

QUEERING THE BIBLE: QUEERING THE GOSPEL OF MARK

UNBOUNDED

Mark 1

Benjamin Perry

PROCLAIMING A WORLD FOR QUEER FOLKS YET TO COME

It can't have been comfortable to be John the Baptist. Camel's hair clothes and locusts aside, it's never pleasant to be the one who tells people about a need to repent, to fundamentally change their lives. Perhaps it's no surprise that we find John in the wilderness—that kind of confrontation can make someone unwelcome at dinner parties. But here we find him: Living the fullness of his truth, proclaiming it unashamed for anyone who might hear. And—as we begin this project of queering Mark's gospel together—it's a fitting text to begin with because, whew, what a queer experience. LGBTQIA+ people have long lived like John, holding in our voices and bodies a love that transcends the ways culture tries to confine it—crying out in the wilderness about what will not only free us, but what will liberate all people.

It's so frustrating to see queer activism pigeonholed as a niche issue, because the truth is—while LGBTQIA+ people's rights and freedoms may be particularly imperiled—the social transformation we need would benefit all people. Lies about binary gender don't just afflict people who need gender-affirming care or fall beyond those tidy confines—they restrict the freedom of cisgender people, too, and are a key component in upholding patriarchy. Likewise, the fight to bless queer sexuality would give all people the safety and freedom to explore the contour and shape of their sexual lives. Damaging systems like purity culture, which presently inhibit many cis-hetero folks from enjoying the freedom and pleasure God yearns for us to share, would necessarily be dismantled. Moreover, normalizing things like alternate kinship structures—long a reality in queer communities—would alleviate the widespread strain so many folks groan beneath while raising children.

John, likewise, comes bearing a gospel that promises to free all people. Biblical commentators situate John within a long line of prophets condemning Roman exploitation—charismatic zealots who dared to defy the violence of that empire because they served a God who they knew beckoned them toward freedom. While Matthew's gospel contains more fiery words, likening authorities to a brood of vipers, it's a mistake to miss this dimension of Mark's text as well. John's decision to baptize people in the Jordan River—well beyond the reach of the Temple and the Roman officials who occupied Jerusalem—is a radically subversive act. It welcomes people into an eschatological foretaste of what it would be like to live beyond them.

This act of welcoming people into a new world while still living in the grips of violent power is a potent call—especially in days when power is stepping up its commitment to that violence. In May, the state of Alabama announced that it is now a felony to provide trans children with the gender affirming care that the American Association of Pediatrics recommends. Meanwhile the kind of Don't Say Gay legislation pioneered in Florida is spreading rapidly across the US. And the open war on abortion rights is an ominous sign for the future of bodily autonomy. In the middle of all of this, we are called to create networks of resistance, ones that embody the love and freedom for which we were created. But, as John models, when people seize the right to crucify folks who transgress the established order, sometimes that work must—by necessity—move underground, into the wilderness.

This can feel like defeat, a capitulation to unjust power. But this story is a reminder—sometimes justice needs a womb in which to grow before it can march through the streets of Jerusalem. In these moments, John's final words in this passage are a benediction and a blessing: "The one who

is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” We are not the alpha nor the omega of this struggle. And there are people coming after us who will enjoy and amplify freedom in ways we struggle even to imagine.

I get a glimpse of this when I talk with younger queer people and hear about how they’ve moved through their schooling experiences with honesty, authenticity and integrity I could only have dreamed about when I was in Middle or High School. Obviously, homophobia and transphobia have not been eradicated, but even the modest cultural gains we’ve made in the intervening decades have transformed people’s ability to be proud in who they are. Consider, then, the hope of those who will inherit the society we’ll build together—one where every person has the inalienable right to discern their gender and live into the fullness of their sexuality. They will flourish in ways we can only begin to dream, and their future is what gives me hope even in days when it seems bigotry is winning.

When political rights are swiftly eroding, that doesn’t make the bonds of love and community we create less powerful. In fact, it makes them more essential. Birthing spaces for collective care and moral imagination—where people can embrace the kinds of self-determination that should be national law—is in an integral part of bringing God’s reign closer. It’s why I’m so grateful to serve spaces like Middle Church, where I’m a minister. We may not, on our own, have the power to undo hateful legislation, but our love matters. When I tell a queer child that God celebrates their sexuality, I take my place in that long line of ancestors who bring justice a little bit closer—heralding a world that’s struggling to be born.

Rev. Benjamin Perry is Minister of Outreach and Media Strategy at Middle Church. He has also worked an organizer with the New York chapter of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, as Deputy Director of Communications and Marketing at Union Theological Seminary, and as an editor at Time Inc.

An award-winning writer, his work focuses on the intersection of religion and politics. His writing can be found in outlets like The Washington Post, Slate, The Huffington Post, Sojourners, Bustle and Motherboard and he has appeared on MSNBC, Al Jazeera, and NY1. He holds a degree in psychology from SUNY Geneseo and a Masters of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary.

He is married to Erin Mayer, and they live with his brother and best friend. He is the editor of the Queer Faith photojournalism series, and helped curate an art exhibit by the same name. He is a passionate advocate for building Church that lives into God’s blessed queerness. His two proudest achievements are skydiving with his grandmother and winning first prize in his seminary drag show.

Mark 2

Ralph Basui Watkins

TEAR THE ROOF OFF THIS : COMING IN FROM THE TOP

Mark 2:1-12

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— 11 "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." 12 And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (NRSV)

Who is on the outside trying to get in? Isn't it interesting that no one turned and saw the man who couldn't get in and then pressed their siblings to make room, make a path and let him in? While this great crowd has gathered and pressed their way to hear, see and touch Jesus, the person most in need of the love and healing touch of God was left on the outside. The church is to be an inclusive body, those on the outside, those on the margins, those in need of the love of God as expressed through the church must be let in, they must be welcomed. It is interesting in this story that the church is full but the paralyzed man is left outside. Those inside appear to have no concern for the man who is outside.

Who is on the outside trying to get in? Do mainline churches today operate in a similar fashion as the gathering depicted in this text? Do they not see that our LGBTQ siblings have been marginalized and left outside? Do they see them wanting to come in and be their out, full, authentic, transparent selves, celebrating the fact that God created them LGBTQ? Is the mainline church so stuck on what they have been told the word is instead of a new transformative liberative word from God? Is the mainline church full of folk who have pressed to get close to Jesus but yet don't receive the word of Jesus? Is the church wanting to be transformed by the word? Bishop Yvette Flunder says, "... the vast majority of churches remain extremely judgmental in their theology and conservative in their politics towards people who traditionally have lived at the margins of society."¹ The judgmental stance of the mainline church has made it unaware to those on the margins. They sit at the feet of Jesus and they don't see, don't care and don't make room for those on the margins.

Thank God the man on the margins had friends. As the friends bring the man to Jesus they realize there is no way in, people aren't making a way for the man to get in and be with God. No one is moving out of the way to make a path for the man on the margins to get in the room. The friends, because of their love and faith, tear the roof off the house to get the man in the house. As they are tearing the roof off, those inside don't respond, there is no hint in the text that they are concerned about the commotion or the state of the man who has be lowered into the room. Instead of feeling bad they had left the man outside and hadn't made room, they sit in judgement of what God is doing. They sit in their seats judging Jesus and the words Jesus speaks, the forgiveness Jesus affords. The response of the people in the room versus Jesus' response is striking. Jesus sees the marginalized one that is being lowered in the room. Jesus doesn't judge the marginalized one but rather

Jesus recognizes the marginalized one and the friends who had the faith and love to bring him to the meeting and find a way in! They had to make a way where there was no way. For the church to be the church that God desires it to be, those of us who call ourselves friends and allies to our LGBTQ siblings are going to have to make a way. We are going to have to tear the roof off of the church. Jesus shows love to this man, now don't get it twisted, I am not saying that our LGBTQ siblings need their sins to be forgiven, they are not sinners, there is nothing wrong with them but they are marginalized by the majority of our mainline churches. I am not liking my LGBTQ siblings to a paralyzed man but I am saying that we have marginalized them, yes, we, I am part of that we. For years I have participated and supported a church that is built on patriarchy, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. As I repent, I am up on the roof digging a hole saying, "Let my LGBTQ siblings in the church just as God made them."

The church cannot claim to be the church of Jesus Christ if it does not live up to the liberative call of God and invites our LGBTQ siblings in the room just as God made them. To quote Bishop Yvette Flunder again, "True community—true church—comes when marginalized people take back the right to fully "be." A people must be encouraged to celebrate not in spite of who they are, but because of who their Creator has made them."² The church is not the church until it invites, welcomes, integrates, affirms and supports marginalized people so they may take back their right to fully be. To fully be in the church, open and out. God calls the church to be like the four friends who brought the man on the margins to the center. He was dropped down in the center of the church, right next to Jesus and Jesus showed him love. God calls the church today to bring those on the margins to the center and show them love.

In this story they are so stuck on what they say Jesus can't do they don't realize it is already done. While the church struggles with affirming and including our LGBTQ siblings, do they not already know God has already included them because God loves them and God made them? Like this story, the church has a choice to get with what God is doing or to self-destruct as they stand against God and the will of God to include and love all people, especially our LGBTQ siblings.

If the mainline church doesn't see, if they don't tear the roof off, God will close them down. We see the shrinking of mainline churches as they split over inclusion of our LGBTQ siblings. If, what we call the mainline church, does not become inclusive we will see a growth in churches and faith communities that are inclusive. "When access to existing communities is not available, marginalized people must seek to develop community for and among themselves. Where people are giving birth to a fresh, emerging Christian community, old barriers exist and must be overcome."³ These new communities are growing all over the country. We have a decision to make. Who do you want to be in this story? Do you want to be one of the four friends or do you want to be those who sit in judgement of what God is doing and has done?

[1] Flunder, Yvette A.. Where the Edge Gathers: . Pilgrim Press. Kindle Edition. Location 121

[2] Flunder, Yvette A.. Where the Edge Gathers: . Pilgrim Press. Kindle Edition. Location 160

[3] Flunder, Yvette A.. Where the Edge Gathers: . Pilgrim Press. Kindle Edition. Location 167

Rev. Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins is the Peachtree Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary and is known as “the scholar with a camera!” He is a professor, photographer, documentarian, faith leader and scholar. He is the author of six books, and over thirty chapters and articles. He is a sought-after speaker, workshop leader and panelist. His television show Talk it Out with Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins was one of the top-rated shows on the Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasting network for over four years (2012-2016). He is also the producer / director, cameraman and editor of three full length made for television feature documentaries: She Is The Pastor (2012) and Our Journey to Palestine: A Story of the 43rd Delegation of Interfaith Peace Builders (2013) and Africana Theology and the Roots of Our Faith: A Journey Through Egypt (2018). Dr. Watkins has had two solo photography shows and his photographs have been published in numerous publications. He is presently working on a trans-media, arts-based research project, “Seeing the Future of the African American Church in the Rainbow: This Is My Story, This is My Song the Lived Faith of LGBTQ Christians”

In recent years, Watkins has been the artist in residence at the Velvet Note and St. James Live, both nationally recognized jazz clubs. He also been awarded a Louisville Institute Sabbatical Grant, Collegeville Institute Sabbatical Residency Grant, Governor’s Teaching Fellowship, Lilly Teaching Fellowship, Fulbright Hayes Fellowship for study in Ghana, a Wabash Teaching Fellowship, and various awards and grants to study in Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Ghana.

Mark 3

Brooke Scott

MARK CH. 3:20-35: A QUEER READING

All my life, I have felt like an outcast. It's a common story. As a child, I was small and often timid or awkward. I didn't really fit in with the popular crew, the nerds, or the jocks. I couldn't hit most things involving a ball and even though I loved musical theater, I could only score a spot in the chorus. I sort of floated around throughout the years, never really having a permanent circle. I grew up in an area outside Philadelphia that wasn't quite city but also wasn't fully suburbs either. I had a family that was supportive but complex. I moved frequently between white friends, Black friends, moderate white churches and conservative Black churches—never really feeling fully understood by either. And when I finally came out as queer in seminary, I felt myself in this other weird space – part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also part of the Christian Church, the latter having caused the former irreversible pain. But I was excited to come out – it was one of the first times in my life where I finally felt at home in my body and everything started to make sense. And yet, coming out as bisexual/pansexual also felt like “in-between” space, where I struggled so often with whether or not I was “queer enough.” It would not be an exaggeration to say that I have had my share of difficult conversations and unfair assumptions. In many ways, my body has felt like a holding space for contradictions and a site for disconnection.

It's why no matter where life takes me, I'll always connect to Mark's Jesus. He is targeted equally by religious authorities & government officials. In 3:21, His own family is ready to “restrain him” because they think he's completely out of his mind. The verb “restrain” used here is also used to describe Jesus' arrest and John the Baptist's (Meda Stamper, Working Preacher).

Mark's Jesus is this eccentric ass freak who has only humble beginnings in a small, boring town. Jesus is conceived by an unwed teenager & no man in sight. He is a faithful Jew, but can't seem to follow the rules. He is a teacher, but loves all the wrong people. He holds a wealth of wisdom but grew up in poverty. He is a man, but challenges systems of power & gender norms of the day. Jesus is inherently “queer” in that he exists outside of what is normal or acceptable.

He is a healer, a seer, a revolutionary who comes to upend demonic evil & whose very body causes uprising, as folks are forced to unlearn & confront oppressive ideologies.

The people's violence toward Jesus is so profound that religious leaders begin to criticize, accuse, and undermine his authority. Somehow, they observe Jesus's justice work and it only causes them confusion and outrage. They watch demons yelp as they are defeated and cast out of people and communities and systems. They watch Jesus bulldoze through death-dealing norms and lead people to freedom.

No one can deny that Jesus has power running his veins. But the religious leaders can only explain it by suggesting that his power is corrupt or perverse because he does not have behave the way he is expected to. They condemn him with the most horrendous accusation they can think of. They accuse him of having demons & being an accomplice to Satan.

And while, Jesus doesn't say much in response, he does call them out for their inconsistency—how could Satan fight against Satan? And how could a house that is divided against itself still stand? In

other words, how could evil simultaneously lead to liberation? How could demons bring someone to wholeness?

The evidence is right there –people who encountered this miracle working Jesus begin to experience true healing in their bodies, minds, and spirits. It's a beautiful image to ponder. Like, maybe, when people encountered Jesus, they began living as their true, authentic selves again. People begin loving who they want to love and living without fear again. People begin feeling at home in their bodies and free in their gender identities again.

How many among us have been accused of evil when we were bending the arc towards justice?

I can't tell you how much I've been told I am not a real pastor because I'm a woman or because I'm queer. I can't tell you how much I've been told I am leading people to hell. I can't tell you how many times I've been told that by calling out white supremacy and homophobia, I am too angry and causing division. I can't tell you how many times I've been told I'm not holy enough or actively working against God rather than with Them.

In a world where books about race are being banned and queer folks are accused of having a family killing agenda, I relate to this Jesus. I think about people like MLK Jr. and Malcolm X who were killed because they were a threat to the status quo and dared to point people towards a better world. I think about the queer people who have lost their lives because they had the audacity to be their true selves.

And yet, if we listen carefully to the story, the people who accuse Jesus put themselves into a dangerous position by committing an unforgivable sin. They see hints of inclusion and progress and they mock and laugh at it. In fancy, theological terms, they commit blasphemy; they oppose the movement of the Spirit. They mistake the work of freedom for satanic evil. People who are so committed to their biases and prejudice can never live in the land of living because they cannot even recognize it for what it is. Because at the end of the day, we need each other to thrive, and if some of us are crushed under the wheels of injustice, none of us can live whole. Racism undermines all of us. Homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia make a fool of us all. Mark's Jesus teaches us that when we stand in the way of justice, we put our own selves on evil's path. Some of us know people like this. Maybe we find ourselves opposed by our own churches, universities, or local legislators. Unfortunately for many, it's their own families.

And yet Jesus does not leave us hanging out in isolation. By keeping to his mission, Jesus continually draws in crowds from the outside. Outcasts and oppressed people find him irresistible. People watching him get free simply because he is true to himself.

Though he himself cannot seem to bring his own family along, by the time we get to verse 31, Jesus begins "redrawing the lines of family and belonging" (Matt Skinner, Working Preacher). In the midst of all the drama, his family comes looking for him and he responds, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

This was a revolutionary concept in a culture where family of origin meant everything. It determined everything from wealth, respect, responsibility, status, protection, and identity. And yet, Jesus' life reorders even family relations to be less about biology and more about alignment and shared values. Against this backdrop, Jesus is one of the first to popularize what chosen family really means.

I am grateful to have a family that loves and supports me, but I know that not every queer person does. In addition, the family I do have looks little like a "traditional family" - my family is made up of the people who believe who I say I am and who show up for me and my cause. My family is one that transcends blood ties and genetic makeup; it is made up of love and friendships and legal marriage bonds, and most of all, intentional choices to accept one another & stand together through whatever this hellhole of a world throws our way.

So, if your family looks anything like mine, if your body looks anything like mine, if your identity is anything like mine, if the world's response to you is anything like mine, I think we all have more in common with Marks' queer Jesus than we ever realized before.

Rev. Brooke Scott (she/her) is a queer Black woman originally from the Philadelphia area. She is beginning her first ordained call in Delaware as both the part-time pastor of Church on Main and as the Presbytery's organizing pastor in Wilmington stationed at Hanover Presbyterian Church. She holds both a Master of Divinity from Duke University and Master of Social Work from the University of North Carolina. Brooke is passionate about helping people heal religious/spiritual trauma. She believes in using faith to liberate and empower historically marginalized communities, as well as transform unjust systems. In her free time, she enjoys reading books, writing, listening to music and podcasts, collecting vinyl records, practicing yoga, and traveling.

Mark 4

Shelby Lewis

QUEERING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: MARK 4:1-20

Mark's Gospel uses concrete, sensory language to speak to the everyday needs of Jesus's followers, and asserts that the kingdom of God is the here-and-now, not a lofty, disembodied hope that compels us to ignore our current realities. Mark portrays Jesus as a humble yet controversial rabbi who lived the fullness of the human experience; his salvific power exists because of his humanness, not in spite of it. By using parables, Jesus conveyed his teachings in language that is both accessible and enigmatic; readers still wrestle with these messages today, despite their deceptively simple language. The most fundamental question of this parable still remains: what is the word of God?

Some may say that the word of God is that Jesus came from Heaven to die for our sins, a perfect sacrifice for imperfect humans. Others may find God as they struggle through rock-bottom hopelessness and times of crisis. Still others find the word of God as a message of healing and hope, a call to justice and mercy, calling upon the humanity of Jesus and remembering His presence among all people every time we are tempted into numbness and complicity. The most beautiful (and most frustrating) thing about the word of God is that it is different for all people, and yet we all read from the same Scriptures that we all understand differently based on time and circumstance.

The "word of God" has also been used as a weapon against LGBTQIA+ people. The often-used phrase "clobber passages"[1] are aptly named, as misconstrued verses that are used like a bludgeon of shame and trauma, trying to make us cisgender and/or heterosexual, but too often just leaves us dead. But the Bible can only be used as a weapon when it's closed.

Opening Scripture is a lot like the parable's seed that fell in good soil; while the chemical composition of the soil may be ideal as it is, what makes it conducive to growth is human effort. When we challenge our preconceived notions of faith and of our identities, we act with God to till the soil, soften it, bury the seeds of our new understanding, and then wait for something new and better to emerge. The seed needs darkness as much as it needs light, and so it is with faith itself. The primordial darkness of Genesis and the nurturing darkness of the womb—representing all that is, has been, and all that is yet to come—is echoed every time we plant a seed in the ground and allow it to take root. Darkness is the home of possibility, not of terror.

Humans are the seed, and our faith is the root—and the eventual harvest that comes from the cultivated soil. Only once we are allowed to bloom can the word of God be used for healing the wounds of the bludgeon, a harvest of freedom from our own limiting worldviews. The darkness of creation, the womb, and the buried seed nurture new possibilities in a way that light alone cannot. The same is true of queerness and transness themselves—inherently life-giving, allowing our truest selves to take root and to grow authentically without the pressures of scorching light. Likewise, the buried seed is emerging, no longer a seed, but not yet a plant—resisting definition but still full of life.

The sower in this parable spreads seeds across the land, and they all fall in different conditions and face different fates as a result of the sower's actions. The first seeds fell on a footpath, trodden earth and a road well-traveled, only to be swept up as a bird's next meal. The seeds could never take root in these conditions. Every time a queer or trans person is denied their truth, whether by internal-

ized hate or the foreboding bludgeon of Scripture wielded in the pulpit, the seeds of our potential, and often our lives themselves, are swept away.

The second seeds fall on rocky and shallow soil, soil that is not completely hostile to growth but impossible for reaping a harvest. Oftentimes queer people embrace their truths and begin to grow, only to be faced with shame, scorching us before we can even truly bloom. This withering away is not because of the queer person's moral failure, but rather that we do not have the roots we need to make our growth last and multiply. Likewise, we may be lured by false hope, by individuals and communities that proclaim inclusion by statement only, but as soon as we try to bloom we are withered away. When we leave our truths at the door in the name of this false and shallow inclusion, we cannot take root.

Still more seeds fell among suffocating thorns—representing the temptations of wealth and desire for other things (4:19) but also the temptation of complicity and conflict avoidance. When churches start to get into the hard work of queer liberation, we may find ourselves covered in thorns, suffocated by reminiscence of bygone eras, opting for cheap grace that kills the chances of growth that will ultimately benefit all. The thorns of complicity are uncomfortable but familiar, and all systems of oppression intersecting like briars kills the mission of the true Church—and creates the crown of thorns on the crucified Christ.

But not all hope is lost, because the last of the seeds fall on good soil. The purpose of parables is to get us thinking about our own lives, not as literal sowers or literal seeds, but finding ourselves in the complex cycles of human growth. Jesus's audience understood the human labor that went into making soil truly good for a harvest. Tenderizing and tilling the soil is like the painful process of deconstruction, letting go of defensiveness and the need to be perfect so that we can embrace what is true. And waiting is the hardest part of growth: our truths may not be evident right away; we know our current state no longer represents who we are, but do not know who we are meant to be. But queerness inherently resists limitation, and that is the beauty of being queer in a hetero- and cis-normative world: that we can just grow and not be stuck in one phase of being.

Likewise, the most nurturing soil is made nourishing by decay; the death of what no longer serves us (e.g. dead names, tradition, language and self-concepts which we have outgrown) can ultimately bring us new life. The transformation of chemical compounds and resurrection into newness is the greatest testament to queer and trans resilience. Although we still live in a society where resilience is necessary and seen as a badge of honor, queerness and transness also allow us to be soft, like the nurturing soil from which we were born: a genderless earthling, the adam, imbued with the breath of Life that still fills our lungs every time we speak our truth. Whenever we embrace the softness of the earth and the liminality of seedlings, allowing ourselves to fall on good soil and to be good soil, the harvest of liberation multiplies so that all may partake. The word of God is found in the darkness, in queerness and transness, in every realm of possibility that starts with even the smallest of seeds.

[1] Biblical texts that are used to justify harm to the LGBTQIA+ community, e.g. Genesis 19:1-38, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Rev. Shelby Lewis (she/her) graduated from Vanderbilt Divinity School in December 2020 and is ordained in the Tennessee Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She completed her B.A. in Religious Studies at Elon University, where she was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Theta Alpha Kappa Honor Societies, as well as the recipient of Elon LGBTQIA Alumni Association's Student of the Year Award in 2015. She has worked in service learning, university chaplaincy, disability self-advocacy, and congregational ministry, and is passionate about helping others tell their stories in brave spaces. In 2021, she began independent consulting sessions for churches seeking greater awareness and equity for people with disabilities. She lives in Nashville, TN with her two rescue cats, Lucius and Violet.

Mark 5

M Jade Kaiser

MARK 5:1-20

Content warning: transphobia and suicidal ideation

This piece is an invitation to remember people have always been transgressing gender. This is a practice of stretching what it means to queer a text beyond static or surface identifiers of queer and trans characteristics. This is a suggestion that any biblical character, no less than any neighboring human, might be what some of us call trans, perceivable or not to those who read us.

—

When, exactly, did he relocate in their minds from one-of-them to one-unlike-them?
Was it before or after his home became that cave on the edge of town?
What made them first try to control him and did anyone dissent?
Was it when he first refused to answer to that old name? Or when he cut off his hair?
Did they say it was for his own good? Or that he was a threat to others?
Did they believe it when they said it?

To answer, they will point to his demons. This will be partially true.

“Hatred is always self-hatred,” wrote James Baldwin.

—

Among the many challenges of 2021 and 2022, anti-trans bills, proposed and passed, have soared across the United States. From the harshest in Alabama making gender affirming care for anyone under 19 a felony, to the many states that have passed laws prohibiting trans girls from playing sports with their gender peers, to the Texas governor declaring the support of trans youth “abuse,” the mission is abundantly clear. For the last 30 years, Adam Serwer wrote of the GOP last year, this has been a successful political strategy: “Find a misunderstood or marginalized group, convince voters that the members of that group pose an existential threat to society, and then ride to victory on the promise of using state power to crush them.” Meanwhile, the lobbying groups behind the bills and messaging campaigns like Alliance Defending Freedom and Focus on the Family make bank (more than 70 million each in 2020). Money and power, as it always has in this country, fuels the fire behind such cruelty.

While demon possession rhetoric may be too passé for even theologically conservative political platforms, the work of demonizing is solidly on trend. Trans women and girls as threat to cis women and girls. Trans activists as threat to children. Trans people as threat to cis LGB people and movements. Wherever they can put a wedge to isolate, they are trying. The ill intentions of these political and profiting groups prey on the good intentions of parents, communities, teachers, and other people striving to be faithful with the information they have. Turning them against their own.

—

Of course he would get angry when they bound him. And when he was angry, he was strong.

Strong with rage, rage that covers grief, grief that looks like madness. In these criminalizing moments, what story did they tell themselves? And which did they tell him? That he was broken? Sick? Sinful? Just misled? That if he would just go back to [pretending to] being her, everything could be ok?

Their narratives, his demons. What a human thing, this being permeable to others' stories about who we are. This need for love. This need for belonging.

In his isolation, the stories begin to stick. With time, they multiply. Becoming legion. Becoming his whole world. His only company, severing him from his deep sense of truth.

--

For many years now, 52% has been the number. The percentage of trans and/or nonbinary people who have seriously considered suicide at some point. This will rise in the face of the latest legislation. Demonizing produces the demons that taunt from within. It is not the fact of being trans, nonbinary, intersex, or gender nonconforming that calls the flourishing of life into question. Discrimination does that. Apathy does. Isolation and violence do. Turning us against ourselves.

—

What was it that morning, that drew him so pointedly toward Jesus? Did he sense something queer? Something gentle? Was he so tired that a simple passing smile brought him to his knees?

Jesus immediately recognizes the evil that has been done to him. He speaks directly to the demons, "Get out of this man." This man. These two words, seemingly impossible for all else around him, flow out of Jesus' mouth with such ease. "This man." An invitation back into the holy realm in which his gender is not a question.

By way of speaking to the demons, Jesus reminds him, "These narratives against you, these lies, this evil has no place in you."

What is the power of God if not one person's love strengthening another?

It is important to note that this is no privileged pronouncement from on high. This is not love handed out like charity nor pity. This is solidarity from one who knows how hard it can be to navigate all the stories alone. From one who knows what it is to be hated both for who he is and who he isn't. From one who knows what it is to channel everything one has in the direction of bearing honest flesh. This is kin affirming kin, love in struggles, shared and different.

The demons promptly recognize their time is over. As this man rises to his feet, what power do they hold? In touch again, anew, in community with his truth. Some will be more afraid than ever, but their fear won't rule his mind anymore.

--

Columbia University's Department of Psychiatry notes, "Research demonstrates that gender-affirming care—a medical and psychosocial health care designed to affirm individuals' gender identities—greatly improves the mental health and overall well-being of gender diverse, transgender, and nonbinary children and adolescents."

Gender affirming care saves lives.

Gender affirming care includes spiritual belonging, religious proclamation and protection, and creatively engaging sacred texts for the flourishing of life.

Gender affirming care means cis people unlearning their gender (which is to also say, race, class, and disability) demons, too.

Gender affirming care is solidarity across interconnected struggles.

--

Is it any wonder that in their fear, the community wants Jesus to leave after they see this man so free from their control, so grounded in his truth?

Is it any wonder this man wants to leave with Jesus?

To our wonder, he stays to claim his space among his hometown. Which isn't necessarily to say with the ones who chained him. And that's important. But it might be to say with the ones like him. Or the ones who are not entirely like him, but who have known similar struggles. Or the ones who know nothing much of that kind of burden, but crave something of what they see in him. Becoming aware of their own demons.

He will not be the first to tell this sort of story. But through it, he will find his kin. And on the edges of town, they will love each other. Wildly. Queerly. A legion of their own.

--

This is not a story meant to minimize the systemic barriers that keep life from flourishing no matter how much we learn to love ourselves. Nor is it intended to gloss over the magnitude of grief we feel over the ones we lose.

This is just a story about demons and to whom they do and don't belong.

-

[It is noteworthy that Jesus is compassionate toward the demons. Misplaced fear and pain of others. Ghosts of others' trauma that move through bodies and generations. It is possible to meet pain with compassion, but first its power over others must be disrupted. To that end, it is noteworthy also, that Jesus' permission to re-direct this human pain toward the pigs acts as an unfortunate truth about what humans sometimes find a palatable destruction of life.

M Jade Kaiser (they/them) is the co-founder and Director of *enfleshed*, a collaborative effort to create and facilitate resources of spiritual nourishment for collective liberation. For over a decade, M has worked and wondered at the intersections of activism and spirituality, including a decade of experience collaborating for trans and queer justice within and beyond the church. They are delighted to currently be involved with Faith and Harm Reduction, SURJ's Word is Resistance, and Cherryhill Seminary's spiritual director certificate program.

Mark 6

JONAH P. OVERTON

The opening scene in the sixth chapter of Mark is one that too many of us find familiar: Jesus, having left home to discover who he is, the call of God on his life, the literally miraculous fullness of his being, goes home.

He returns to the synagogue. These are the friends, family, and neighbors who taught him to be a person. The ones that raised him up to love creation and the divine, to seek truth, holiness, and justice. But also the ones who always wished Jesus would be a little quieter, ask fewer questions, quit pushing so many boundaries.

He begins to teach them.

There are things he can teach, now. Things that had always been true but are now made newly manifest in his very person. Miracles coming to fruition in his own body, layers of meaning uncovered in the holy stories, truths that had lived for years on the tip of his tongue, now ready to roll off into willing hearts. Many had been healed or freed or radicalized by his teachings as he travelled. And now, here he is, back at home again.

As he teaches, they are amazed. Surprised. Scandalized. Repulsed, say some translations. They fall into the sin of disbelief. "Who does this kid think he is," they sneer. He was Mary's kid, the one that might not even have a "legitimate" father. They had decided who he was long ago, and whether their image of him was good, bad, or neutral, they weren't about to let him redefine himself- especially not when he deigned to tell them about the scriptures, to teach them about holiness, to challenge them to question who they were.

Too many of us know this story in the pit of our stomachs, the catch in our throats.

Despite the structures that demand our performance of straightness, of cis-ness, of the binary, we somehow found an out. We discovered closeness, connection, identity, and language for who we truly are. We find our true kin and we choose one another.

And then we go home. We try to explain the miracles we've experienced. Some are amazed. Some merely surprised. Some scandalized. Some repulsed. They built those closets for us, and they won't let us so easily leave the wreckage. Who are we anyway, to tell them what it means to be free? To be whole? That might require them to examine their surroundings, to see their role in our captivity - or worse, in their own.

Too often, we are literally disbelieved.

"It's a phase," we hear.

"God doesn't make mistakes," they say.

"There are only two genders," someone grumbles.

We expend so much energy trying variously to convince, placate, or fight them.

Perhaps we could simply find validation and rest in what Jesus says next: "Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households."

The scriptures say that he was unable to do miracles among them due to their disbelief. How many LGBTQ people, prophets of a liberated future, are stripped of their power by the sinful disbelief of their families of origin? This sin can be deadly - spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Jesus, in his wisdom, moves on. Notably, he never sets foot in a synagogue again in the book of Mark. Perhaps Jesus, like many of his queer and trans children, must find his way home without the religious institutions that have failed him.

Walking away from the synagogue that raised him, however, does not stop him from seeking and even building communities of faith. He continues teaching in the villages and cities beyond his home. He does not do this alone.

He gathers the Twelve, his beloveds. The ones who see him for who he is, just as he sees them for their true selves. He instructs them on what they need to change the world - it's less than they expect. There is abundance waiting for them, among those who are ready and willing to transform alongside them.

Like Jesus, we are called to find and choose and gather our queer and queer-loving kin. To build family, resource one another, and go out to change the world.

Jesus offers them and us a critical instruction: "If a place doesn't welcome you or listen to you, as you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them."

In a time when hospitality was culturally paramount and washing the dirty desert feet of guests was the responsibility of any good host, dusty feet demonstrated a failure of basic decency. Jesus suggests that while we travel through this life to spread liberation and queer love, those who truly reject us have failed, not us. We have a right and even a responsibility to brush that dirt off our shoulders and leave, not letting our bright souls gather dust while we beg to be welcomed by those who have failed us.

Our queer Jesus is infinitely loving, generous, and kind. And he demonstrates to us how critical boundaries are. How generous lovingkindness begins with the self. Jesus does not say "if you leave" but "when." With this instruction, Jesus acts in solidarity with all of us whose leaving is faithful: the queer teen who runs away from their abusive home, the trans woman who leaves her partner because he deadnames her during fights, the nonbinary person who walks away from the church for good in search of God.

The rest of Mark's sixth chapter highlights even more experiences common to LGBTQ people of faith. After the sending out of the Twelve, the author detours back to John the Baptizer, a radical forerunner of Jesus. Like many queer people, John's wildly transgressive life is a threat to empire. He challenges the excesses of those in power, exposes how bereft the marriage between Herod and Herodias is, even if it is deemed socially acceptable while other holier intimacies are decried as "sinful."

Queerness is anti-empire, an inherent threat to patriarchy, misogyny and normative family structures. This is the reason for the current wave of anti-queer and anti-trans legislation being drafted

or passed at this very moment around the country – to control bodies, to narrow expressions of gender and intimacy and family, to recreate the oppressive hierarchies of cisheteronormativity.

Because left unchecked, we the prophets of the queer, trans, nonbinary unKingdom will unseat the powerful. Our mere existence is resistance. Though the empire responds to us (like John) with mechanisms of death, our faith calls us to sing aloud our liberation, to keep teaching and preaching the world to come, and to know that where we are defeated, Jesus continues on ahead of us in the work.

He does so with beautiful flair in the next passage, the feeding of 5,000 people. This movement is growing, we see. Not only does it defy the synagogue, it defies the scarcity logic of capitalism that says we must all fend for ourselves.

After a long day of teaching, the disciples urge Jesus to send the people away to go feed themselves. “You feed them,” he says. Logically, their meager resources couldn’t begin to be enough for all. And yet, the queerly expansive abundance of Jesus demonstrates that with generosity and thanksgiving, there is more than enough for all. When we defy binaries and normative expectations, we discover a cornucopia of queerness that provides for far more than we had imagined. The new queer kingdom is truly for all.

After this miracle, the disciples witness Jesus walking on water. We expect them to be jubilant, but instead they are terrified and confused. This, too, is a common queer experience – our beloveds, our kin, even our magical, queer, trans, nonbinary chosen ones, see us unfold into glory and respond not with joy but with fear. What happens when they don’t fully understand the expansive power of our spirit and expression? Perhaps they are cis and misunderstand transness, perhaps they are binary and can’t see the fullness of gender bending, perhaps they are white and don’t understand what it means to be a QTPOC.

We learn again that we are not alone, and Jesus, who feels that disappointment in our chest, offers both solidarity and the wisdom of his example. He tells his beloved to be encouraged and not to fear. Jesus knows that it is fear that keeps us putting pieces of ourselves in closets long after we thought we were out. Even more so when we try to sweep bits of one another back into hiding. As long as we continue to journey together in love, we must encourage one another. Perfect love will drive out the fear that binds us, and we will be liberated into wholeness and holiness.

We see the fruits of that liberation in the final passage of the chapter – Jesus, now fully recognized by the people. They are drawn to him with hopeful expectation. Perhaps they, too, can be made free. His liberation is contagious, with all who touch even the hem of his clothing finding themselves healed.

This too, is the story of queer liberation. When we are made whole, we are holy. When we are seen, we are powerful. And that holiness burns like a flame, drawing in those who long to be healed into wholeness with us. Existence is not only resistance, it becomes a force for transformation, and together with the queer Christ, we can all heal into wholeness.

Rev. Jonah P. Overton (they/them) is a community organizer, creator of the podcasts “Jonah & the Peacock” and “Christian Queeries,” and the lead pastor of Zao MKE Church in Milwaukee, WI. As a young queer and trans clergy person, Jonah has been called into ministry to build the church as queer space and organize communities and churches towards justice and liberation.

Mark 7

SHANEA LEONARD

WHERE IS THE REAL PROBLEM?

There is a term that has been able to transcend generations as a normalized colloquial term. I hear boomers like my mom, millennials like my friends, and zennials like my godchildren all using this familiar word. And although my generation, Gen X, coined the phrase, it has the innate ability to cross all barriers of age, race, religion, and socio-economic status in its legitimacy and accuracy. The term I am referring to is HATERS.

Haters are those individuals who predicate their happiness on highlighting the flaws and fallacies of other individuals. Haters are not happy unless they are pointing out where another has been less than or unequal to the standards set. And typically, those standards are set, if not strictly upheld by a certain culture which the aforementioned haters are very much apart of and perpetuate. The problem is, haters do not realize that in their effort to isolate an issue they are, essentially, highlighting their own inadequacies in the process. Being a hater often shows just how blemished the narrowly focused lens of jealousy, ignorance, inaccuracy, and pettiness often is. In effect, being a hater can be classified as sinful because it causes one to draw attention away from the Creator and God's beauty in creation to a place that allows envy and evil to usurp attention and prominence.

The seventh chapter of Mark is a great example of what happens when a group of haters are confronted with this sin. This story paints the scene of the Pharisees, or religious folks, criticizing Jesus' disciples because they have sat down to eat without washing their hands. Now before we get too deep in the queering of Mark and extensively into the heart of the text let me say that overall washing your hands before you eat is a good thing. A few years ago, a study was done in London that pointed out if everyone routinely washed their hands, one million deaths a year could be prevented. Furthermore, none of us has forgotten the need to adequately wash our hands and sanitize at every possible moment given the current pandemic we live in. After all hygiene is important and clearly can be lifesaving. If nothing else, COVID has taught us all this fact. However, that is not the issue.

The issue here is that the Pharisees are focused on a ritualistic cleansing before eating that the disciples did not engage in. This is critical because although God does instruct God's people to cleanse their hands before consumption for obvious reasons, rabbinical tradition dictated a much more strenuous process that seemed to be ignored by the disciples. Thus, what is inferred is that if they didn't wash hands the way the Pharisees dictated, then the disciples are somehow deemed defiled or unholy. The inability to adhere to ritualistic tradition above the essence of humanity is a treacherous and dangerous place of judgment. Sounds like a group of haters to me. In fact, sounds like a lot of church folks I know. The notion that if you exist in a space that is void of a particular traditional way of showing up in the world or doing a certain thing then there is something wrong with you and you are deemed "less than". The HATER makes an accusatory ruling on the content of one's character based on an outward practice or ritualistic portion of life and faith.

What is the crux of this text, however, is that the Pharisees are standing in a place of judgement based on the disciples' inability to abide by tradition and doctrine and thus complete their fault finding speculation by deeming them unholy. They judge them based on an outward practice. Yet, when Jesus is included in the narrative the lens of the accusation is not only shifted away from

the disciples' outward faults but toward the inward motivations of those pointing fingers. Jesus tells those who are seemingly the most faithful and religious folks that their hearts are far from the Divine and him. Jesus says to the Pharisees, as they "throw shade" on the disciples and act fully in their role as haters, that the real problem is not the lack of Dove, Purell, or Dawn at the table.... its the dirty hearts of the ones with the cleanest hands. Jesus goes on to show them that they have given preference for their own teachings, rules, and traditions over the Divine and the people. They have allowed holding on to their own echo chamber of thoughts and beliefs to be elevated over their ability to show love, mercy, and care for God's creation and adherence to God's word. And by doings so, they not only disobeyed God but they themselves have become truly the ones who are deemed defiled.

Now before we all rush to judgement of the Pharisees, let us honestly confess that this type of exclusionary thinking still exists within the church today. Many of us who are within the LGBTQIA+/queer community are often seen as defiled, unclean, sinful, or ungodly because of who we are and the fact that our existence is the antithesis of many conservative and traditionalist dogmas within Christianity. Furthermore, this story and Jesus' own words are often misinterpreted to identify the sexual immoral sins of rape and molestation mentioned in verse twenty-one to mean homosexual or queer sexual engagement. However, a properly translated and interpreted reading of the text discredits such anarchy in a very decisive way. Nonetheless, those among us who see themselves as God's personal staff of morality police and doctrine detectives use this text in a way that it was never intended.

The heart of this narrative is very clearly articulated by Jesus both in public to the Pharisees and in a deeper private conversation with the disciples. God's concern over humanity is not insignificant trappings of the mundane of life that keep us pitted against one another. I truly believe God could care less about the socialized gender or sex of a potential life partner more than God cares about the heart and intentions of the suitor. The point here is God is deeply invested in the personhood that is defined by what is in your heart. Jesus explicitly says it is what flows out of you, meaning out of your heart, that matters. It is the core of your being that determines if you are truly defiled. Does your character reflect a heart that is yielded to the Divine, open to love, free of judgment, and quick to rush to that which is just or are you more consumed with the endeavors of being a hater and seeking to devolve every perceived intolerable behavior of those around you. It is far too easy to fall into the superficial trappings of what attracts the finger of judgement and if it does or does not follow established patterns of what is deemed right or good. It takes much more effort to yield yourself to show the same reciprocal love, care, and openness that God shows you on a daily. And the reward for doing so is far greater to do so.....

Be warned, if your faith and adherence to said faith makes you uncaring, ungiving, unloving or ungodly then you have missed the point of being in relationship with God and in community with God's creation. Nothing about connection to Jesus and relationship with God is exclusionary based on ritualistic practices and obedience to traditional dogma. On the contrary, the experience of the freedom we have in Christ Jesus propels the heart of a believer to a place of openness and inclusion. Being a follower of Jesus has never truly led anyone to be a hater. It has truly compelled all who believe to be lovers...lovers of God, lovers of justice, lovers of one another, and lovers of creation. For this is what it truly means to be a Christian and believe...

Rev. Shanea D. Leonard, B.A., M.Div. is a pastor, teacher, consultant, community activist, and 21st Century abolitionist. Shanea has been a minister of Word & Sacrament for over thirteen years in the Presbyterian Church (USA). They currently carry out their justice mandate as the Coordinator for Gender & Racial Justice for the Presbyterian Church (USA) national office. In their PC(USA) role, Rev. Leonard is working to dismantle racism, homophobia, transphobia, white supremacy, and various forms of discrimination by helping to move the denomination into a more inclusive and intersectional reality. A native of Philadelphia, they received their B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and M.Div. from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with a concentration in Urban Ministry. They have been serving communities and congregations in various capacities for over sixteen years. Shanea was founder and organizing pastor of JUDAH Fellowship, western Pennsylvania region's only predominantly Black affirming faith community and has served many years as a leading faith and justice voice in that region. Shanea has served several organizational boards and received numerous awards for their work around the eradication of racism and bigotry with the intersections of faith and justice. Shanea is an often sought-after workshop leader, keynote, consultant, and writer. Pastor Leonard has done extensive work within an urban context to eradicate systemic oppression in the areas of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic despair. After relocating to Louisville, Kentucky Rev. Leonard has continued their modern-day abolitionist work in connection to the Black Lives Matter movement and with the Tiger's Eye Collective. Shanea believes that God has given them a burden for people whom others have disregarded, oppressed, forgotten, or simply do not even see. They live their life by Micah 6:8 and the mantra of Assata Shakur which states, "...it is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love one and protect one another. We have nothing to lose but our chains!"

Mark 8

KASHIF A. GRAHAM

I SEE MEN AS TREES.

Mark 8:22-26 is a passage that has lived with me for a very long time. In my deliverance years, I used these verses to comfort myself when I still felt 'same-sex attracted' after so many aching prayers. It takes time. I even preached a sermon one evening, when they had the up-and-coming ministers offer a word of exhortation. Healing is a process, I preached, you only have to trust the Jesus of Bethsaida.

In this pericope, we encounter Jesus and the disciples, on a campaign of performing miracles. They arrive at Bethsaida, and following the usual trajectory, the townspeople bring to Jesus a man in need of healing. It should be noted that Jesus leads the man outside of the village. One might assume a privacy of experience, but there is no evidence to suggest that the disciples are not also present in this scene. Examining the passage through a theatrical lens (which is, in essence, a queer lens) we might view verses 23-25 as an aside; meaning that as the characters are physically removed from the surrounding action of the village, they are also abandoning the metaphysical principles thereof. In essence, we know that we are in a new place, with new rules. In an actual theater, the characters would likely move from, say, stage left to stage right. This movement requires a suspension of disbelief. We are invited, and perhaps urged, to set down our ingrained understandings of how time works. To queer our minds for the ensuing action.

And the following events do not make sense—at least with what we have canonically believed about Jesus. He is, as we used to sing in my childhood church, The Great Physician. In the other passages about the healing of blind people, such as John 9:1-12, Jesus touches their eyes and they can see. Why then would this all-healing Jesus need to touch a man's eyes twice? Perhaps the whole scene, then, functions as an aside from the Jesus who appears in the Synoptic Gospels. We are outside of the village and outside of the Gospels—which is queer and unruly and precarious.

At the first spit-and-touch sequence (here, Jesus spits into the man's eyes), Jesus asks him, like some optometrist from antiquity: what do you see? And the man's answer turns our canonical expectation on its head. He does not see with a sensate acuity. Instead, he responds: I see men as trees. More healing is required. Then, Jesus touches him a second time, and his sight is restored.

But in between verses 24 and 25 is a strait of possibility, and I floated there for a long time. I had followed the Pentecostal command to seek healing for my eyes—my homosexuality, my way of seeing the world, and the ways in which I was not seeing other men rightly. That 'inter-testamental' period was full of ache. It was like living between two slabs of earth, with the hope of finding land again. That shore, I believed, would bring me into a land of normalcy: a wife with long black hair, a home in a subdivision on a lake, obedient, well-groomed children. It was a new suburban priesthood of the home. If I could only stop seeing men as trees.

To be sure, after miles of sleeping 'in heat', where my body betrayed me by night with all sorts of sexual and chemically sweet dreams, I realized that I was not going to make it to that new shore. And that Jesus was not going to touch me again. At least not in the ways that would give me the life that I thought I wanted.

So now, here I write. I am a 30 year-old Black gay man living in Nashville, Tennessee. To echo the

haunting title of Mary Church Terrell's autobiography, *I am a colored man in a white world*. And in white gay Nashville, a colored body in a forest of white. My sexual encounters have been sparse here, in comparison to what they could be. I know that because I have travelled to other cities where, as we say in Black gay lingo, 'the girls were calling my name'. But regarding the encounters I do have, an old question returns to me: what do you see? I probe myself with that inquiry that just won't leave me—am I seeing 'men as trees' or am I seeing them rightly? By this, I mean, am I seeing the gay men on the apps as a mere opportunity, or do I care for their humanity, as well?

To be sure, I am not against hookups. And I am not reflecting on this passage in a way that is antagonistic to purely sexual encounters. The 'purely sexual' is, in my estimation, the 'truly human'. One does not have to be sexual to be human, but if one is sexual one is operating out of an expression of humanity. This being established, I do not think the problem is about a nebulous body count, for who can place limits on how many times we should remember that we are human? And I do not think the problem has to do with commitments surrounding the sexual encounters. Instead, I think it has something to do with individuals operating beneath a frequency of love—love in the most cosmic sense. Operating below that frequency, or perhaps, in this conversation, without eyes of love may mean that one only sees a collection of body parts. Trees, for your usage, and your shade, and your building.

Yet, I struggle with even my own criticism. What if having sex with someone because you like their thighs or their shoulders or their whole body is an adoration of the human form? But then, the body and the mind are one, which is over and against a Cartesian approach of embodiment. And if they are one, how can you engage with the body and not the mind? Would you not have to deny engagement with something—refuse connection, perhaps, with their mind, therefore dehumanizing them? I do not believe that to honor humanity in the space of the hookup is to maintain some time of relationship with the individual[s]. I think that too often, we have tried to rebuild our sexual ethics with the Evangelical master's tools—meaning that we have cobbled together some relational requirements that would then make the hookups permissible. I want to move beyond all of that.

What do you see? I know that I, as a Black gay man in the South, have wondered this standing naked before white lovers. Do you see the body that has drawn you to me? Do you see a tree jutting up and out—a tree that you can use to stimulate your imagination, when with your eyes closed a few minutes hence, I will have no idea where you are and who you are with because you have barred me from your mind? Or, can you see me with a textured acuity—poet, writer, Black boy, scared?

Kashif Andrew Graham is the Outreach Librarian for Religion and Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity Library. His reading and writing interests are queer & Black lit, the 1920's novels of racial passing, and the modern South. He holds a Master of Science in Information Sciences from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, a Master of Arts in Church Ministry from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary, and a Bachelor of Arts in English Honors Literature and Spanish Language and Literature. He is currently working on a novel about an interracial gay couple living in East Tennessee.

Mark 9

EDDIE A. ROSA FUENTES

MARK 9: 2-13

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, 3 and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. 4 Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. 5 Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" 8 Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One[a] had risen from the dead. 10 So they kept it to themselves, wondering, "What's this 'rising from the dead'?" 11 They asked Jesus, "Why do the legal experts say that Elijah must come first?"

12 He answered, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. Why was it written that the Human One[b] would suffer many things and be rejected? 13 In fact, I tell you that Elijah has come, but they did to him whatever they wanted, just as it was written about him."

I want to start by sharing some of my context, as our contextual experiences shape and frame how we understand and engage with biblical texts. I am writing this commentary as a Latine queer non-binary neurodivergent person, born and raised in Puerto Rico and now living in the United States. I therefore look into the Gospel of Mark through that embodiment and story.

Mark can be seen as a story,[1] and as a Narrative, tension increasing from previous passages. Of course, the tension increases not only for the reader, but also for the main characters, in this case Jesus. Jesus' trans (the human that is also divine, the Jesus that trans/figured) immigrant (God who migrated from heavens to earth)[2] life has been an object of constant surveillance (2:7, 18, 23; 3:6, 22; 8:12...) As seen in previous chapters, many of the questions directed to Jesus by the people in power were a constant scrutiny of his ministry and community. Little wonder that through the "messianic secret" (1:44, 3:12...) he hid his messianism in order to advance the Reign of God as an alternative society. In this way, the impoverished experienced the Trans Jesus on their own and not through the boxes that others created for Jesus.

The text in Mark 9 is known as the trans/figuration and comes after Jesus predicts his own death (8:27-9:1). Mark's Jesus is a fast-paced Jesus. He healed, debated, taught in parables, healed fed, touched, rebuked, evicted... Jesus did not have a breakesito, even when he was asking for time (7:24).

It is this tired fast-paced Jesus who asks Peter, James, and John to go to the mountain and be alone. In that mountain, he could find a place of tranquility, relaxation, a place where he could take care of himself. However, sometimes the stress is so intense that self-care and spiritual practices are not enough, and the body goes away on its own. Today we find this trans Jesus experienced a

disconnection between his own sensory experience, sense of self, personal history, and thoughts. Jesus' trans/figuration could have been an experience of dissociation, which is very well known among queer and trans people.[3]

Is Jesus experiencing dissociation as a symptom of acute stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, to name some conditions? Or is Jesus learning to live with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)? Conditions that were not described as we understand it today, in the 1st century, but today, 20 centuries later, are common in queer communities. To be sure, those conditions, which are the daily bread of queer communities, were not named in the 1st century, but it doesn't mean that they didn't exist.

Syd Flanagan, a Queer mixed-race person of color, in their essay "When DID and Christianity Collide" shares the following experience:

We learn quickly that "I" must be used to refer to this body, a slip risks punishment. "We" is demonic. "We" must be prayed out, cast out. "We" can get us whupped. We learn to hide in "I" and agree to go by the same name. Learn not to get caught talking to each other in front of the mirror. Never quite unlearn talking to each other. Press the idea of "us" further and further to the back. Never ask ourselves why is there an "us" when so many people proclaim to only have an "I". Lock up the worry we are demonic. No more all night prayer sessions over us, to cast out or heal one thing or another. [4]

Today's western (Christian) society understanding of human embodiment has a particular definition—cis, heterosexual, individual, white, among other. Identities that move away from those centers are seen as uncivilized, unclean, abomination, demonic. Making some queer people believe as Flanagan mentions, "We swim with the idea that if we can become an 'I', a straight cis white 'I', Jesus will help us. We will be 'right with God' and not demonic." [5] This understanding also erases the possibility of seeing neurodiverse experiences in Jesus' trans life.

That's right, Jesus dissociative experience, probably linked with the burden of the fulfillment of his prophecies and his ministry, needed the blessing of Elijah and Moses. No wonder why all three disciples were scared and did not know how to handle that situation. Peter suggests the making of three shrines (σκηνή)—a portable tabernacle, cloth hut, or tent.[6]

Dissociation sometimes can be temporary residence out of or within the own body. Therefore, Peter might be offering temporary residence to Jesus/Elijah/Moses' body in shrines that traditionally had access to the stars. A temporary residence to not make everything go away, but to let Jesus' body process all the burden he is carrying. Not so long ago he was predicting his own death and by the end of this same chapter will do it again. Maybe, Peter might have also been taken aback by Jesus' dissociation remounting him to when Jesus' family was looking for him and wanting to control him as he was "out of his mind" (3:21).

As a pastor, theologian, and biologist, I testify that neurodivergent experience is also a queer experience. Sometimes they are temporary, other times they are permanent. All the time they are hurtful because of the way society judges us. In this case, it seems that this was an episode of Jesus' neurodivergent experience that needed the reaffirmation of Elijah, Moses and of course Papito, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" Now, how much do we as Christians, say about the neurodivergent experience of our children?

[1] David M. Rhoads, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, Third edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

[2] Eliseo Pérez Álvarez, *El Muro de Tortilla: Migración y Mitos* (Mexico: Comunidad Teológica de Mexico, 2019).

[3] Matthew Tull, "What Does Dissociation Mean?," Verywell Mind, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/dissociation-2797292>.

[4] Syd Flanagan, "When DID and Christianity Collide," Messy Misfit Club, n.d.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "G4633 - Skēnē - Strong's Greek Lexicon (Kjv)," Blue Letter Bible, accessed May 12, 2022, https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/gen/1/1/s_1001.

Rev. Eddie Rosa Fuentes is an embodied Puerto Rican and queer story, who works with the re-imagining of the human being through a decolonial method. His incarnation and life experience moves him to use multiple concepts that have been taken for granted in theology, looking for a way to reimagine them in a fruitful way. He moves in an interdisciplinary space and works with queer, decolonial, Caribbean and performance theories. Eddie's desire is to provide space to invite people to embrace their stories and embodiments.

Eddie is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Humboldt Park in Chicago.

Mark 10

SHANNON TL KEARNS

I grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical church and we talked a lot about discipleship. We were to go out and make disciples of all people. We were to be good disciples.

And what did a good disciple look like? A good disciple told lots of people about their faith and tried to get them to convert. A good disciple studied their Bible a lot and prayed a lot. A good disciple was active in their church; serving, giving money, and attending every Sunday. A good disciple attended a small group of some kind, had people they were accountable to. A good disciple did their best to keep their bodies and minds pure.

I spent a lot of time trying to be a good disciple and often feeling like I was failing. I was extroverted and so telling people about my faith was really hard. I definitely served in my church a lot but I didn't have a lot of money to give and always felt guilty for not wanting to give it. I felt weird being accountable to others because it felt too vulnerable. Not to mention my growing realization that I was queer and trans (even if I didn't have that kind of language for it).

But these ideas of discipleship were all about me and God. At the most it extended to me and the church. Imagine my surprise when, after leaving evangelicalism, I realized there is a whole lot more to discipleship!

Maybe you, like me, grew up in an evangelical church with these notions of discipleship. Or maybe you grew up in a more mainline denomination that talked about social justice more often. Or maybe you grew up Catholic and had a different set of expectations.

No matter what tradition (or no tradition) you were raised in, revisiting the Gospel of Mark with fresh eyes makes a huge difference in how we understand the ministry of Jesus and what it means to be a disciple.

The Gospel of Mark is all about discipleship. It's a call to action, a call to get involved, a call to bring about the Kingdom of God right here, right now. In every story the writer of Mark is telling their audience what it means to be a disciple.

And while a couple of the things, on the surface, seem like the kind of things I was taught in my church, a deeper dive tells another story.

Take chapter ten. It's a series of small scenes, jumping from one to another almost without time to breathe in between. On a quick read we get a conversation about divorce, a lesson on children, a story about wealth, a teaching about death, a conversation about power and prestige from Jesus's followers, and then a story of healing. Phew! That's a lot to pack in to one chapter!

In my church growing up, I would have been taught about the stories like this: divorce is bad (and so are gay people), be as innocent as children, be willing to give up your money (or, alternately, no one is perfect), Jesus is God so he knew he was going to die, don't be a power grabber, and God can heal you if you have enough faith.

Does any of that sound familiar?

Now, whole commentaries have been written on each of those stories, but if we keep in mind that Mark is about discipleship, each of these stories takes on a different hue. Each instance is a moment where Jesus is inviting people into the way of discipleship.

This chapter starts with the conversation about divorce and honestly, it's the most tricky to parse. Some commentaries talk about how Jesus provides more care for women than traditional law, allowing them, also to declare a divorce. Other commentaries state that this was an attempt to trick Jesus into talking about Herod and his marital relations, the same type of critique that got John the Baptist executed.

It can feel like this is an anti-queer text eliminating the possibility of queer relationships, but I see this text as centering, again, the least of these. It's about critiquing power structures that allow men to rule over women, it's about critiquing political structures that allow for the taking of women and for a ruling class that plays by different rules.

Who are those being ruled over today? Who are the people without agency over their own bodies and relationships? How are laws set up that privilege certain types of relationships while excluding others? These are the questions we're being invited to sit with and to answer with our own discipleship.

In the episode with the children, Jesus is centering the needs and feelings of a group of people who were often overlooked, who had no rights, who wouldn't have been considered important. The call to radical discipleship is to center those on the margins.

Who are those on the margins today? Transgender children, Black and Latinx transgender people, particularly transgender women, and so many others who are kept out of decision making and for whom others' decisions do damage to their lives.

In the encounter with the rich young man we hear that he's been devoutly religious, he's kept the commandments, he's honored his family. He's done all of the right things. Jesus invites him into deeper participation; to give up his security and join the political movement for liberation. And the man goes away sad because he's unwilling to go that far. Those on the margins already have nothing to lose, this man was being invited to stand with them in solidarity and was unable to do it.

Where are the places you're being invited to go further? Who are you being invited to be in solidarity with? What kind of discomfort might that cause in you? What security might you be asked to abandon.

Jesus tells his followers that they're heading toward Jerusalem and he's going to be executed there. He knows this not because he has some kind of fortune telling ability, but because that's what happens when you go to the center of power and defy it. He's willing to walk the road to that center of power even knowing what it will cost him.

Where are the centers of power in our world? In your neighborhood or city? Where are you being called to stand up to that power? What are you willing to risk?

And in the very next sentences we hear Jesus's followers asking for future glory, for power, for seats of honor. We realize they don't fully understand the mission. They're still thinking in terms of the way it's always been done. They've missed the point of Jesus's invitation to discipleship.

Where are we missing the point? Where are the places we're unwilling to consider a new way of being? Where are we choosing our own comfort, our own prestige, our own agendas over the work of solidarity and justice?

Then, finally in this chapter, we have the story Bartimaeus, a man who is blind. Because of his disability he's told to be quiet, told that he's not worth the time and attention of this prophet. Being sick meant you were excluded from civic life. "The system subjects the physically ailing to a double oppression: not only are they second class citizens in Israel, but they must make special payment as well." (Binding the Strongman pg 153) All of the healing stories aren't necessarily about the healing, they are about the restoration of the healed person back into community. It's about making sure they are included again. Reading this story with a disability lens we would say it's the world that needs to change: it's not the person who needs to be healed, it's the world that needs to adapt.

Whose voices are we not listening to? What barriers are we putting up that keep people out of our communities? What are we refusing to change that makes those with disabilities adapt to our structures instead of the other way around?

The best of queer and trans community has always been about centering the most marginalized, taking care of the most vulnerable, taking the fight to the centers of power, eschewing respectability, and making community where there was no community. From fighting back against police brutality at Stonewall, to caring for those with AIDS, to marching on the White House for better funding, to start up health clinics to meet our own health needs (that were being ignored by larger systems), to our continued fights for access to safety and protection and the ability to have agency over our own bodies, we know what it means to be in community and look out for one another.

Being queer and trans and especially being queer and trans Christians, we are invited into this space of radical discipleship. We are invited into a community that goes beyond traditional notions of family and structure and instead think outside the barriers, queering the very foundation we all stand on.

The invitation remains the same today, to go more deeply into a politics and a practice that creates families and systems and structures that are more just.

Will you answer this call to discipleship?

Shannon TL Kearns is a transgender man who believes in the transformative power of story. As an ordained priest, a playwright, a theologian, and a writer all of his work revolves around making meaning through story. He's the co-founder of QueerTheology.com and will soon publish with Eerdmann's books. He was the founder and Artistic Director of Uprising Theatre Company in Minneapolis. Shannon is a recipient of the Playwrights' Center Jerome Fellowship in 20/21 and he was a Lambda Literary Fellow for 2019 and a Finnovation Fellow for 2019/2020. He is a sought after speaker on transgender issues and religion as well as a skilled facilitator of a variety of workshops. His work with Brian G. Murphy at QueerTheology.com has reached more than a million people all over the world through videos, articles, and online courses and community. Shannon's plays include Body+Blood, in a stand of dying trees, Line of Sight, Twisted Deaths, The Resistance of My Skin, and Who Has Eyes To See. He's also the writer of three television pilots: Transformed, Freedom, Kansas, and Family Unit.

Mark 11

JAZZ LOGAN

COMING OUT AND COMING IN

Coming out. There are many reactions to this moment that are valid and sacred but the coming out moment is one that many queer folk share. Coming out is this moment of reckoning of who you are to yourself and to others. Coming out isn't the pinnacle, the climax if you will, of the queer experience; it is the coming into oneself. It is naming, identifying who you are and claiming your own voice. Coming out is also about coming into your own voice.

Throughout the gospels we see Jesus on his own journey of coming out and coming into his own voice. Throughout the book of Mark, we see Jesus interacting and engaging with a wide array of people, some Jewish and some gentiles. After an encounter with Jesus these people are often charged with not telling anyone about what they had witnessed that day, keeping a closed lip on who the "son of man" is. In private however, we see Jesus asking his disciples to tell him who they think he is, and in some moments he confirms the disciples notions of who he is and in others he tells them.

In Mark 11, something contrary to the beginning chapters of the gospel of Mark happens. Jesus allows the people to declare him as "Hosanna", to exult him... this has not happened in the book of Mark. Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a colt while everyone is praising him and calling him "Hosanna" (You could call this a parade of sorts). Jesus processes into Jerusalem, on his tour he stops first at the temple in Jerusalem before going out into the city (Jesus was going out onto the town with his boys, you could say). The next day on this fabulous Jesus tour train, Jesus gets hangry and curses a fig tree on his way to the temple. When he enters the temple he sees people gathered in ways that the temple is not supposed to be used... he is infuriated by this and overturns the tables in the temple. As he was leaving the temple, the disciples see a fig tree and Jesus took this moment to talk about petitioning God. The chapter ends with Jesus answering questions about his authority, his divinity, about his identity. Mark 11 is Jesus' coming out moment but most importantly it is his moment of coming into his voice. Mark 11 teaches us how to come out in our own narratives of life and to come into our own voices.

At the beginning of this chapter we see Jesus preparing to make a grand entrance into the city of Jerusalem. He has instructed the disciples to bring him a colt to ride into the city, he even gives them instructions on how to politely steal borrow it. When Jesus enters into the city riding the colt, he is greeted by the people shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:9-10, ESV)! The people are placing their cloaks on the ground for Jesus to step on. This is a huge moment in the story of Jesus because this is his moment of recognition of who he is. The people see him for who he is. In the chapters leading up to Mark 11, Jesus has charged those that he has healed or encountered not to tell others about him. He tells them not to tell anyone about what they have witnessed or about who he is (Mark 7:36), but the people always do. Whenever I read about Jesus telling the people not to tell about him, I am always perplexed by this because I thought the point of Jesus' ministry was for everyone to know (at least that is what they taught me in Sunday School). However, after being in divinity school for the past two years I have learned that to be the "son of God", to be declared as "Hosanna" is a dangerous thing to be; it becomes political.

The word Hosanna is used six times throughout the bible and it is used as an exclamation of praise

and a phrase that means to “save us”.[1] The authors of *Feasting on the Gospels* say, “Jesus enters Jerusalem like a Messiah-king leading a royal procession in celebration of divine deliverance.”[2] The people saw a “savior”, someone who they thought was going to deliver them out of their physical oppression. They saw what they wanted to see in Jesus’ identity... a king. However, Jesus’ ministry wasn’t about earthly rule, it was about the Kingdom of God. In this Kingdom, it is not about the hierarchy of the King but about the presence of people being with everyone with no divides. Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was peaceful and dramatic. Perhaps, this entrance for Jesus was a statement for himself. His declaration of who he is and his readiness for the world to see it rather than a political ploy.

As a queer person, I cannot help but identify with Jesus’ struggle as depicted in Mark 11. There is a tension between his proclamation of identity and people’s interpretation of it, they’re seeing what they wanted to in his identity. When I came out, there were assumptions made on my behalf, of who I now was and who I was not. Comments were made on the transitory nature of my identity such as the all too common “it’s just a phase”. Both those who I hold close and whom I have no connection spouted phrases wrought with the evangelical undertones of “choice” and “not that type”. I found that the irony of coming out is the ability to finally say who you are to ears that are unready or unwilling to listen. The ability to define yourself to others whose dictionaries are closed to any alterations. Therefore, we begin to define ourselves and introduce ourselves with the same amount of fanfare as Jesus. Attempting to definitively announce our existence to an audience working just as hard to reflect their own expectations of our identity onto us.

In Mark 11:15-19, when Jesus “cleanses the temple” this is him coming into his voice and authority. When Jesus flips the tables he is flipping the tables of injustice, he is flipping the tables that say “there is no room for you here unless” and recreating, restoring the space for its intended purpose of prayer. Jesus comes into his voice and calls out the injustice in the temple that is preventing people from being able to commune with the Lord. He is removing the barriers for people to commune with God.

Jesus “queers” the temple by coming out and coming into his own voice. Just to be queer (pause for laughter, pun intended), to be queer is not only to disrupt the binaries personally but also those socially, politically, economically, theologically and environmentally. To be queer is to be a disrupter of the “norm”, it is to help society redefine the “norm” or to abolish it entirely. Like Jesus we are called to come out and come into the temple to queer it up. To be queer is to be prophetic, to see the injustices and speak out against them. Like Christ we must flip the tables that create and support systems of injustice, especially in the church. We have been called to come out and to come into our own voice like Christ did, creating spaces for others to do the same.

[1] “Mark 11 .” STEP Bible. Accessed May 13, 2022 <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=strong&options=VNHUG&qFilter=G2839>.

[2] Jarvis, Cynthia A., and Johnson, E. Elizabeth, eds. *Feasting on the Gospels-Mark : A Feasting on the Word Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014. P. 339

Jasmine “Jazz” Logan (she/her) is a third-year student at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Jazz is from Arizona but most recently lived in Los Angeles, California, before attending WFU School of Divinity. Jazz has aspirations of becoming an ordained minister (denomination pending) and has a passion for teaching the next generation that they are beloved.

Mark 12

BILLY KLUTTZ

A READING OF MARK 12: 38-44

Introduction

Chapter twelve of Mark's gospel is rich with interlocking characters and critiques. In keeping with Mark's earlier intercalations, the Gospel writer continues his method of multi-storytelling. That is, Mark's interwoven, inter-related stories remain myriad, even as we near the cross and his Gospel's end. In this piece, I interpret the widow's offering (Mark 12:38-44) using the lens of performance art and LGBTQ experience. Although performance art is not solely a tool of LGBTQ liberation, it has been a well-known strategy for our community's own meaning making and struggle for civil rights.

The Tate Museum defines performance art as: "Artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted." [1] Using the contours of that description, I hope that you will reconsider with me this double feature starring both Jesus and an unnamed widow.

Setting the Stage

Mark's twelfth chapter focuses on the temple and the powerful figures centered there. Chapter eleven retells Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. There, Jesus stages a series of protests which can also be interpreted through the lens of performance art. Firstly, Jesus creates a stylized entrance with his supporters. Jesus goes to the temple and, realizing that it is late (and perhaps the crowd/audience is gone), he heads to Bethany for a respite (11:11). When the spectators return, Jesus returns, as well, to perform/protest within the temple, overturning tables and interrupting the normal business.

Jesus as Rhetorical Champion

Within this context of performance and protest, Jesus begins chapter twelve by teaching. In this parable, a vineyard owner sends a series of enslaved people and even his own son in hopes of collecting his portion of the season's produce. In response, the vineyard tenants beat the enslaved people and kill the son. The ruling authorities fear Jesus' crowd of supporters and do not respond to this thinly veiled critique. Instead, they send others to entrap Jesus, but Jesus wins the rhetorical struggle, managing neither to affirm the current system of taxation or outright reject it. In doing so, he highlights the temple authorities' participation in Roman taxation and occupation. It is his interlocutors, not Jesus, who affirm that the coins in question belong to Rome (12:16). [2]

Rhetoric and the Reality of God's Kindom

The Pharisees and Herodians are amazed by Jesus (12:17), but the Sadducees still have questions. They pose a series of hypothetical situations in which a woman is forced to marry seven brothers after their subsequent deaths. To whom will she belong in the resurrection, they ask (12:23)? In the reign of God, she will not belong to anyone, Jesus replies (12:25). Systems of power and abuse may remain on earth for this present time, but Jesus' message is of the beginning of God's reign—and that changes even our most fundamental assumptions and institutions.

Finally, a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the most important (12:28). Jesus responds with three commands: to trust the unity and singularity of God, to love God with all that you are, and to love your neighbor as yourself (12:29-30).

The Widow's Protest

Following Jesus' teaching in the temple, the chapter closes with one final piece of performance art. This time, however, it is not Jesus doing the protest. Instead, it is an unnamed widow. The chapter that has focused on the injustice of the current form of governance, the power of money and taxation, and the situation of widows, closes with a powerful performance by a survivor of that system. In doing so, our gospel writer reminds us that those damaged by systems of injustice are not just objects of debate, but subjects and actors in their own right. Even within systems of conscripted choice, we are still possess holy, creative agency.

This widow makes her protest in one final offering to the temple system. Jesus tells us first that those in power devour widows houses (12:40) and then he makes sure that we notice one widow's protest against that status quo. Jesus tells us that she has contributed "everything she had, all she had to live on" (12:44). And we, as witness of this performance art are asked to decide if that is positive or negative. Jesus asks us to pay attention to the woman's giving; he does not commend or reject the woman's gift.

Queer Theology and Protest

To me, queer theology is defined by its attention to the ways we define what is supposedly normal and abnormal, both in reading the Bible and in following Jesus as a community. Queer theology challenges us to consider that which we have maligned, and what it might teach us about God, one another, and ourselves.

In reading this story and chapter, I am reminded of my own discomfort in witnessing some public actions of protest. I am guilty of sometimes bristling at the interruption and discomfort that protest brings. However, Mark's Jesus crosses the boundaries both of what we deem normal and what makes us comfortable.

Reading this story from an LGBTQ perspective also makes me think of similar public actions taken by the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) to demand a public response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.[3] Like the widow in chapter twelve, many of the ACT UP activists began their activism because they were out of options. They, too, had nothing left to live on and would likely die soon. But out of that supposed dead end came a coalition of organizing that slowly awakened our nation to the reality of those living with HIV/AIDS.

In honor of her artful activism, here is my own poetic retelling of the widow's final witness:

The Widow's Protest

Her home was devoured so quietly
Taken with subtle rules, silent excuses, muted gestures
Her security was tacitly taken, as well
Blame falls hushed in such a large system
Or should I say sanctuary

And maybe the widow did scream
Over the banquet din
For her home
Her hunger
Her humanity

But that day someone heard her
That day
The noise of her protest
Her challenge
Her gift
Was loud enough to be noticed

That day
She cashed out
All that she had to live on
From the system that had taken all of her life

Enough of the long prayers
That brought no respite
Enough of the showy offerings,
Profits from her own home's destruction

"There's not enough"
A young girl thought she heard someone say
Over the ringing of copper metal

[1] <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/performance-art>

[2] Mark by Warren Carter as part of the Wisdom Commentary Series (2019), p. 334-6.

[3] For part of that history, I recommend <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/14/how-act-up-changed-america>.

Rev. Billy Kluttz serves as Associate Pastor at Govans Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He is also the co-host of The TLDR Bible Show, a humorous Bible summary and discussion podcast, and a Doctor of Ministry candidate at Wesley Theological Seminary. In his free time, Billy loves downhill skiing, country music, and co-parenting his dog, Banjo, alongside his incredible husband, Steven.

Mark 13

OPHELIA HU KINNEY

RESISTING DISENGAGEMENT

The end isn't what it used to be: a portent of angels and demons or a cinematic Armageddon. Sitting on the Mount of Olives where he'd retreated before for solitude and prayer, Jesus responds to his disciples' urgent questions.

They ask "when?" They ask for signs. Ever the eager students, they want to know, "Will this be on the test?" And Jesus, like sunlight on a river, slips by their questions. He winds a path that evades the simple answers they crave.

Today, Jesus' response may read like a nightmare, or it may read like a newsfeed. With a nearly omniscient scroll of real-time heartbreak around the world, we can feel catatonic. We can be tempted to wait like lambs for the end. We can be tempted to pray for its coming. Or, as Jesus advises: we can live now.

What we receive by way of Mark may be less of an end-times prophecy and more of an our-times prophecy: a relevant truth-telling about the suffering of our day.

"Nobody knows when that day or hour will come - not the angels in heaven and not the Son." Jesus admits that he's not a forecaster or a fortune teller, though the disciples are quick to mistake him for one. Jesus is less preoccupied with predictions and more concerned with living. He invites us away from the periscope and back down into the hull where life - precious and remarkable life - takes place in shared quarters.

In our anxiety, we ask, "When?"
In our doubt, we ask, "How will we know?"
In our fear, we ask for an undeniable sign.

Jesus in turn evades the simple answers we crave. When we ask, "How long, o God?", God answers: "That depends." And then God reaches for our hand.

...

Often times, those of us who are queer or who otherwise experience life on the margins have a high-contrast clock. There are two times: "now" and "not-now."

"Now" is where death takes place - but "now" is where life takes place, too. And "not-now" is also where death takes place - but, Jesus promises, "not now" is where life takes place, too.

"Stay alert," he asks of his disciples. "Stay awake," he asks of us, lest we go gently into the night or surrender to suffering. We are not awaiting an Armageddon event; rather, we are witnesses to a steady drip of everyday pain in a world always dying and being reborn.

"Many people will come in my name, saying, 'I'm the one!'" Jesus warns. "They will deceive many people. When you hear of wars and reports of wars, don't be alarmed. These things must happen,

but this isn't the end yet. Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other, and there will be earthquakes and famines in all sorts of places. These things are just the beginning of the sufferings associated with the end."

The cataclysmic events Jesus described 2,000 years ago happened in his time and are happening in our time, too. In the midst of international war and domestic conflict alike, LGBTQ+ activists experience heightened persecution. Queer and trans Ukrainians face the peril of imprisonment by invading Russian authorities while LGBTQ+ individuals around the world face a tidal wave of state-sanctioned oppression.

In the U.S., LGBTQ+ people are also at the mercy of legislative measures that favor real estate developers over renters and home-buyers, threaten reproductive choice, absolve police of accountability, and more. Those with adverse childhood experiences are at greater risk of retraumatization and poorer health outcomes.

It can be tempting in the face of so much suffering to rest long on the laurels of progress. After all, we have "marriage equality." We have more positive media representation. Some of us have financial stability, housing, healthcare...

We ought to celebrate - yes. And gratitude will be our bread - yes. And yet, the tide of suffering does not rest, and Jesus calls us to wade into its midst, to put our hands against its surface, to hold each other through it, and to resist disengagement. The Black lesbian scholar-activist and political prisoner Angela Davis famously said: "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world, and you have to do it all the time."

At this particular moment in the pandemic - summer 2022 - we are experiencing a collective temptation of disengagement. From my church kin and from those I work alongside for LGBTQ+ justice in the Church, I hear a similar refrain: we are beyond exhaustion. Our civic trust is unraveled, our communities are frayed, and our capacity to co-regenerate seems frighteningly depleted.

We likely find ourselves asking the very questions that the disciples asked Jesus.

In our anxiety, we ask, "When?"

In our doubt, we ask, "How will we know?"

In our fear, we ask for an undeniable sign.

The kin-dom will come - perhaps when we are ready for it, or perhaps after we've been ready for far too long.

But pushing against the tide of suffering that is now is a tide of life that is also now - fought for and planted and watered and harvested by those who abide in justice. Queer people today are feeding this tide in the face of destruction: equal parts truth-telling and death-defying activism from mutual aid and unionization and the creation of thrift shops to unexpected alliances and worshipful communion and artistic expression. Suffering is happening right now, Jesus alerts us, but so is healing.

It is not fair that we are asked to be so brave. And yet, like the disciples lounging at Jesus' side on the Mount of Olives, we are not asked to be so brave alone.

Ours are an end-time, which is also a beginning-time. And there is an urgency in the face of incalculable suffering, and yet there is also the tug of the Spirit on our sleeve, inviting us to slow down and to live in the now. When asked about the end, Jesus reconnects us to the present. When asked

what will be on the test, Jesus reminds us: this is the test. The test is happening now. All this is a great mystery - a great queer yes-and.

"These things must happen," says Jesus - perhaps reclining in the company of his beloveds, perhaps thinking of his own suffering and death to come, and perhaps as the sun set in Jerusalem as it had countless times before: "but this isn't the end yet."

Ophelia Hu Kinney (she/her) is a storyteller most frequently translating experiences of divinity and wonder into word and art. She is a child of immigrants, a spouse, and a sister. She serves as the Director of Communications at Reconciling Ministries Network and the Worship Coordinator at HopeGateWay, a Methodist-inspired community of faith in Portland, Maine.

Mark 14

TALIQUE TAYLOR

Mark 14:22-26 is a story that Christians know well, the story of the Last Supper. This is Jesus' final meal with His twelve apostles before He is to be betrayed, tried, and executed.

Jesus' posture in this passage is somber and serious, as He administers the bread and wine to the confused and anxious twelve. After all, He had convened this final dinner to tell them the heart-breaking news, that in just a matter of hours, the radical movement they had started three years earlier; will come to a violent end at the hands of a brutal empire, an empire threatened by its message of radical love, liberation, hope, and solidarity.

With this fully in mind, Christ gives His apostles and thus, gives the Church, one of its most beautiful gifts; the Eucharist. With these simple words: "Take; this is my body... This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

Jesus ushers in this beautiful sacrament, this new way of being in community, and this new model of sacrificial Christian love. He gives bread and wine to His apostles, symbols of the literal breaking of His body and shedding of His blood that will come on Calvary, as a sign of an unfathomable grace.

But the Eucharist has a dual meaning. It not only is the gift of God for the people of God, as we say in the Episcopal Church, but it is also a prophetic witness, a living and breathing testament as to what Christ Himself and His followers will have to endure for the sake of justice; persecution, discrimination, ridicule and death.

Who can be a better testament to the "terrible beauty", in the words of James Cone, of the solemn Eucharist, than LGBTQ people? Are we not, even at this late date, fully realizing the joy and sorrow of the Eucharist? Are we not living testaments to its hope and its despair? Do we not come to the table of Christ seeking both fulfillment and solace from it?

Today, LGBTQ people in the United States and around the world find ourselves in a state of crisis. We are collectively attempting to process the trauma brought on by the ongoing pandemic, the loss of friends, family, and other loved ones, while simultaneously waging a defensive war against the evil powers of homophobia and transphobia that have made their ways back into the national discourse, in state legislatures, and on Governors' desks. It would appear that we too, find ourselves at a little table in Jerusalem, worried about the fate of that revolution that began all those years ago, at Stonewall, where Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and so many others found the strength to resist.

Amidst all of this, LGBTQ people within the Church find themselves awash with a flood of emotions; from grief and sorrow to anger and resentment, as theologies that actively harm our communities continue to fester unchecked within far too many churches, Christian colleges, youth groups, and other spiritual communities. And for those of us who navigate the intersections between race, gender identity, and sexuality, this moment finds us worn out and exhausted.

We've already had to deal with the shallow analysis and half-assed condemnations of racism by America's white churches in the wake of the executions of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Now,

LGBTQ people of color within the church are hearing the theologically violent sermons of cishet pastors who warn their congregations about our perceived “grooming” behavior, and further stigmatize and marginalize our existence and presence among children.

What does the Eucharist mean for an exhausted Queer community? What does the breaking of Christ’s body and shedding of His blood mean for us as we, now more than ever, face the sorrowful reality of continual death?

It is in these moments of great tragedy, in these hours where our hearts feel heavy with grief and longing, where joy feels abstract and distant, that we, God’s beloved Queer children, fully realize the gift of the Eucharist.

In these dark times, the Eucharist transcends its duality and becomes liberation. It is Christ’s broken body and spilled blood that reveals God’s solidarity with us as we grieve, as we mourn, and as we face persecution by those who call themselves, “Christian”. In the Eucharist, Christ is the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. When we cry out to God, “How long, O Lord?”, the Eucharist is God’s response, “Not long. Fear not, for I am with thee, always”.

God is not indifferent towards our suffering, nor is God neutral. God does not validate, “both sides” on the debate over Queer affirmation, but has made the choice to side with us! God is not neutral on white supremacy and all of the hellish terror it has brought to Black and Brown people, God has chosen to become Black and Brown!

Christ is with the Queer child who laments the rejection of her family, for in the Eucharist lies the mourning of Christ at His fate on the cross. Christ is with the anxious Trans child who fears the risks of being their authentic selves, because in the Eucharistic feast is His own angst. Christ is with the newly married Queer couple who celebrate their life together in joy, because the Eucharistic feast is the sharing of a joyous meal. Christ is present in the lifeless body of the Black Trans woman whose name is known only to Him, because in the breaking of His body and the spilling of His blood is Christ’s shared suffering with the broken body and shed blood of His beloved Trans children.

When all hell has broken loose, when we fear the worst, when we are overcome with the instability of our world and all of the emotions it brings, for good or for evil, the Eucharist sits high on Christ’s altar, our constant reminder of His love. It is there for us, even when we don’t feel like it, even when it is hard to believe it, even when it just doesn’t seem to make much sense.

And, as much as the Eucharist is our gift from God for God’s people, it is also a calling to discipleship. It is our reminder that just as Christ gave Himself for us, we are to give ourselves for one another. We cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering of our community; now more than ever, LGBTQIA people need each other, and all of us have the duty, the vocation, to be there for one another. We must join God in liberating work on our behalf; protesting, writing, resisting, sheltering, comforting, serving, and resisting, for the Eucharist is Christ’s ultimate resistance to the powers of evil with the enduring, the transformative and the Divine power of love.

Talique Taylor is a current English/Creative Writing student at Taylor University in Indiana, where he also serves as a student advocate on behalf of American ethnic minorities on campus. He is a confirmand in the Episcopal Church, and currently serve as a Lay Eucharistic Minister (LEM) at Gethsemane Episcopal Church in Marion, Indiana. He is originally from the inner city of Chicago,

where he grew up on the city's West Side. He now lives in the Cook County south suburbs. Currently, he is in the early stages of discernment for the Episcopal Priesthood. Talique is a writer, a student-theologian and a history/politics/theology nerd.

Mark 15

CASEY OVERTON

Mark's most horrific chapter opens with Jesus' second interrogation. The anonymous Markan author tells of Jesus being given into the hands of Pilate who would've been historical Jesus' most formidable opponent, although the author chose not to frame it according to this historical likelihood. What the author may have expressed with some accuracy is the curious but unsurprising transformation that follows. What began as a religious or spiritual charge of blasphemy against God from the Sanhedrin is conveniently metamorphosed into charges of treason against the throne - a necessary secularization that uncovers the historical reality that Jesus' true and most lethal accuser was not the Sanhedrin but the State.

Although the high priests are unfairly and inaccurately scapegoated as the chief executives of Jesus' murder, Markan attention to this shift in charges hyper-realistically portrays a profound reality for marginalized populations preyed upon by social and legal "justice" industrial complexes that are invested - quite literally - in our captivity and dehumanization. Whichever charge will result in conviction ends up being the "correct" charge.

Mark's author even goes to the lengths of creating a foil in Barabbas or, translated, "son of the father" whose guilty release is inconsistent with the judiciary customs of the time and probably fictionalized. The motif of shame and ridicule is accentuated further with the entire company of soldiers - hundreds of men who have inconvenienced themselves to join in Jesus' torment using props that might have been troublesome to acquire. When they are through, Jesus' body has been tortured beyond its capacity, yanking Simon, the bystanding Libyan, into the narrative as Jesus' body double whose "assistance" is more obligation than compassion.

The backhanded "altruism" escalates with Jesus being offered a spiced wine delicacy that, while potentially lessening his pain, could serve to ensure that Jesus' death doesn't offer him too early a release from the miserable experience. Christ refuses to entertain this insult and survives long enough to be lynched as soldiers gamble for bits of him to loot as souvenirs. The mocking continues from spectators including even the two crucified bandits who must have forgotten their nearly identical plight in favor of spending their final moments punching down.

Weighty darkness envelops the scene and Jesus, having little left to grasp the thread of life, shrieks at God in indignation. A final backhanded offer of sour wine serves as Jesus' last displeasure while the heartless below speculate whether Jesus' ancestor might come to his rescue. They don't, and Jesus perishes. The veil rends in two which prompts the centurion to recognize the divinity before him. The women, bearing witness to his agony from a distance, had recognized God's presence all along. A member of Mark's notorious Sanhedrin displays the only authentic kindness in this chapter, asking permission to personally accommodate Christ's battered body. Joseph of Arimathea and the loyal women are Christ's final caregivers. Devastated and aggrieved, they ensure as dignified a burial as possible.

Keeping the embellishments in mind to avoid scratching the antisemitic Christian itch for fabricated Jewish villains, the Markan author could have been writing to a Jewish audience for whom religious authorities were their most imminent adversaries. This would be where the inflexible binary between fiction and nonfiction falters. Although Jesus' primary accuser would have been Pilate and the State, the text likely reflects the lived experiences of those of us whose chief accusers are trust-

ed religious authorities still acting as agents of the state. The Markan author shrewdly juxtaposes his synthetic priestly vigilantes with employed agents of the State whose cruel and violent mockings of Jesus are hardly distinguishable.

Ashon Crawley has birthed a body of work that compassionately responds to the cries of such living and departed victims of state violence meted by empire-sympathizing religious authority. In his multigenre exhibition "The Hammond Organ and the Problem of Black Sexuality," Crawley "takes the electric mechanical instrument of the Hammond Organ, invented in the 1930s, to think about various problematics experienced in black social life." In so doing, he eulogizes victims of the late 20th century AIDS epidemic which, unabated due to government neglect, quietly devastated Black communities over the course of four decades. Throughout his work, Crawley gestures toward the overrepresentation of Black church musicians among the dying and closely examines the organist in particular.

In spite of their alleged "depravity," the organist, choir director, drummer, or praise dancer is exalted, famed for their "anointing" which the church is delighted to siphon for its own advantage. As Black queer church members are given royal treatment for serving as the artistic fulcrum of Black ministry, they are gossipped, derided, and eventually estranged from the community if their identity is confirmed. The purple robe is cast upon the lashed backs of our condemned queer and trans siblings, its thick fabric agitating the shredded tissue of their still-bleeding wounds. Hailed as ministers yet ridiculed as "tambourine players," piercing thorns halo the minds from which innumerable scores of Black church anthems were so sensuously wrought into existence. Those same congregants waxing ecstatic by queer anointing in worship are the company of queerphobic soldiers; their ridicule lubricates the engines of the gendered, classed, and racialized caste system consuming us all.

Crawley's high-definition imaging of this injustice could hardly be captured without mentioning labor relations. Despite the Markan Pilate's ahistorical reticence towards Jesus' conviction, the escalating harm that follows is officially sanctioned because Jesus is "guilty" of claiming the "wrong" identity. It is "wrong" because the State cannot tolerate a peasant-rabbi unfit to clean dust from the emperor's feet flamboyantly cross-dressing as a king. Otherwise, the empire's kings may have to clean their own feet; to claim royal status is a transgressive queering of the hierarchical order that keeps the imperial enterprise in "working" condition. So, too, the American empire responds to our most liberated queer and trans siblings with perilous antagonism. So, too, must the United States police identity in order to shield its favored proponents from the labor it recognizes as undesirable. Gender and sexuality, as social constructs employed for colonial gain, are non-exempt.

Discrimination in the United States always begins with dollars. "If the cash value of a wife's multifarious services (on the open market) were computed it would far exceed what a husband could afford to pay." Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, authors of *The Anti-Social Family*, are among the many who have exposed the savagery of capitalistic reliance on labor exploitation along manufactured gender lines. Queering the gender binary and the (amato)cisheteronormative nuclear family disrupts these colonial borders by which "undesirable" yet essential caregiving and housekeeping labor is performed at insultingly low or nonexistent wages - pittance relative to its invaluable societal benefit.

American Christians (with far more devotion to America than Christ) realized in the postwar era that feminine bodies must be confined in a domestic prison if men should have enough free time to resume the oppressor escapades upon their return from the oppressor olympics (WWII). Alexandra Minna Stern discusses the rise of the ghoulish overlords of modern gender roles in *Eugenic Nation*

saying, "Rather than focusing exclusively on restricting the reproduction of 'undesirable' groups, postwar eugenicists devised 'family values' specifically to promote the reproduction of white Christians in the face of increasing racial justice and feminist empowerment."

This conflation of state and religious interests continues to corrode American culture right now. The most informed and/or most numbed among you may recognize this rhetoric as consonant with a portion of the endless vitriol found in the putrid manifesto of a genocidal hellspawn who murdered 10 Black people in Buffalo. The great replacement theory remains stagnant, reeking water in the unflushed toilet bowl of alt-right ideology that dogmatizes viewing the "other" as a threat. This is not unrelated to the transphobic frenzy following the heart-shattering Robb Elementary massacre in Uvalde - a random trans woman was framed as the perpetrator. We now must finally confront the implications this fascistic paradigm holds for our bodily autonomy with the overturn of Roe v. Wade by SCOTUS. While our moral imperative to transfigure our ministry leadership structures remains at its apex for the sake of trans and queer people, cisheteropatriarchal queerphobia, transmisogyny, and affinity for all violence therein endangers everyone.

We Black co-bearers of the crossbar, inhabiting the liminal spaces between rage, sorrow, incapacity, and complicity, are dually obligated to seek liberation as we reconstruct from the devastation. The end of chapter 15 accentuates the disciples' abandonment of their Messiah in their desperation to avoid incrimination by RICO-style state aggression. Simon the Cyrene's proximity positions him as the closest thing to a companion Jesus had on the via dolorosa, but Simon is neither a friend nor can he save Jesus. While Simon's presence provided Jesus relief if any was to be found, it also maintained the violent imperial spectacle culminating in Jesus' elimination. Sharing the same choir stand, cishet and passing "comrades" find a subtly disharmonic companionship with our queer siblings, lacking safe means to defend these victims or refuse to spectate their punishment. Facing bankruptcy by the reparations owed, the best we can offer is hollow "support" like prayers, praise, and verbose essays that come much too late to commute their socio-spiritual executions.

By confronting these disturbing parallels, we find the same commodification and extractive disposability politics that murdered Christ endemic in our own "Holy Ghost-filled" spaces. Even after our anointed are cast out or killed, gambling soldiers traffic in queer sound, slang, apparel, and mannerisms as cultural artifacts we continue to benefit from as they grow increasingly dislocated from the multi-marginalized community where they were birthed and their value appreciated. Whether as State magistrates, minions, or marionettes, all who do not become malignant to empire participate in the state-sponsored spectacle of BlackQueer death.

Responding to Crawley's work, Rev. Leonard Curry reflects,

"Are Black people - are Black Queer people - the floor for the Black community's excess?...Do Black Queer people become a subordinate yet nonetheless fecund site for productivity, inspiration, or production? What metaphor is superlative here? Should we think about Black queer people as the soil, as the salt, as the silt of the earth? A place where you bury things? Where things can be shed and left but also a place for you to turn again and again for the production of new life?"

Curry's questions reminisce a resurrection, of renewed potential for breath and change in so pessimistic a place as the grave. Don Abrams lives into this possibility for resurrection at the helm of Pride in the Pews, a grassroots organization ministering at the intersection of Black faith and Black Queerness.

Our responsibility is not to be singular experts nor is it the responsibility of any nonBlack person to

address or comment on Black people's intracommunal contentions with internalized white dominance. We are blessed enough to have guides in those, like farmers, carefully tending this sacred ground. From Crawley and Curry's interdisciplinary contributions to the care work of Pride in the Pews to the femme-bodied babies refusing to wear dresses on Easter morning, we live amidst countless oracles who have charted our way forward. May we be humble enough to follow them, lest we "saints" are left behind.

Casey Overton (she/they) is a radical communications strategist and spiritual activist who is deeply vested in the development of healing cultures. They are the editor of "Liturgy that Matters", an enfolded publication. She also serves as the associate director of communications for an organization that supports organizing and advocacy for housing justice. As a multispiritual worker, they love being immersed in cooperative interfaith dialogue while creating restorative space for those marginalized within or beyond faith institutions. She's also an amateur poet, nap-taker, and time-bender. She resides in the stolen Powhatan lands now called Richmond, VA.

Mark 16

SHELLEY DONALDSON

MARK 16:9-20

There are two things happening with this final piece of Mark's good news. First, we've got some revisionist history happening. Scholars agree that Mark was probably the very first of the gospels written. It's the shortest and it's missing some key pieces that the others have (the virgin birth isn't there, Joseph never makes an appearance, and the story ends with Jesus in the tomb). There's not really a resurrection story for Mark, at least not like the other gospels. Because this part, starting at verse 9, was added later to the original writing. Jesus was crucified and when Mary, Mary and Salome came to anoint the body of Jesus (as was customary), there was no body to be found but a man, dressed in white in a tomb telling them to go and tell the disciples that Jesus was alive and going ahead of them to Galilee.

That's it. End of Mark's initial story.

Luckily for us modern-day readers, someone came in and added in this section here (vs. 9-20) the parts about the disciples finding out about his resurrection and their complete lack of ability to accept said information from anyone other than Jesus himself. I assume that whoever added this final piece did so to give a more complete picture of Jesus' story because that's what must happen sometimes, right?

We don't always get the whole story. But thankfully, someone took the time to make sure we knew that Jesus' disciples wouldn't listen to anyone other than Jesus and that even Jesus had to knock some sense into them because they weren't willing to hear the truth from the mouth of a reputable source. Mary Magdalene, like a legit friend and follower to Jesus, did her due diligence and told the eleven male disciples who were left behind what she had experienced. You would think this would be good news to their ears. Wouldn't you want to hear that good news?!

But, alas, they were not to be swayed with the words of a woman. They knew Jesus was gone, and they were sticking to their narrative. But that's okay because Jesus was persistent. So, he hung out with two of them (surely this would convince the rest of them, coming from the mouths of two of their own), and when the two told the other nine, the rest of them still wouldn't be swayed. For those who hadn't experienced the resurrected Jesus first-hand, they buckled down and stuck to the narrative that they would accept from none other than themselves.

Here's the second thing that's happening: Jesus had to come back and tell them for himself in the flesh. And he wasn't pleased to have to do so. Why didn't they just believe what others told them? Was it just easier not to believe? Once Jesus showed up, they had to face the music that Jesus had come back, and they had failed to listen to other repudiable voices that Jesus empowered.

In the LGBTQIA+ world (and for minorities in general), this is what we call "becoming the curriculum." Yes, Jesus was always the curriculum, but can't a guy get a break, even in his death and resurrection?

Now you might be wondering, "how does this relate to the queer community?" Well, my fine readers, as queer people it's easy to understand what both the editors of Mark's gospel and Jesus were

doing because we constantly have had to do both.

Mark's later editor came along, probably realizing that this gospel wasn't telling the whole truth. Yes, Jesus was crucified by state-sanctioned actions, and he appeared to the women first upon his rise from death. But what early readers of Mark didn't get was that when Mary did as Jesus told her to do, those who were supposed to be the most faithful to him (ie. the 11 dudes who followed him around like early-day Lady Gaga groupies), well they weren't having it from the mouth of a woman. Apparently, this editor wanted us to know that not only were they not compliant in listening to another of Jesus' most faithful followers, but that Jesus got pretty upset at them. He doesn't seem pleased that he had to remind them of their duties as his disciples.

Queer people (and minorities in general) must do this all the time. There's always the public story, the one that has been created by the mass media (typically written by the white, heterosexual, cis-gendered males in the writing room). But at some point, queer individuals and groups have found that they have had to go back and tack on their own disclaimers and endings so that those stories reveal a fuller truth. AIDS didn't only affect the gay community back in Reagan's time, but that sure was the spin put on for the world. No one at the time with the ability to do so bothered to really tell all the facts. Instead of understanding it as a humanitarian issue, the narrative was that it was only an issue for gay men because of their obviously sinful deeds (cue eye-roll here).

Then here comes Jesus to the table of the 11 men who are supposed to be doing his work in the world now that he's technically gone. Instead of listening to the others who had some authority to speak in Jesus' name, they decided to just do their own thing. And so, Jesus had to come back, in person, and remind them of their duties. You would have thought they learned while he was alive on earth. Apparently, that was not the case.

As queer people, we are constantly called to come back to the same stage and share our stories, regardless of how hurtful they may be to retell. We are constantly asked by the same people about how to talk to queer youth, even though that material is already out there for public consumption, and we've already shared it multiple times over. Our presence is requested over and over to the same tables to help usher our straight-identifying siblings into an understanding that we too are beloved children of God and that we are not less than. We must constantly become the curriculum, over and over, because even though those listening to our voices mean well, they aren't always listening, and so we must come back and remind them. Hopefully this is done in a loving way, but hey, Jesus got a little hot under the collar at having to do this type of thing. You can understand where some of us might get tired of this too.

I'm not saying that queer people shouldn't be asked our opinions or that we should stop filling in stories to include more information. The reality is that queer people will continue to be the curriculum for so many because it's important that we get this whole welcoming and beloved community thing right. Sometimes that means being the curriculum for our siblings in creation. And Jesus might not have been pleased about it, but he still did it. Likewise, we don't always have time to go back and tack on facts of a story for public consumption because we've got just as much on our plates as the next person, but we still do it because if we continue to do those things, eventually we'll start to see the unfolding of the world as Jesus knew it could and should be: fully-inclusive and welcoming to all of God's creation.

Rev. Shelley Donaldson (she/her) is from the windy city of Chicago. A recovering camp director, she is a graduate of the University of West Georgia in Philosophy of Religion and Art. Shelley found her way to McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, earning her Masters of Divinity in 2012. There she focused her studies on Christian education, biblical interpretation, interfaith dialogue, and expressing faith through artistic means.

Shelley is a practicing artist and a founding member of Creation Lab in Chicago. With more than 15 years of experience in youth and camping ministry, Shelley serves as the co-moderator of the board for the Presbyterian Youth Workers Association, has served on planning teams for Montreat Youth Conferences, led workshops for the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators and NEXT Church Conferences, travels as a speaker for youth leaders and Christian educators when her schedule allows, has experience working with LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and writes on her blog: *The Travelling Theologian*. As a published author, Shelley has written stories for *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press), and *4 Views on Pastoring LGBTQ Teenagers* (The Youth Cartel). You can also hear her on various podcasts: *Big Ideas in Youth Ministry*, *This Week in Youth Ministry*, *The Family Ministry Podcast*, and *The Global Fringe*. Shelley has also spent significant time in Cuba, building relationships with churches and individuals through her ministry and relational-based mission work, and practicing her Spanish-speaking sermon skills at the urging of her Cuban friends. Outside of work, Shelley spends her time with her wife Tara, hauling their kayaks all over the Northeast, cooking and searching for the perfect biscuit recipe, spending time painting, and practicing her Spanish-speaking skills.



UNBOUND
©UNBOUND 2023



JUSTICEUNBOUND.ORG
A ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA