a harsh indictment for followers of the "stronger one" (1:7) committed to "binding the strong man" (3:27), and recalls the story of the Gerasene demoniac whom "no one was strong enough to bind" (5:4).

Yet they are confronting an especially insidious demon, a "spirit of silencing" who throws its victim to the ground, foaming at the mouth and paralyzed (9:17f). Jesus' response is one of frustration (9:19), which seems curious unless we see it as a hint that something broader is at stake in this story.

No sooner is the victim presented to Jesus than the demon strikes with full fury (9:20). Jesus' inquiry suggests that there may be a connection between the boy's condition and that of the "faithless generation":

How long has he had this? (9:21)

How long must I bear with you? (9:19)

The father's answer is irresistibly archetypal. The demon has silenced his son "since childhood" and aims to destroy him through "fire and water." Surely such language symbolizes the primal roots of the unresolved anguish and trauma that keeps human beings "silenced."

The next exchange is a poignant summary of the central theme of the gospel (9:23f):

Father: If you can, have compassion and help us.

Jesus: If you can! All things are possible to the one who believes!

Father: I believe! Help me in my unbelief!

This exorcism story is thus revealed as a dramatization of the struggle for faith, symbolized by the vanquishing of the demon of silencing and the transformation from death to life (9:26f).

The metaphorical character of this episode is further indicated by the fact that the epilogue focuses not upon the exorcism but upon the disciples' continuing frustration with their impotence: "Why could we not cast it out?" (9:28). The structure of the story again helps interpret its meaning:

9:14-19: the scribes and crowd accuse the disciples of impotence;

9:20-27: Jesus interacts with the father, the boy, and the demon;

9:28f: Jesus discusses impotence with the disciples.

This composition suggests that it is the *disciples* who are the true subjects of this story, impotent because they are "deaf and mute" to the Way of the cross. In other words, we cannot cast out demons by which we ourselves are possessed!

At the close of this story, and for the first time in Mark, Jesus exhorts the disciples to pray (9:29). But what does Mark mean by prayer? Jesus' prayer takes place in remote places (1:31; 6:46), in contrast to that of his opponents who exploit the public glare (12:40).

Jesus will invite his disciples to pray on just two other occasions. One is after his dramatic Temple action, when he urges the disciples to believe in the possibility of a world free of the exploitative Temple-state (11:23-25; see Chapter 16). The other is just before Jesus is seized by security forces, when he summons his followers to prayer as a way of "staying awake" to the Way of the cross (14:32-42; see Chapter 22). Note the similarities:

> "All things are possible to the one who believes." (9:23)
>
> "Amen, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it..." (11:24)
>
> And he prayed... "All things are possible for you..." (14:36)

The powers rule in our hearts and in the world through the despair that persuades us that genuine personal and political transformation is impossible, and we have been socialized into such resignation "since childhood" (9:21). To pray is to re-center our consciousness around a faith that insists on the possibility and imperative of such transformation.

This episode suggests that prayer is the contemplative discipline of self-knowledge—an invitation to examine the roots of our impotence. If we wish to cast out *this* demon, we must engage in the difficult process of confronting the illusions that paralyze us and the unconscious power of repressed trauma that keeps us silenced.

THE WORD IN OUR WORLD

Perhaps we can remember times when someone we knew or loved was experiencing life so intensely, so joyously, that a kind of light radiated from their face and eyes. This is a pale analogy of what Mark is trying to describe in this story of transfiguration. In rare moments the glory of the new creation breaks in upon human life, as visible as sun beams that gradually pierce a cloud bank until more and more light streams through. Time that is thick with *chronos* becomes a *kairos* moment—transparent to that which is beyond past or present or future.

But what is this all about and what does it have to do with us? Is this just more mysticism that we can never experience ourselves? Is it religiosity that carries us away from the world and from each other in private subjective experiences? So much of contemporary spirituality is precisely that: divorced from community and from the struggle of history. Or is this story of the Transfiguration about finding the perspective to understand what our history is really about?

Transfiguration moments happen when our stories become joined in their deepest core to the gospel story. From the mount of Transfiguration, the divine voice asks us again to listen! When we take seriously this discipleship journey, when we live in radical faithfulness, our stories begin to merge into a great Story like little drops of water that become rivulets, then streams and rivers, and finally rush into the ocean. We experience glory when we are given the grace to know that our story is inextricably related to that greater Story.

We are not alone but surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Not just Elijah and Moses but all the apostles accompany us on this journey: Francis and Clare, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King and Steve Biko, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, Archbishop Romero, and everyone who has tried to be faithful to the gospel. That great Story is made up of thousands of individuals and communities who lived and struggled, who hoped and dreamed, who tasted success and failure, but who finally passed off the stage of history never knowing their glory, never knowing or being recognized for what they may have contributed to this history.

Take this opportunity to name some person of faith who for you is a part of the cloud of witnesses. Describe the qualities of faith and life that make that person so significant for you. You may even wish to have a dialogue with that person as you seek his or her counsel on how you are to remain faithful in your discipleship journey.

Mark's story takes us from the Transfiguration "high" on the mountaintop into the low valley of the scene portrayed in Mark 9:14-29. As we come down from the mountain with Jesus, what greets us is a chaotic scene of conflict and controversy in which the disciples have been unable to cast out a demon that endangers a young child. Each of us as Christians can probably tell a similar story of a time when we experienced failure or defeat.

What has happened when we have confronted evil or tried to solve a problem, and our best efforts have been met with defeat and failure? There is a kind of action-reflection process that is modeled by Jesus and his community, not just in this instance but in numerous places in the gospel story. It suggests that no one success or failure is final but is just a moment on the journey. Some of us by nature may find it difficult to reflect on anything before we are off to the next action or project. Others of us never seem to have enough information before we are ready to act.

But if in community we can see our common ministry as an action-reflection process, we can learn to look upon every moment, no matter how painful, as having something to teach us. In fact, failure can be a much more effective teacher than success. While success sometimes confirms our illusions of grandiosity, failure teaches us hard lessons about limits, about real motives and unexpected outcomes. Failure can mean disillusionment in the best sense: the sometimes painful process of giving up our illusions about ourselves and our world.

Ongoing evaluation is one of the most important spiritual disciplines of a faith community. The experience of failure can be a key moment for learning perseverance, for deepening our awareness of root causes, or for developing more effective strategies. Failure can teach us how to forgive ourselves and each other. Take the experience of a failure in the life of your community and reconstruct what happened. Ask yourselves: Why did it happen? What did it mean for us? What can we do about it?

Many times a bitter failure or defeat can be redeemed by some evaluation after the fact. A failure can become a code that allows us to see more clearly a core issue in the depths of our own soul or in the breadth of our society. Is this part of what Jesus was about when he called together the community in the privacy of a household to debrief the day? If we did more of that kind of reflection on ministry, we would surely deepen our analysis of the problems we face.

At an even deeper level, the text calls us to struggle with our own demons of unbelief because we cannot exorcise that by which we are still possessed. In your discipleship journal, name your addictions, confess the self-interest of your privileges. Share with one another the ways in which you are enslaved to destructive ways of living and being. Perhaps that naming will mean that we must honestly confess our powerlessness to change, to cast out the demons that possess us. This is the wisdom of 12-step programs—we begin to find the power to heal in the confession of our own powerlessness.

The most genuine expression of prayer is found in the father's heartfelt cry for compassion. "I believe! Help me in my unbelief." In prayer we journey toward the hidden places of our being where, if we are honest with ourselves, we encounter our brokenness and lack of freedom. There, in the ambiguous depths of the human heart, we encounter unbelief.

What shape does that unbelief take? For Mark, unbelief is not incorrect doctrine or an imperfect attitude. For Mark, unbelief is the despair that is dictated to us by the powers and principalities of this world. Unbelief is a life script that is fixed and says to us that nothing can really change. If we accept this life script and the despair that comes with it, the revolutionary vision and practice of the gospel are rendered impotent.

Prayer for Mark is that personal and communal struggle against this temptation to despair. It is wrestling with the demons within us that tempts us to abandon the way of Jesus. Prayer is naming and casting out the demons that silence us and make us docile before the status quo of self and society.

Without prayer and a spiritual foundation, prophetic anger becomes disconnected from love, ideals become empty routines, social analysis becomes cynicism, values lose their passion. The despair and unbelief that tempt us to hopelessness *will not* be disarmed until we name and face them together.

When Jesus asks us to deepen our prayer life in order to follow him, he is calling us to develop a spirituality of social action. Just as each person and community has a unique relationship with God, so prayer is different for each person and community. We encourage you and your community to explore and develop a prayer life that empowers your public discipleship.