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The Year of Mark:  
Westfield Church's Year with the Bible's Oldest Gospel

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## **Abstract**

The Year of Mark: Westfield Church's Year with the Bible's Oldest Gospel

By Jonathan M. Chapman

Biblical literacy and understandings of biblical authority with Westfield Church were expanded and deepened when scriptural study focused on a singular narrative arc. By creating their own lectionary (*The Year of Mark*) and committing to working their way through the gospel of Mark sequentially, congregants felt more deeply tied to the story of their faith, understood more about the Bible as a whole, and deepened their own faith. This year-long effort proved to be an effective entry point into a larger conversation about scripture and its uses within the local parish.

The Year of Mark:  
Westfield Church's Year with the Bible's Oldest Gospel

By

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The people of Westfield Church had nearly everything it took to be a church: a solid sense of community, meaningful worship, potlucks. But they were lacking an essential cornerstone: a working knowledge of the Bible. In an effort to address that fundamental lapse in Christian education, we undertook the Year of Mark—an entire year devoted to the study of a single gospel as a congregation. First, I explore the history of the congregation as it pertains to this issue. Next, I explain how we worked to address the lack of biblical literacy at Westfield. And finally, I offer some insights into what The Year of Mark’s overall impact was for our congregation. While this particular project is to fulfill academic requirements, its overall impact was far reaching—namely in the local church. To that end, while I engage in critical discourse regarding the nature of Mark, its theological implications, and the overall outcome, I intentionally do so in more familiar terms that (I hope) make it accessible to other congregations attempting to do something similar.

### ***The Heart of Killingly***

“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for It is the Power of God unto Salvation to every one that believeth,” Reverend Baxter began, as he settled in to preach the sermon at the founding of Westfield Church on October 19, 1715.<sup>1</sup> That day, a church was founded, its newly-minted minister ordained,<sup>2</sup> and a trek set that would better the lives of thousands of the faithful in the northeastern corner of Connecticut. At the heart of its founding and its ministry to the local community was a deep reverence for and appreciation of scripture. Three centuries later Westfield’s continued commitment to its community is undeniable. But its commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> S.S. Matthews, Harry E. Back, and George B. Guild, *Manual of Westfield Congregational Church: Danielson, Connecticut, 1715-1905* (Boston: Frank Wood, 1905), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Matthews, Back, and Guild, 7.

scripture? Debatable. While the congregation has an unshakable love of Christ and is certainly not ashamed of the gospel, its overall biblical literacy is wanting.

Like many congregations in New England, Westfield has a storied history. Re-organized in 1801 as the First Church in the Society of West Killingly<sup>3</sup> (and built in what was then the west field of town), Westfield Church as we know it today traces its roots directly to the First Church in Killingly founded in 1715. Through a series of theological arguments, geographic conveniences, and spiritual evolutions, Westfield is the sole remaining direct descendant of that original congregation. The symbol of such primacy and longevity? A singular silver tumbler given by Mary Danielson (our borough's namesake family) to the First Church of Killingly in 1732.<sup>4</sup> It's a cup we still use for Holy Communion today, not just as a relic of our past, but as a present reminder of all our congregation has been through in its more than 300-year history and as a prophetic artifact of what the future holds.

The people of Westfield Church didn't know whether or not they would make it to their 300<sup>th</sup> birthday. The departure of their last settled pastor in 2005 revealed the desperate situation the congregation was facing. Their endowment had disappeared, and their congregation dwindled. A part-time interim told them the hard truth: there was no way they could afford a full-time minister; it was likely they would need to close. Their best option? Merger.

Being made of stubborn Yankee stock, the few remaining stalwart members knew she was telling the truth but also refused to accept it. In the darkest days, when they were down to twenty or so worshippers a week, they would meet in the historic congregation's 1923 Ladies' Parlor. It was cheaper to heat, and everyone fit easily enough.

A second interim arrived after the sudden departure of the first. "Is this what you want?"

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<sup>3</sup> Matthews, Back, and Guild, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, Back, and Guild, 29.

she asked. She laid before them two choices: change or die. It was then—staring at the hard reality that they didn't have anything left to lose but everything—that those hearty, stubborn New Englanders decided that something had to give. They realized that their hands couldn't be open to receive what might be if they remained tight fisted around what was. They took big risks, namely me. They took a chance on a young, Southern pastor who had never led a church on his own before and moved him eight states away from everyone and everything he knew.

After years of working hard and praying harder, Westfield Church is back. Its congregation—the town's first—is thriving again. Attendance numbers have skyrocketed, more than tripling in the last six years, and congregational giving has increased by a staggering 187% in the last five. In 2018, 37 new members united with Westfield, raising the total number of members and regular attendees we are charged with caring for to more than 250. On Christmas Eve alone, we welcomed more than 450 worshippers between two services—more than any other holy day in the last 40 years.

Westfield's finances are equally stable. The congregation ended the 2018 fiscal year nearly \$4,000 in the black despite remarkable challenges including a substantial roof repair, replacing all the pew cushions, and a significant number of other un-budgeted capital expenses. The congregation made a commitment to grow my role as pastor from three-quarter time to full time in five years. We made it in four. Westfield's staff has grown from three part-time workers to ten in total. Statistics point to a church that beat the odds and has become a vital congregation once more.

We are the church that not only cares for the Heart of Killingly, but—in many ways—is the heart of Killingly. We serve thousands of meals annually to people in need; we stuff more than 12,000 Easter eggs for our annual Easter Egg Hunt; and we have redefined the holidays for

our sleepy, little town with our beloved Victorian Christmas. After a year of devastating losses in our community including a tragic spate of deaths of teens, Westfield emerged as the leading voice in guiding our community through its grief.

### ***Learning the Bible Again***

Despite such remarkable growth and numerical success, the spiritual life of Westfield was lacking. While the congregation's commitment to caring for the heart of Killingly is inspired by our understanding of gospel commands, our knowledge of those commands within the totality of the scriptural narrative is virtually non-existent. Our worship is lively, engaging, thought-provoking and appropriately entertaining. It is the pulsing rhythm of our community, providing space for people to express their joy, their heartbreak, and everything in between in a spirit of authenticity.

And yet, as its pastor, I encountered my parishioners' hunger for something more meaningful than engaging worship that ends in an hour. They wanted something that stayed with them through the week, something they could revisit on their own. They wanted something that wasn't a tangential moment in their journey but a guiding force. The tool for that longevity became clear: scripture. But first, we had to show them how to use it.

In an effort to find an effective way to address the spiritual need at hand, it made sense to figure out just where the congregation was coming from. How much scripture did the people of Westfield Church know? How much *about* scripture did they know? Was there a baseline understanding of scripture we all shared? And if so, what was it?

I boiled those questions and others into two main categories: biblical authority and biblical literacy, then sent out a simple online survey. The first examined participants' understanding of biblical authority. Simply put: how seriously do you take the Bible? The second



sought to establish some kind of baseline regarding biblical literacy through a series of questions referencing books of the Bible, specific stories of the Bible, and where such stories are located in the overall corpus of scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, the question I address in the scope of this effort is that of biblical literacy, not biblical authority. While the original assessment targeted two main questions (biblical literacy and biblical authority), it became clear that tackling both questions on a broader scale within the same congregation and at the same time would be too much. Before engaging individual and congregational notions of biblical authority, it seemed prudent to first address the Bible as a piece of literature itself. By gaining even a baseline understanding of what is in scripture, we might then be able to more deeply explore what weight or authority we give it. It is my belief that understandings of biblical authority are inextricably linked to one's biblical literacy. Therefore, it made sense to create a series of inquiries addressing both questions.

The survey assumed some basic familiarity with the stories but anticipated a significant lack of biblical knowledge in the pews. During this process, I realized that my own religious formation in the American South had shifted that baseline for me. My assumptions of even basic biblical knowledge (children's songs at Vacation Bible School, for instance) were too optimistic. The survey results were, simply put, shocking. And yet, as I sifted through the results, I found myself asking a single question: Should I really be this surprised?

The survey indicated that the overwhelming motivator for my congregants' attendance was the desire for community and the need to be part of something bigger. With nearly 85% of participants attending at least twice a month, it was surprising to see answers to the question "What is your understanding of biblical authority?" include "?," "Beats me," "Zero

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<sup>5</sup> You can find the entire survey in Appendix D, and its results in Appendix E.

understanding,” and a non-committal, “It is what it is.” Interestingly, only 8.6% of participants responded that they read the Bible daily. It is no surprise, then, that when confronted with the notion of biblical authority, the overwhelming majority of our participants did not even know where to start.

Even more troubling were the responses to “Does the Bible influence your day to day life? If so, how?” Many answered that the Bible did inspire them in some way, yet many of those responses were tepid, lacking any substantive examples of concrete ways the Bible influenced their day to day lives. While it is difficult to read emotion into typed answers, it was clear that some responses were bordering on embarrassed that the Bible *didn't* influence their lives as much as they felt like it should.

It became clear that scripture lacked influence in their lives because they largely didn't have even a fundamental grasp of scripture. While 91% of surveyed congregants correctly identified a fictitious book of the Bible, there was less success in identifying the books of the New Testament and Hebrew Bible independently, with more than 38% of participants answering incorrectly. In examining participants' knowledge of stories in Scripture, nearly all (except 1 responder; 98.2%) were able to correctly locate the Creation Story as being in Genesis. Less than half were able to locate the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel, and only 42% successfully located the story of Jael and Sisera in Judges. Within the New Testament, participants were overwhelmingly more successful at correctly assigning the story of Saul's conversion (72%) to Acts than they were locating the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch to the same book (44%).

As my parishioners reflected on their experience of the survey, many indicated that while the stories we read about on Sunday morning from the Revised Common Lectionary are not entirely unfamiliar, how they fit together--not just within the gospels they originate from but also

in the larger context of God’s story—is largely lost to them. Almost universally, my congregation wanted an intentional exploration of scripture and what it means in a modern context. They want to know what the stories in the Bible are *and* what those stories say to them today.

I found myself feeling a new pressure as the pastor of Westfield Church. While I knew that I was the primary biblical scholar and interpreter for my congregation, I had no idea the extent to which they relied on me to connect their lives to the story of God revealed in Holy Scripture. The needs became clear: Westfield’s congregants carried a deep desire for intentional biblical formation from the pulpit and a deep hunger to understand their story as part of God’s larger story of faith.

### **The Year of Mark**

On the second Sunday of July 2017, I read the first verses of the oldest and shortest gospel during Sunday morning worship. For months, I had been working out the details for our first-ever sermon series. Rather than a short sprint through an Epistle or a month on a certain topic, I chose to start with the central story of the Christian faith—the story of Jesus. It was no small undertaking. We were to take fifty-one weeks to walk through the gospel of Mark in worship.<sup>6</sup> Known for being brief and urgent, the gospel can be read or performed in less than two hours—a typical time frame for storytelling, particularly after the last meal of the day.<sup>7</sup> Instead of that quick, glancing telling, we were going to take our time.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix B for the full schedule of The Year of Mark

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark as an Oral/Qural Narrative: Implications for Preaching,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44, no. 4 (October 2017): 7.

Some have argued that rather than ending with the Easter story, Mark begins with it.<sup>8</sup> The first words of Mark are “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>9</sup> It can only be the good news of the gospel if there’s an empty tomb, so from the get go the gospel of Mark is different from the other gospels. Heide writes, “Mark is not a passion narrative with an extended preface. Instead, Mark is an extended resurrection story with a realistic understanding of ministry tied to the passion narrative.”<sup>10</sup>

This shift in narrative provides historic and modern readers alike an opportunity to hear the gospel story in a new way. Likewise, such a shift calls us to understand the gospel within the context of our lives. “Mark calls us all to rethink and rewrite the narratives of life with the truly human and truly divine Jesus before us going to Galilee and going with us in our walks together in ministry,”<sup>11</sup> writes Heide.

My goal was three-fold. First, I hoped my congregation would gain increased knowledge of the stories found in Mark. Many of my parishioners indicated they knew individual stories found in the gospels, but those same parishioners were unable to order those stories not just in Mark’s sequence but into any kind of narrative arc matching any of the gospels. By working through Mark sequentially, I hoped to empower them to grasp the gospel narrative as a whole.

Mark was an obvious choice to achieve this goal for the simple reason that it has the fewest stories—it’s nearly 60% the length of the other synoptic gospels.<sup>12</sup> Widely thought to be written from a larger oral tradition, the stories in Mark are dense, meaningful, and brief, packing

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<sup>8</sup> Peter T Heide, “Rethinking the Gospel of Mark: Resurrection Narrative as Epic,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41, no. 6 (December 2014): 374.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 1:1

<sup>10</sup> Heide, “Rethinking the Gospel of Mark,” 374.

<sup>11</sup> Heide, 374.

<sup>12</sup> Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 107.

a punch when it comes to spiritual insight.<sup>13</sup> I hoped that using the Markan version of key stories shared among the gospels would keep those stories easier to understand, reference, and sequence into an overarching narrative for my congregants.

It wasn't just about being able to enumerate the order of the stories. The Year of Mark was an effort to help my congregants see how those stories built on one another, adding layers of meaning to stories that alone might indicate one interpretation but when placed within the larger narrative point to another. While the order was important, it was also essential for them to grasp the content and the continuity of the gospel. To this end, I would largely rely on narrative criticism.

Narrative criticism proved an effective choice. It allowed us to focus both on the story that Mark was telling and its discourse—the way the author tells it.<sup>14</sup> This added another dimension to our exploration of Mark's gospel. Instead of focusing solely on the details of the story itself, we were able to dig deep and examine Mark's overall intention in how the story was told.

My second goal was to deepen their understanding of the gospel message found in Mark by encountering it in its entirety. Through intentional continuity of presentation, I hoped that they would learn how the stories of scripture are far more potent when considered through the lens of the totality of scripture. Like all the gospels, Mark's stories build one on another. Ultimately, the gospel message isn't found in any singular parable, miracle, or teaching but in the accumulation of them in their totality.

In this way, Mark was a stand in for the whole of scripture. I wanted my congregation to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of scripture, but in a way that was both palatable

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<sup>13</sup> Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark as an Oral/Qural Narrative: Implications for Preaching," 7.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 35.

and digestible for my church of non-biblical scholars. I hoped that by using Mark as a case study, it would point to larger truth about the texts we claim as God’s word and about God.

Finally, I hoped that my parishioners would be able to understand Mark’s gospel not just as a history of Jesus and his first followers but as a text that invites them to become a part of the ongoing story of God’s faithfulness. I wanted them to learn the details of the gospel *and* find the ways their lives—being lived millennia later—are already woven into those stories.

Ian Wallis explains that Mark had another motive besides documenting the life of Jesus. As Christianity gained steam, the earliest followers began to encounter a departure from the first traditions surrounding Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Mark, then, was written to remind early Christians what their faith was all about. “One of the principal drivers for Mark was to correct expressions of Christianity which had become dislocated from Jesus’ ministry, promoting a Christ cult of personal salvation without commitment to furthering Jesus’ kingdom causes,”<sup>16</sup> Wallis asserts. For us to find our place in the ongoing story of God’s faithfulness we, like Mark and the early Christians, needed to return to our roots.

A decade ago in my denomination, we had a marketing campaign that became for many of our congregations an informal motto: God is still speaking. It’s a sentiment our ancestors in faith grasped, at least in their own way. Puritan John Robinson who preached to the Pilgrims before they left England on the Mayflower, said in his final sermon to them, “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.”<sup>17</sup> Our modern take came from a Gracie Allen quote: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

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<sup>15</sup> Ian G Wallis, “Why Mark Wrote a Gospel: Taking Another Look,” *Modern Believing* 57, no. 1 (2016): 54, <https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2016.05>.

<sup>16</sup> Wallis, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth: From 1602-1625* (C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1844), 397.

By studying scripture in this particular way, it was my hope that my congregation would gain insight into God's ongoing story. What's more, I hoped that they would understand themselves—even millennia after a text was written—to be part of the story that text presents. While this might be interpreted by the more academically oriented as bordering on the iffier side of eisegesis, I felt it was my call as their pastor to help them know their own being--their own spirit, as part of God's unending story.

Here lies the challenge of an endeavor like *The Year of Mark* undertaken by a pastor like me. Formed by stalwart and historic mainline denominations who respect academia and take pride in an educated clergy, I had to find the middle ground between the scholarly Bible study *The Year of Mark* had the potential of being and the mind-stimulating *and* soul-inspiring journey it should be.

My original Terms of Call with Westfield lists my position not as Pastor alone, but as Pastor *and* Teacher. I had to find the balance between helping my congregation love God with all their minds by teaching them the nuance of scripture while encouraging them to question and love God with all the hearts by showing them the emotion, depth, and vitality of scripture. One thing was clear to me in my dual roles—for *The Year of Mark* to be a success it couldn't be one or the other. It had to be both.

For fifty weeks following that second Sunday in July, I read and preached through the entirety of the Gospel. Built on a solid, yet accessible, exegetical framework, this year-long series provided a firm and working knowledge of Mark.

To make the entire gospel fit into the span of year, each chapter of Mark received, on average, three Sundays. Some weeks focused on as few as eight verses; One Sunday covered nearly an entire chapter. I combined some similar stories from different chapters (mainly

healings and exorcisms) to (1) shorten the overall experience and (2) easily show the connections between the stories as their function as literary elements in Mark's gospel.

I struggled with whether it was effective to combine stories that way. On the one hand, helping my parishioners understand the continuity of scripture—in this case, Mark—was one of my initial goals. On the other, our time was limited—so taking it one story at a time, even in with the briefest gospel—would have taken well over a year, not to mention the challenge of attendance.

The Year of Mark was only as successful as congregants' presence. That is, telling the stories in order doesn't matter much when congregants are not consistent in their attendance to hear those stories. Ultimately, I decided that it was better to lump similar stories in a few instances than it would be to try to recall like stories from previous weeks with little efficacy.

As a preacher committed to the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), I will confess that this idea was a significant break from my tradition, my common practice, and my comfort zone. I had long relied on the safety and ease of the RCL. I encountered a new nervousness as I made my way through the year.

While the stories were familiar, I found myself engaging them in new ways and without the abundant exegetical resources that support established lectionaries. Despite the plentiful commentaries (and I certainly used them), there was a contextual shift that took adjustment. Worship resources, often easily cut and pasted into worship plans, were crafted from scratch. I knew The Year of Mark would provide the opportunity for intentionality not just in our sermon time but across worship. I didn't know to what extent.

One argument in support of using the RCL is that it encourages preachers and churches to confront the majority of scripture, including what may be considered by some to be difficult



passages.<sup>18</sup> As I was planning this year-long endeavor, I realized that the same would be true with our *The Year of Mark*. I would still be forced to preach about passages I find uncomfortable or difficult—and without the shelter of the church year. While the RCL present challenging passages, it does so within the confines of the liturgical calendar. The established journey of the Christian year provides nearly boundless preaching points whether or not preachers choose to directly engage scripture. In actuality, those texts I thought would be challenging remained challenging, but had their edge softened when considered within the larger narrative of Mark.

One of the significant challenges was finding a way to marry *The Year of Mark* with the standard Liturgical Year that serves as the foundation of my congregation's worship calendar. To address this concern, *The Year of Mark* was broken into two main halves. The first ran twenty-one weeks from July until the beginning of Advent at which time we took a five-week break from the series. We returned our focus on Mark again in early January.<sup>19</sup>

Where I could, I strove to make connections between the text and liturgical designation clear even if not traditional. For example, the Sunday we celebrated Epiphany, we skipped the traditional text of the arrival of the magi. Instead, we focused on the assigned passage for the day according to *The Year of Mark*: on Jesus' second announcement of his identity in Mark 9—an epiphany in its own right. While we didn't tell the traditional Epiphany story, we still celebrated Epiphany discussing the theological implications while continuing on with our endeavor.

In a few instances, my congregation's commitment to the standard liturgical calendar,

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<sup>18</sup> David Holeyton, "Reading the Word of God Together: The Revised Common Lectionary and the Unity of Christians," *Communio Viatorum* 48, no. 3 (2006): 224.

<sup>19</sup> This break proved fruitful for the overall endeavor of *The Year of Mark* as it gave the congregation space to reflect on what we covered through the fall before continuing on. This break provided the ability to focus on matters other than Mark, namely Christmas. By waiting to continue *The Year of Mark* until after the holidays, we were able to move ahead with more congregational attentiveness and intentionality.

required I make a few adjustments in the overall order. Since these were due to significant days in the life of the church, I hoped that congregants could suspend the overall narrative flow we were following. I moved the Transfiguration Story and Triumphal Entry to their respective Sundays, slightly altering my initial hope to work through the gospel entirely sequentially. I was sure to mention the change in direction on those Sundays and strove to make it a point in my sermon.

Later, we paused to celebrate Easter and Pentecost, hopping out of the book of Mark entirely for those Sundays instead of jumping ahead in the story.<sup>20</sup> We finished our series in late June focusing on the multiple endings of Mark and what they invite us to as faithful Christians. This schedule meant that we focused on Holy Week for the eleven Sundays *following* Easter which provided a unique opportunity to attend to texts often overlooked or speedily dealt with during a jam-packed week.<sup>21</sup> While my initial hope of working the gospel in order had to be changed, doing so allowed me to use the liturgical calendar as a tool in my overall efforts to familiarize my congregation with the gospel story and ultimately proved effective in helping them to grasp that narrative in a new way.

I anticipated the potential benefit of intentionally working through a book of the Bible over time to be tempered by the commitment of those participating. This indeed proved to be the case. One of the challenges with The Year of Mark was that my congregation had to opt into it. That is, they only take away as much as they choose. Working through the gospel of Mark week

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<sup>20</sup> This proved a particularly prudent decision as Mark's dual endings were an interesting ending to the overall project, one that would've been spoiled if we had used Mark's resurrection story(ies) at Easter instead of at the end.

<sup>21</sup> I often feel that the progressive Church has forfeited these stories preferring instead to focus on the Resurrection. By spending nearly three months on the stories featured in Holy Week, we were able to, in a sense, reclaim them. Stories that had long haunted a number of my members were cast in new and helpful light.

by week requires regular attendance for maximum impact. In any church that would be a challenge, but in New England, those worshipping in our congregations as little as once a month would consider themselves regular attenders.

Additionally, there was a level of participation I hoped for that went beyond simple attendance. I wanted my congregation not just to hear the texts, but to reckon with them. I wanted them to not just wonder what the text was saying, but what it was saying to *them*. These two challenges—spotty attendance and deep engagement—shaped two questions whose answers looked to the future and the past. The first became: How do we maintain our efforts in their absence? The answer: the internet.

The Year of Mark wasn't just a year-long sermon series. It was also a digital experience. Each week, we posted the previous Sunday's sermon on The Year of Mark's website. Our initial plan had been to also include music and other liturgical elements, but we ran into challenges both in content creation and copyright that proved too time consuming and expensive. I created an entirely new site to explain the basics of The Year of Mark and to serve as the online journal of this effort.

This allowed for anyone who misses a Sunday or who is not able to attend on Sundays (including people from around the country and globe) to participate. I emailed the sermon each week to a group of congregants who specifically requested it and established a Facebook group to provide a digital format for discussion. While many appreciated the ease and speed of online access to the sermons, few if any engaged me digitally.

The second question was this: how do we enable our congregation to *deeply* engage the text? My expectation for deep engagement wasn't a high bar. The hope was simple: engage the same text more than once in the same week. To that end, we relied on a programmatic standby

for established congregations: Bible Study. While I had hosted the periodic book study at Westfield, I'd yet to begin a formal, in-the-flesh Bible study. The Year of Mark offered a perfect opportunity.

Each week we gathered in our 1923 Ladies' Parlor on Tuesday nights to explore the upcoming Sunday's scripture. Not only did this keep the scripture in front of participants for a week instead of a day, this study provided an opportunity for participants to deepen their understanding of the Bible by wrestling with it alongside each other. This weekly gathering to explore scripture and drill into its meaning to its original audience and to modern readers proved to be formative—not just educationally, but communally. In the regular exploration of scripture, a common trust was built among regular attendees which deepened their sense of companionship within the congregation. Several participants regularly shared meals following the study and members would steadily check-in with each other throughout the week on days other than Sundays or Tuesdays.

Taking a cue from *Lectio Divina*, we read the text three times weekly, pausing to reflect on words, phrases, or images. Hearing the passage repeated proved useful for many participants who were able to use the first read through as a re-introduction to a somewhat familiar study before paying attention to other details in the subsequent readings.

While my parishioners didn't know it, we mainly utilized narrative criticism. Powell's description of narrative criticism is that it "does involve a deep absorption into the world of the text. In a sense," he writes, "the text serves as its own context; passages are read in light of the total narrative without regard for discernment of previous source strata or stages of composition."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 86.

These study sessions also functioned as both an incubator for ideas that could be used on upcoming Sundays and a feedback loop for what was presented the previous Sunday. Not only did I, as the preacher trying to execute this project, find this extremely helpful in my own content creation, but it was also effective in providing participants with a sense of ownership in The Year of Mark.

I would regularly end our time together by asking, “What should I preach about this week?” Only a few weeks was I met with blank stares. More often than not, those in that circle were full of ideas. Likewise, starting sessions with the question I suspect all preachers dread (What did you think of the sermon Sunday?) provided useful feedback. Rarely were there comments on style or logistics (too long, talk slower, etc). Instead, participants offered insightful comments that showed deeper engagement with challenging texts.

One participant made a point to tell me after we’d completed our year-long journey through Mark, “The characters really came alive. Some weeks, I’d sit in church, early on Sunday morning, and wonder how in the world your sermon would connect it all.” She saw the complexities of the gospel and today’s world in a new light and looked to the church to help her make sense of it. Later, the same participant asked, “When do we start again? I can’t wait!”

My hope was that the Bible study would foster more than a knowledge of Mark. I hoped that in the regular study of scripture, my congregants would gain a new vocabulary—a new way to talk about scripture. I hoped that they’d see the entirety of scripture, not just a single gospel, in a new light.

One regular at our weekly Bible study offered, “You taught us how to read and how to think about what the Bible says, and how to take it in small pieces and really focus on what the words mean. In doing that, the physical, historical, and cultural contexts, the poetry, and the

imagery just all of a sudden came to life...I don't mean to sound trite or so dramatic, it's just that everything clicked into place and made sense on a deeper level."

While I anticipated that my weekly preparation routine would shift as we launched this project, I wasn't anticipating how deeply it would force me to engage the gospel of Mark. I expected my congregation to be changed. Somehow, I didn't expect I would be, too.

The role of pastor is one of varied (and often unexpected) tasks in a never-ending cycle of Sundays. I remember thinking in seminary that when I had my own church I would spend hours a week poring over scripture, praying for God's Spirit to be upon me as I preached, and revising my sermons regularly before preaching. I was committed to exegesis and research. When I started my first solo pastorate, I had every intention of establishing and maintaining those habits. But church got in the way. That is, fundraising, funerals, visits, bathroom repair, and life got in the way. I found myself worrying if what I was preaching was right or good enough or worthy enough to be presented to my congregation.

The Year of Mark provided me, as a pastor, with an overarching purpose in the telling of this overarching narrative. It helped me regain the intentionality of sermon preparation that I had lost years before. It challenged me to stop thinking week-to-week and instead look at the whole picture of the gospel before describing the detail found in any particular story.

It also helped me to think on my own. While I relied on exegetical resources, I found myself reading fewer and fewer interpretative commentaries. I didn't need other preachers to tell me what to preach anymore. I felt more confident in my own thoughts—that they *were* worthy and insightful in their own right.

The Year of Mark challenged me as a preacher, but also as a theologian. It became a generative venture, one that emboldened my preaching and encouraged my own spiritual

development. I spent more time wrestling with preaching texts than ever before and my sermons were better for it.

At the start of The Year of Mark, I'm not sure my congregation entirely understood what it was about. While some were quick to grasp the point, others pinned it as another one of Pastor Jon's crazy ideas. But as we settled into the rhythm and routine of The Year of Mark, my congregation began to stitch together stories of the gospel in a new way using the threads of their lives to create a new tapestry of faithfulness. They learned about scripture, they learned about Jesus, and they learned about themselves. They saw the story of their lives in the light of God's story for their lives, and faith became more than just an hour-long Sunday morning activity. It became, at least for some, their life in the best way. And so, for them, I believe The Year of Mark was a success.

### **Mark In Today's World**

The earliest of the gospels, Mark was written during a politically turbulent era.<sup>23</sup> The burgeoning Christian community was just beginning to solidify as a new faith, not just the fulfillment of an old one and the price in Roman-occupied Palestine was steep. Ched Myers in his book, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, puts it this way: "The evangelist Mark...enlisted into the war of myths in his day; he did so by writing his Gospel, by retelling the story of Jesus of Nazareth and his struggle with the 'powers' of Roman Palestine."<sup>24</sup> He argues that Mark wasn't writing a story for the sake of the story. This wasn't some primitive biography of a man called Jesus. Instead, it was a political stand grounded in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 40–42.

<sup>24</sup> Myers, 4.

story of Jesus and pointed toward the Roman Empire.

But Mark's pointed commentary didn't lose its potency with the demise of Rome. Instead, it speaks to us still today. "How we interpret that Gospel," Myers continues, "depends upon our reading of, and engagement in, the war of myths that still continues."<sup>25</sup> Mark deals in these myths, even if not always explicitly. Woven into his gospel are themes of darkness and light, sickness and healing, and most notably, institutional expectation and religious liberation.

The political tensions in Mark's world weren't just between the Jewish people of Palestine and Romans. As Hellenistic urbanism began to saturate the region, the divide was deepened between the needs of more urban environments and the needs of more rural ones.<sup>26</sup> Myers points out that "this tension was especially acute in Galilee, where the 'breadbasket of the plains was literally surrounded by newer Hellenistic cities.'"

This urban/rural divide added to a cultural tension with political implications between Galilee and Judea.<sup>27</sup> Due to "its geographic isolation and distance from Jerusalem and its greater level of intercourse with the gentile world,"<sup>28</sup> the political and religious power holders in Jerusalem were generally warier of Galilee. For many in the area, those from the north were thought of as second-class citizens—poor, rural, and uneducated. It's a political act in itself, then, for Mark to center his gospel account not in the religious perfection of Jerusalem or in the power-wielding Hellenistic centers, but in rural and village Galilee.

This cultural tug-of-war is both one of Mark's greatest challenges and his greatest tool in overcoming those challenges. "The evangelist has a problem," Van Oyen writes referring to Mark and his use of the Son of God. "He seeks to tell something new about Jesus, but at the

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<sup>25</sup> Myers, 4.

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<sup>27</sup> Myers, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Myers, 53.



same time he has to call on existing expressions that his hearers have to recognize to some extent. How can he transmit something new about Jesus, Son of God, to hearers who know well this expression and who therefore have certain expectations about the content of it.”<sup>29</sup>

While modern-day social media outlets have proven to be effective means for communicating messages, Mark was unique in its early effectiveness because of its roots in the oral tradition. Dewey explains, “A Good storyteller familiar with Jesus’ traditions could hear it once and tell it again. It may well have been its popularity as an oral story among first and second-century followers of Jesus that enabled its survival and inclusion in the New Testament canon.”<sup>30</sup> That popularity along with its ease of communicating and the emotion carried in the stories was inspiring to first century Christians facing the threat of persecution for their faith.

Scholars estimate the literacy rate through the Roman Empire to hover at five percent.<sup>31</sup> So the quick, memorable stories that stitched together to form Mark’s gospel proved to be a useful tool, not just in the dissemination of the story of Jesus, but also in the spreading of Mark’s anti-imperialist undercurrents. Mark portrays the disciples as slow to learn Jesus’ points, providing opportunities for the author to reiterate Jesus’ teachings throughout the gospel—a suspiciously useful tool in the emphasizing of counter-cultural and politically tense sentiments.

Likewise, we were using the gospel of Mark at Westfield to help guide a congregation coming into their own through the twists and curves of life together during what is arguably the most politically tense moment in recent American memory. The contexts are separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years. There are gaps in culture and history that must be acknowledged. And still, somehow, the gospel of Jesus—in the case presented by Mark—speaks

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<sup>29</sup> Geert van Oyen, *Reading the Gospel of Mark as a Novel*, trans. Leslie R. Keylock (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 91–92.

<sup>30</sup> Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark as an Oral/Oral Narrative: Implications for Preaching,” 7.

<sup>31</sup> Dewey, 7.

to the faithful today just as it did when it first came into being.

Richard Rehfeldt argues that “the gospels served to shape the identity of early Christian hearers. Preaching on the gospels provide opportunity today to shape congregational identity.”<sup>32</sup> Rehfeldt’s assertion seems particularly accurate when it comes to both how Mark formed early Christians and how Mark formed Westfield Church. The Year of Mark was fundamentally shaped by the political circumstance our country found itself in. Despite being part of what is arguably the most progressive mainline protestant denomination, Westfield is a solidly purple congregation. That is, on the political spectrum, we run the gamut from red to blue and everything in between.

### ***The Year of Mark in Action***

The Sunday after the 2016 election, I had church members weeping in their pew beside church members who were celebrating. Starting The Year of Mark less than a year following such a defining day in our modern political story, proved to be an effective tool from a homiletical standpoint. The stories Mark offers, along with their particular brand of political and religious intrigue, became a natural entry point into meaningful conversations with my politically divided yet deeply committed to each other congregation.

Throughout the year, I was able to draw parallels to Jesus, his disciples, and their struggles in Mark’s gospel with modern day challenges and questions, but two instances stand out as being particularly successful. While these weren’t sermons I would submit for critical analysis or appraisal, they did—if subtly—effectively address issues congregants were having and challenges they were facing. By addressing it from the pulpit, I was able to validate their

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Rehfeldt, “Preaching to Shape Congregational Identity,” *Word & World* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 206.

emotions toward challenging situations while also offering a way forward.

One opportunity appeared on the second Sunday of October. The passage for the day was the first twenty-nine verses of Mark 6. There is a lot packed into those thirty or so verses. Jesus issues his famous commentary on prophets (“Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kind, and in their own house.”); he sends the twelve out in pairs, ordering them to not take anything with them and to move on if they are not welcomed (“If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”); and John the Baptist is beheaded.<sup>33</sup>

Passages like this one were a unique challenge of The Year of Mark. In order to make the entire gospel fit into a year, there were days I had to expand the Sunday morning passage beyond the obvious pericope. This meant I had to make hard choices when preparing for Sunday. My time was limited. If there were three major movements in a scripture—like this one—trying to preach all three for the sake of narrative would limit my ability to preach a meaningful sermon that had the potential to connect with my congregants.

That particular week, several of my congregants had come to me with a challenging situation. There were members of our wider community they were trying to assist. My well-intentioned, if naive, members were entirely disillusioned as their slow realization of the depth of systematic poverty in our community. They were overwhelmed by what they had agreed to do and were worried that their obligation was spiraling out of control.

So that Sunday, rather than pontificate on Jesus’ stirring remarks on prophets or the tragic beheading of John the Baptist, I set out to give my members advice:

Don’t over pack. Jesus gives his disciples packing instructions. Only a staff and sandals, he tells them. No food, no bag, no money, no extra clothes. If you’re like me and

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<sup>33</sup> Found in Mark 6:1-29

you tend to overpack, then you know the worst part of traveling with your overstuffed bag is getting that bag from the baggage carousel at the airport to the car or from the car to your hotel room. It's heavy, so you kinda swing it out, thinking you're using leverage to your advantage which can sometimes cause you to fly behind it. Have you seen that before? People whose bags get away from them like that? It's kind of funny until it happens to you. Here's Jesus' advice: don't over pack. That is, don't fill your life up with such busy-ness that you can't respond to God's call in your life. Don't take on other people's stuff. Man, that's hard. I am so bad at it. But here's the thing, I've already got my *own* baggage. I don't need other people's, too! So that's the second task: Don't overpack.<sup>34</sup>

A second sermon comes to mind as being particularly effective in helping my congregation reckon with the aftermath of the racial tensions that exploded in Charlottesville, Virginia in the late summer of 2017. We were just starting Mark 4. Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee, and telling the parable of the sower. His disciples didn't understand (a common occurrence in Mark), so Jesus re-iterates. It's a powerful parable, one Jesus' cares enough about to essentially tell twice. What, then, did this story first told in first century Palestine have to say to my congregation in modern America? The story had something to tell us about getting dirty.

In the parable, there are four characters: the sower, the seed, the dirt, and the plants. My congregation prides itself on being the sower of good news and the see their work in our community as the seed they're sowing. And they like to think of themselves as the result of God's tending. But what if we aren't the seed or the sower or the plant, but the dirt? Here's a little of what I offered that morning:

You can't get out of the tomb without a little dirt on your clothes. What I mean is, redemption means getting dirty. It means standing up to white supremacists when they rally in Charlottesville, Virginia or wherever the sin of racism and white supremacy rears its head. It means showing up to again and again and again to say that's not who we want to be, that's not who we are. That Saturday morning two weeks ago, when the Charlottesville rally was at its worst, our denomination's Minister for Justice and Witness ministries, Traci Blackmon, was there. In fact, during an on-screen interview, a network staffer rushed her off the camera mid-interview because of an imminent threat to her safety. All you could hear was her

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<sup>34</sup> You can find this sermon in its entirety in Appendix A, titled *Don't Overpack*.

saying “Gotta go, gotta go.” Tilling and tending and becoming the soil we need to be is back-breaking, scary work.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, within the confines of this work and on my own, it’s difficult to fully express the effectiveness of such sermons and The Year of Mark in total. But members of Westfield were quick to offer their feedback along the way and at its conclusion. The effective completion of the original goals is dependent on who you speak with, their overall participation, and their willingness to offer feedback. It seems that many expanded their biblical literacy and gained a more meaningful sense of their own faith by deepening their understanding of how God’s story is woven with theirs.

Presenting the gospel of Mark in sequential order was a major piece of the overall project. One member commented, “A Congregationalist in my formative years in Norwood, Massachusetts, I’d heard Bible stories before of course, but never in an organized, adult way. I’d never taken and studied Jesus’ life and times in a consistent and straight forward way and our study of Mark was a perfect way to do that.” Another parishioner and Bible study participant reflected, “It [The Year of Mark] absolutely helped me read and understand Jesus’ life ‘in sequence.’ Through The Year of Mark I feel like I finally understand who Jesus was and why he was (is) so important.”

It’s clear that The Year of Mark, at least on some scale, achieved its goal of helping members of Westfield Church understand the overall narrative of the gospel through the study of Mark. Many commented on their newfound ability to connect the stories of Jesus they’d heard all their lives to each other. What’s more is that they were able to connect those stories to their own lives.

Another hoped for outcome of The Year of Mark was to deepen the spirituality of

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<sup>35</sup> You can find this sermon in its entirety in Appendix A, titled *The Dirty Life*

our members. One participant shared how The Year of Mark allowed her to experience her faith more deeply. “I have been surprised by the emotionally moving moments just sitting in church. As a (perhaps uptight) WASP, I’m glad to be more in touch with this side of me which I’ve never really accessed adequately before. Historically, I don’t cry easily. A year later, I feel like I’m more understanding of references that are made in sermons and also specifics in the church year.”

That same parishioner commented on the larger issues The Year of Mark helped her wrestle with. Here’s some of what she said:

Over a year ago during one service, we had a Sunday of going to different stations around the church. One of them had little cutout stars with a word on each. We were encouraged to take one star from that station. I took “grace.” That star with its reminder has been in my wallet ever since, and I look at it every time I open my wallet. I’m still unsure of what “grace” actually is, but I’m also still pretty sure I can still use more of it as I chase down the elusiveness of its meaning for me. The Year of Mark taught me that religion is very personal and an ongoing journey for those who choose to jump in. That it is a positive journey, and that it really helps negotiating today’s world of unrest and disruption.

Another commented on a newly found sense of belonging thanks to The Year of Mark. A Japanese immigrant, she joined Westfield during a particularly turbulent time in her family which ultimately resulted in a divorce. She was introduced to Christianity (in the formal sense) and eventually baptized at Westfield. We have been the guiding force in her spiritual formation. She offered, “I feel that I’m far more educated in terms of gospel and religious understanding. The Year of Mark helped me to understand Jesus: what it means to live like him through his actions and what he sacrificed for us. I am more ‘religious,’ I can say that for sure. I certainly try living by what I had learned from The Year of Mark. It was very meaningful on my end.”

One of my more troubled members, one who feels and senses deeply, spoke to how

The Year of Mark helped her through a difficult time: “[It] was a tough year for me. Simplistically speaking, I was thankful to meet with a group of people each week whose focus matched mine... There were so many weeks that the only peace I found was in reading my bible and carrying the lessons in my heart and mind.”

That same member commented about The Year of Mark’s ongoing influence in her life. Our year of journeying through Mark has had further implications: “Now that I understand it differently, I read my Bible almost every day. Sometimes I read it for pleasure... Sometimes I read it for comfort and peace of mind and heart... Sometimes I read it for information and I research people or places that were previously just parts of stories.”

Even members of our staff found it formative. Our Church Administrator, who is not a member but attends worship regularly, shared with me that The Year of Mark “certainly deepened my spirituality because I read so many perspectives on the scripture through my worship planning and saw the ways that it could be approached. So on Sunday, I would go into church with this idea in my head of how I interpreted it through my own reading and conversations with you and then got to see the way the same scripture spoke to you through your sermon.”

The Year of Mark’s success isn’t limited to individual progress. As an institution, The Year of Mark has fundamentally shifted how we worship, how we organize our time, and how we tell the stories of our faith. Gone are the days of complacent reliance on the Revised Common Lectionary and its affiliated resources.

One member of my staff, our Church Administrator who curated liturgical elements for weekly worship, offered this insight: “With The Year of Mark we really spent time going through the story and I found that I had to consider the nuance of each part because

traditional resources would run out quickly. And I think we discussed this a few times, but some of the scripture is usually shied away from and it makes you consider why that is and how to approach it in a prayerful way.”

When planning worship with my staff, we now look toward other narrative arcs within scripture to help us tell the story of our faith. My administrator commented that, “When it was focusing on Mark, the path was laid out, and I was able to pay attention to the way scripture moves through Mark’s experiences.” Mark’s narrative arc became a useful tool in its own right for worship planning. Likewise, using additional narrative arcs in scripture has been an effective way to empower effective and meaningful worship.

After *The Year of Mark* ended in June 2018, I left on sabbatical. By the time I returned, I decided to try the same idea again. Would the idea of telling the stories of our faith—many of which were familiar to our members, but in snippets of their original versions—be effective when focusing on the Old Testament?<sup>36</sup>

The plan was simple: spend September with Adam and Eve, October with Noah and the Ark, and November with Abraham. While we weren’t able to cover all the details of these stories, we were able to examine the complexities they present. Remarkably, I found my congregation to be enthusiastic in their support of this decision. They wanted to know more about the Bible, and they were excited for the opportunity to delve into the patriarchs of our faith.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Using the Old Testament stories of Creation, Noah, and Abraham allowed me to further explore what it is like to stick to a narrative arc through our worship and my preaching. The timing was advantageous to me as it made good use of the time we had left in the church year before starting a new one—and with it a new lectionary.

<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, I think they did learn more about the Bible, although I was required to leave out some details for the sake of keeping the story moving. As Dr. Strawn laments in his book *The*



Preaching on Noah for the month of October for four weeks seemed like a good idea until I was in the throes of one of our most well-attended months ever sounding like a broken record from the pulpit. As children, we learn the story of Noah was one of rain and rainbows, animals and arks. But really, that's a sanitized version. When breaking the passages up while planning for the month, I didn't realize how much of it was about the wickedness of humanity. The author of Genesis is making a hard sell that humanity was so bad that God had no other choice but to destroy it. It makes for a harrowing story and a challenging one to preach on. But that same month, we would encounter the wickedness of humanity closer than any of us realized.

After three weeks of destruction and flooding, we were finally scheduled to make it to the rainbow—the sign of God's covenant, a symbol of God's faithfulness. I spent that week alongside my administrator stringing up a giant rainbow across the chancel. My sermon for the week was nearly complete when news broke of a gunman who'd walked into a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, killing eleven.

The theme of the day was God's faithfulness. My voice trembled as I stood behind our giant pulpit and told my congregation the truth:

A year ago, last week, two significant events happened in the life of our church. The first was that two of our members of our congregation were confronted in the bank parking lot by someone who was clearly waiting to confront someone, anyone, about how my being a gay pastor was leading this congregation down a dangerous and wrong path. A few days later, a woman called and told me I was leading this church to hell (literally to hell) for showing Hocus Pocus on our lawn—that I was introducing the devil into our congregation.

Many of you remember those two occurrences, but what you might not remember is that between those two events, we had the State Troopers on site. Why? To help us form an

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*Old Testament is Dying*, many churches are far more familiar, and thus far more interested in, the New Testament. So keeping their interest over the course of a year with the stories of Jesus proved easier than enticing them with the stories of the patriarchs over a season.

emergency plan. That is, they were here to help us figure out what to do if what happened in Pittsburgh yesterday and Texas a year ago November 5th, happened here. I stood behind this giant pulpit and asked them, “what should I say?”

Yesterday hit me in the gut. And I spent most of the morning wondering how we could make it to the rainbow after the flood when it feels like we’re still in the middle of the storm.

We’ve spent three weeks on the wickedness of humanity, the failure of humankind, and a flood of destruction. My God, we need a rainbow. But how, when it feels like the waters are rising and the rain keeps coming.<sup>38</sup>

The Year of Mark empowered me to tell my congregation the truth. It set a precedent in how we would engage scripture as a congregation. It raised the bar in my congregation’s expectation of what they would get from their time in worship. And it cultivated a culture that allowed me, as their pastor and their preacher, to address challenging issues—often political ones—from the pulpit through the lens of scripture. That sermon about a synagogue shooting and God’s faithfulness, a sermon that was really about how our story is part of God’s story—wouldn’t have happened if it hadn’t been for The Year of Mark.

Six months after the end of The Year of Mark, I asked for feedback from my congregation. “Do you know more about Mark now?” I asked. “Did it deepen your faith? Did you notice anything new about the Bible? Do you feel more equipped now to talk about the Bible, or even just Mark, than you did before?”

Several replied to my anecdotal inquiries, but one response in particular stood out. “Did The Year of Mark change how I read and understand the Bible? Absolutely. Do I feel more comfortable talking about the Bible? Maybe. There’s so much to know and I can’t keep all of the different books straight in my head, but I want to know more and I have a much

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<sup>38</sup> You can find this sermon in its entirety in Appendix A, titled *God. Is. Faithful.*

better understanding of what I read, and that matters to me more than I can say. Did The Year of Mark deepen my faith? More than I ever would have thought possible.”

Mark was a desperate gospel writer. He had a story to tell—an urgent one that he hoped could become a balm and guide through the harrowing and complicated political times early Christians were living through. Those themes resonated deeply with my congregation and proved the power of the gospel’s timelessness. Not only did our year-long exploration of Mark expand my congregation’s biblical literacy, it also shaped our corporate theology in a unique way.

The shorter ending of Mark compels us not to wait for the risen Christ, but to go find him where we first met him. For the disciples, that was Galilee. But for us that’s very likely not in the church, but out in the world. This single theological understanding of where we’re called to meet Jesus has fundamentally altered our mission as a congregation. No longer are we the insular congregation solely intent on our survival. We’ve become the Heart of Killingly—a congregation striving to care for those we meet outside our walls, not just inside of them. While Mark is not responsible for that shift alone, our study of his gospel pointed us in the right direction.

It is impossible to gauge The Year of Mark’s overall success, but it’s clear that it had an impact both on an individual level and institutionally. We were a different church before we started this journey than we are now, after it. And members of our congregation are equipped to engage the Bible in new ways thanks to The Year of Mark. It’s greatest benefit, however, was how it inspired my congregation to broaden not just their scriptural horizons, but their spiritual ones, too.

Alan Cadwallader writes about the multiple endings of Mark and their implications

for the Church. He first points out that Jesus' first followers were called to be a community that not only tells of resurrection but embodies it. He explains that Mark "provides no closure, no ideological conformity, no single way of being, doing and telling the resurrection."<sup>39</sup> This has big implications. It means that, according to Cadwallader, "the Church at any particular point in time and in any locality has to discover what resurrection means in its own time and locality."<sup>40</sup>

Westfield Church embodied Cadwallader's assertion. The Year of Mark challenged us to hear the gospel story in a new way. The gospel of Mark provided that opportunity precisely because of its uncertain ending. The last chapter is an example of what the entire gospel is: a story that provides room for the reader to fill in the blanks. Cadwallader put it simply: "The Gospel is larger than the text and the Church's faith and faithfulness are measured by that not by its dogged conformity and confines of the written word."<sup>41</sup>

Cadwallader's simple summation holds true for The Year of Mark. After 51 weeks, the most meaningful learning wasn't the order of the narrative, nor the details of the story. The holiest lesson we shared in big ways and small was that the Gospel is bigger than any one telling of it. It's something that compels us beyond our comfort zone and into a new world of meaning. It's an invitation into a relationship—not just with Jesus, but with ourselves, with each other, with the Church Universal, and with our congregation in our little corner of Connecticut. For us faithfulness isn't held by the confines of the written word, nor the chains of tradition. Instead, we're still writing the end of the story all while we follow where Jesus leads, trusting the words of the Angel in Mark 16: "But go...he is going

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<sup>39</sup> Alan H Cadwallader, "The Hermeneutical Potential of the Multiple Endings of Mark's Gospel," *Colloquium* 43, no. 2 (November 2011): 141.

<sup>40</sup> Cadwallader, 141.

<sup>41</sup> Cadwallader, 141-142.

ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

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## APPENDIX A: SERMONS

### *Don't Overpack*

originally preached at Westfield Church on October 8, 2017

Based on Mark 6:1-29

I'm notoriously bad at packing. I've watched all the Rick Steves shows PBS has to offer and I've made checklist after checklist, but somehow, even on my shortest trips, I always over pack. More than once, I've watched the scale that weighs the bag at baggage check spin to a pound or less below the limit. The person on the other side of the counter looks at me, usually with one eyebrow up, and I say, timidly, "I like options." Shoes, it turns out, are heavy.

In our passage today, Jesus sends his disciples on a trip. He's just been rejected by the people in his beloved Nazareth, famously saying—and this is the Jon Chapman translation—"You Can't Be a Prophet in Your Hometown." They didn't believe in Jesus, they believed Jesus was nuts. He couldn't do much with that, so he left town. And as he's bumming around the surrounding villages, teaching, he calls the twelve together, gives them authority over unclean spirits, and sends them out to tell the good news.

Now I know we've had a lot today, so I'm going to jump to the chase and tell you the four things I want you to think about when it comes to these six verses—four things you can take home with you. Here's the first: Don't go it alone. Sounds simple right? It isn't. People are irritating. They're hard and complex and hurtful. But they're also kind and generous and hopeful. Jesus sends his disciples out two-by-two, in pairs—like boy scouts swimming in the lake—a buddy system. Jesus tells us that wherever two or three are gathered, that's where I am. Being Christian is being in community, it's being together, facing life *together*. That doesn't always sit well with our stubborn, independent types. But Jesus isn't about building up stubborn, independent types. He's about restoring right relationship, he's about reconciliation, he's about bringing people together—and in order for any of that to happen, there's got to be more than one. So that's your first task for this week: don't go it alone.

Here's the second point to remember: Don't over pack. Jesus gives his disciples packing instructions. Only a staff and sandals, he tells them. No food, no bag, no money, no extra clothes. If you're like me and you tend to overpack, then you know the worst part of traveling with your overstuffed bag is getting that bag from the baggage carousel at the airport to the car or from the car to your hotel room. It's heavy, so you kinda swing it out, thinking you're using leverage to your advantage which can sometimes cause you to fly behind it. Have you seen that before? People whose bags get away from them like that? It's kind of funny until it happens to you. Here's Jesus' advice: don't over pack. That is, don't fill your life up with such busy-ness that you can't respond to God's call in your life. Don't take on other people's stuff. Man, that's hard. I am so bad at it. But here's the thing, I've already got my *own* baggage. I don't need other people's, too! So that's the second task: Don't overpack.

Jesus knew not everyone was going to like what his disciples had to say. In fact, he'd already encountered in Nazareth, remember? So he gives them this advice: "If people are jerks, get it out." Again, that's the Jon Chapman translation. What he really said, at least according to our translations is this: If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet." I like that—it's kinda sassy. I dig Sassy Jesus.

Here's what he's saying: know when to leave. Now, that's tricky, right? I mean, our instinct is to leave when we're mad, when somebody's crossed us. That's not what Jesus is talking about here. He's not referring to our everyday humanity—the broken, messy lives we lead that spin between happiness and despair and hope and anger. He's not saying to throw in the towel at the first hint of disagreement or to not forgive and work to make things better. He's saying that if it's not the right place, the right thing, the right time, then it's OK to go. It's OK to care for yourself enough to be in an environment or situation that is uplifting and challenging and holy.

Hear me, hear what I'm saying: I don't need someone in my office on Monday morning telling me how we or I have failed them—that we sing too much and that it's just more than you can bear and so your knocking the dust off your feet! Jesus isn't giving his disciples a Staples easy button. But he *is* giving them permission to move on so that they can be heard and can be whole. So that's the third: know when it's time to go.

And here's the fourth thing, the one all the rest hinge on: tell good news. Jesus' disciples, when they head out, tell people to repent. I know that language makes us a little uncomfortable. It's easy for us, in our minds at least, to tell people to get right, to stop being jerks, and try harder. But in real life? That's a different story. If that's you, then think of it this way: the good news is easy. It's that there's a better way to live.

This week, I got a call from one of our members telling me about an experience he'd had at work. A co-worker had been going through some tough times and was lamenting to our member the circumstances that got him there. Our Westfield-er supported him, then told him how his life had changed since coming to Westfield—how he felt God working in his life because of the people here at Westfield. That's good news—sharing how your life is better not because of Westfield, but because of God. So, tell good news.

Those are our four tasks for this week, a truly for our lives as faithful Christians: Don't go it alone—journey with each other. Don't overpack—take only what you need and leave the rest. Know when it's time to go. And tell good news. It's not easy. It never is. But, then Jesus never said it would be. He just said it'd be worth it. Amen.

***The Dirty Life***

**first preached at Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church, Savannah, Georgia and later at Westfield Church on August 27, 2017  
Based on Mark 4**

Will you pray with me? Almighty God, speak through me, speak in spite of me. And open our ears to hear your Word of hope and our hearts to hear your word of truth. Amen.

Last year, on the third of September, I preached one of the hardest sermons I have ever had to preach. It was a Saturday and the church was packed, I mean *packed*, with people most of whom weren't members of my congregation. They were the friends and family of a man named Taylor Williams. Taylor, a native of the town I serve, lived in Kingsland, Georgia. He was an Army Medic, who went by the nickname Doc, like most medics do. He served two tours in Afghanistan. At age 16, as a junior fireman, he rushed into a burning building to save a family and as a result received an award for Bravery from the state of Connecticut.

Taylor was a complicated guy—dedicated to helping people in need while suffering from PTSD. It's one of the great injustices of our way of governing our world—the reality of war and how we train kids to defend and kill then expect them to come back and just be OK. Taylor wasn't OK. But he tried to do right and take care of people. And on August 14, 2016—a year ago tomorrow—at the age of 26 he was stabbed in the back 11 times just down I-95 from here in Kingsland.

And a few weeks later, I stared out a church stuffed with people staring back at me waiting for me to say something comforting or hopeful or profound or anything that might help make sense of the tragedy that had taken place a thousand miles away and yet, in a way, just next door.

I stood behind the pulpit, said a quick prayer just between me and God that I would find the right words, took a deep breath, then started: “The first thing that has to be said is: this is a really shitty situation. Taylor was too young, too bright, had too much potential for his life to end in such a tragic way. It's not fair. It's not right. It's not OK. It's not going *to be* OK. To his family: you have every right to be mad as hell about this—about the injustice of this situation. I wouldn't blame you if it was all you could do not to stand up right here and shout at God or collapse in your anger. And you know something, if that's what you need to do, go for it. You've got a room full of people who'll love you through it”

It was a dirty moment. I don't mean dirty as in x-rated or dirty as in unclean. I mean dirty as in dirt—soil. It was a moment when we, everyone gathered in that old sanctuary that has hosted countless funerals, waded into the muck and mire of life *together*. It was hard and painful and dirty and beautiful.

In the book of Mark, Jesus is all about teaching and healing, talking and doing. And here, at the start of chapter four, we find Jesus teaching. There's a bunch of people listening, so many in fact, that he's teaching from a boat on the Sea of Galilee. Using the vessel as his pulpit, he tells the parable of the sower. Now, here's the thing about parables and, well, most of the stories in the Bible. We read ourselves into them. Most of us like to think of ourselves, whether or not we like to admit it, as Jesus. In this story, that means we like to think of ourselves as the farmer, as the sower. We like to think that we're the ones offering opportunity and hope to a community desperate for good news. And while community suppers and NA meetings are essential and good

and true, they don't make us Jesus. Sure, we toss out opportunities for people to encounter Christ but that doesn't make us the sower.

And Jesus tells us that the seed the farmer is sowing is the Word and we can all agree that as much as we like to think we've got it right, that our story-telling and pithy quips are gospel, they aren't *the* Gospel—they aren't the life-saving, life-giving Word. So, while we might like to be the seed Jesus the sower is tossing around hoping will grow, it seems kind of safe to assume that we aren't.

So, if we're reading ourselves in this parable, there's only one thing left for us to be: the dirt. Sounds glamorous, doesn't it?

But in the parable of the sower, it's the dirt that makes all the difference. The sower is the same as is the seed. It's the dirt that changes from rocky to thorny to fertile and good. Now, I'm no farmer, but I'm not entirely ignorant when it comes to such things. And it turns out I know I know one essential fact about farming: good soil is shitty soil. That is, good soil is soil that's got more than just dirt in it.

My mama died in 2008, but before she died one of her favorite pastimes was gardening. She'd spend hours tending her flowers, planting countless annuals. She loved her peonies and the rose bushes she cultivated from clippings taken from her hometown—Raytown in the corner of Taliferro County about halfway between Atlanta and Augusta. She'd watch them bloom year to year and tell me stories of the quiet little crossroads she grew up in

But out of all her flowers, her favorites were her day lilies. They were bold and delicate, the blooms lingering for just a few days—maybe a week. We'd go to local nurseries on the hunt for day lilies. Every year, I remember we were each enamored with some new color. I remember Mama going outside early in the morning, before it got hot and humid—y'all know about that here, don't ya?—and she'd weed and tend.

But before she did all of that, before those plants could grow, before they could thrive, Mama knew she had to take care of the dirt. She'd bribe me with ice cream if I'd go with her to a local nursery and help her load up the car with peat and manure. Then we'd get home and she'd turn over some of that hard, Georgia red clay and we'd work that peat and manure into it. We'd both be breathing hard and sweating, and we'd get dirty. And somewhere along the way, she'd say: This is how you get plants to grow. You've got to give them good dirt.

That sounds right to me—that for the joy and hope and compassion and mercy of God's love planted in us to grow, we've got to give it good dirt. It doesn't matter how often you go to church, how many people you help, how often you pray. If you're not taking care of your dirt—if you're not living a dirty life—God is going to have a hard time taking root in you.

But here's the thing about making good dirt. It's hard work. Rarely is garden dirt good enough on its own. No, you've got to add nutrients and fertilizer. And you've got to work it and water it. Working the dirt isn't easy. It's sweaty and exhausting. And sometimes it leaves you with aches and pains.

But if you don't work it, if you don't nourish it and if you don't till in the smelly stuff and if you don't tend it—the dirt of your life—you're going to get shallow roots and when the heat of the day comes, you're going to wither.

Now my congregation has done a pretty good job of getting dirty. If I can just gush for a minute, they've been tilling the soil they were planted in more than 300 years ago and figuring out just what it means to be faithful Christians in the little town we're growing in. Fifteen years ago, they were talking about closing or merging. Sunday mornings often had 20 or so in worship. Sound familiar to any of you here at Asbury? And they made some hard decisions and big

choices and figured out what they were willing to sacrifice to keep going—to keep caring for the heart of Killingly just as they had been doing for nearly three centuries. They chose to get dirty, to deal with the hard stuff, to show up again and again to till and to tend what God had given them.

And it worked.

In 2014, we became an Open and Affirming Congregation—a similar designation to the United Methodist’s Reconciling. And we’re good at it. We’re good at being Open and Affirming. Our God’s doors—six doors each a different color of the rainbow with “God’s Doors are open to all” written across them—have garnered nation-wide attention. And we just launched our Every. Single. Other. Campaign that is helping our next faithful steps come into focus by wondering what it means to love every single other as expressed by an eleven-foot tall banner on the front of our giant steeple that reads “Love each other. Every black other. Every republican other. Every LGBTQ other. Every white other. Every democrat other. Every Jewish other. Every straight other. Every refugee other. Every despairing other. Every hopeful other. Every. Single. Other.” And my folks are dirty enough to know that’s not the entire list—that there are many more “others” that we could add.

We’re out there—we’ve worked hard to be fertile soil of hope and promise for our little community that was devastated 60 years ago when the mills left and people lost their jobs and livelihoods and are still waiting, decades later, for something to come replace them. And it’s easy for us, as the leading congregation in our community that’s reveling in revitalization and new life, to think everything is daisies and petunias and day lilies.

But you and I both know that even in the good soil, thorns can grow.

Two weeks ago, my first Sunday away from y’all, a woman confronted one our church members in the Key Bank parking lot before worship that day. One of our members was walking across the lot, clearly headed to Westfield, when a woman in rolled down her window. “You know that pastor’s gay,” she said incredulously. Our member said something about coming to see what Westfield was about for herself. The woman scowled a tad and drove off. It wasn’t any big thing, and yet, we had a few members who sat in this very room that week, anxious about what would happen if that particular woman actually *did* show up.

Here’s the thing: It’d be easy to get caught up on that quick encounter—to let the rocky insinuation of the words she spat out take up space our dirt. But we can also look at that exchange in a different way with a single question—how did she, in a sentence sputtered in a parking lot, fertilize my faith? Sometimes, it’s those hard moments, those awful experiences are also the fertilizer that help God’s Word of love to grow within us.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t believe that God throws rocks in our paths so we can work toward good soil, *so that* we might grow to know God’s word more deeply. But the God I proclaim is a God of redemption—and that redemption looks like empty tombs and the sick made well and the hungry being fed. And redemption works only if you’re somewhere you need to be redeemed from.

You can’t get out of the tomb without a little dirt on your clothes. What I mean is, redemption means getting dirty. It means standing up to white supremacists when they rally in Charlottesville, Virginia or wherever the sin of racism and white supremacy rears its head. It means showing up to again and again and again to say that’s not who we want to be, that’s not who we are. That Saturday morning two weeks ago, when the Charlottesville rally was at its worst, our denomination’s Minister for Justice and Witness ministries, Traci Blackmon, was there. In fact, during an on-screen interview, a network staffer rushed her off the camera mid-

interview because of an imminent threat to her safety. All you could hear was her saying, “Gotta go, gotta go.” Tilling and tending and becoming the soil we need to be is back-breaking, scary work.

And sometimes, redemption looks like standing in front of 350 people and speaking the truth about a soldier murdered 1000 miles away from connect and just a couple of hours away from here. A few months ago, we got news that the District Attorney wouldn't be filing any charges in the murder of Taylor Williams. That despite eye-witnesses including one man who was stabbed by the same person in the same encounter and survived, there wasn't enough “evidence” to charge anyone. When his mother told me this through tears, I didn't know what to say. I was at a loss. Like her, I wanted to know why. And somehow that night, I found myself re-reading Taylor's eulogy—the one I delivered nearly a year ago:

“We want to know why?” I said that afternoon. “Why this one whom we loved so much? Why this family? Why this situation? Why this violence? And those are fair questions to ask. And they're ones I wish I could answer. And one day, maybe we will find answers to those questions, but for now, all I can say is I don't know. I don't know why Taylor or why now or why there.

But there are some things I do know. I know that God doesn't leave us orphaned. So I am confident Taylor is in the arms of our Heavenly Parent. I know that God knows what its like to lose a child. So I am convinced God's heart is broken over the loss of this one, too. I know that God is faithful. So I am certain that God was always with Taylor and was always with each of us, and always will be.”

Friends, it's a rocky life we lead. And just the time we think we've gotten the last stone out of our dirt is when we find the next one. But the Great Sower calls to us to till and plant and prune and grow. Not sure where to start? Don't worry about what you don't know—start with what you do.

And get a little dirty.

***God. Is. Faithful***  
**preached at Westfield Church on October 28, 2018**  
**Based on Genesis 9**

When I was in seminary at Emory, I had a preaching professor who said that you should never start your sermon with a joke—that it was cheap, that it was pandering. Well, lucky for you, he’s not here. So, here’s what I’ve got. A priest, a rabbi, a Southern Baptist Minister, our Moderator Andy, and a dog all walk into the emergency room each exhibiting different symptoms of the flu. One had a headache, one a sore throat. Another had a fever, another the chills. They waited and waited to see someone, and finally they were called back. After waiting some more, the nurse walks in, takes a look around, and says, “What is this? Some kind of sick joke?”

There it is. That’s it. It’s all downhill from here.

It may seem strange to start a sermon the day after a worshipping community was slaughtered by joking, but the way I see it is that there are two things we can do in impossible situations like this one. One is that we find something—anything—to laugh about because laughter reminds us that joy is in the world, and that while it might seem far from us today, *that* joy will find its way back into our life—and that gives us hope.

The second thing we must do when awful things happen is tell the truth about them. And the truth is that this is a really shitty situation. Maybe that’s not the word you’d use, but “it’s just terrible” doesn’t quite grasp the visceral, desperate misery of it all—they were at a celebration. The gunman posted on his social media, “I’m going in.” And he did. With guns blazing. It’s not terrible. It’s more than that. There’s nothing right or fair about this. There’s nothing good or justified here. It’s *just shitty*.

It’s one of the harder parts of my job—telling the truth—and one of its deepest joys. Oddly, I often experience the difficulty and the joy of truth-telling on the same day—and sometimes within the same sermon. And today, it turns out, is one of those days. Because, you see, the truth is that despite the terrible, heart wrenching circumstances that weigh so heavily on us this morning—the murder of worshipping innocents and depth of despair we’ve reached as a nation—we still bear witness to the hope we have in the resurrection, of the hope we have in God.

I’m sure it’ll surprise you that I think a lot about God, given my vocation. I think a lot about what it means to be a person of faith in this world, about how God interacts with us and cares for us and loves us. And through that thinking, I’ve come to lots of different beliefs about the Divine, about how God shows up. But at the core of my understanding are these two:

The first is simple: **God doesn’t choose for us to die.** God didn’t let that gunman to walk into that synagogue any more than God wants one to walk into this church. God doesn’t want any of us to die. In fact, in our scriptures Jesus tells us that he came that we might have life in abundance. And the last time I checked, the opposite of abundant life is death.

The second fundamental belief is one my entire faith is rooted in: **God doesn’t make shitty things happen. But God *can* make really beautiful things come out of really shitty situations.** The story of the resurrection is one of God making beauty come from tragedy, life from the cold and dark of the tomb. And the story of Noah and his ark, isn’t so much about the flood as it is about the rainbow.

But here's the thing, we might not see the full breadth of that beauty for years. And we're not always able to see it on our own. So, for those of you who have tears blurring your vision, let me show you where I can already see that beauty budding. I see God's redeeming love in the ways you all have already rallied in online postings and messages to me inquiring what we can do. It's a thing of beauty, how you care for one another—how *we* care for one another.

It's never easy, finding our way in impossible circumstances not to mention telling the truth along the way. It won't ever be easy. But caring for one another, loving one another, holding one another and speaking the truth about our pain and our hope is our only choice—the only one that works. And so that's what we're going to do here this morning—we're going to care and love and hold and hope.

It turns out that one of my favorite stories in all of scripture is a story about telling the truth. We find it in the gospel of John, chapter 11. It's the story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. I'm sure you're familiar with it, but just in case you need a refresher, here you go. I don't know if this is exactly how it happened, but I know this story is true.

Jesus was best friends with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. He'd visit them when the pressures of the road were too much, and he always knew he'd find a friendly ear and good cooking—kinda like coming home to the South after a long exodus in New England, not that I would know anything about that. And it was those late-night conversations that shaped them—all of them—in different ways. Jesus watched what it meant to be fully human and *not* divine. And Mary and Martha and Lazarus learned how to be more genuine, more authentic.

It had been a while since the siblings had seen Jesus. They were expecting a visit from him any day, but the truth was they were getting impatient. You see, something had been off for Lazarus—something wasn't right. So the sisters sent word to Jesus. "We know you're on your way," they wrote, "but if you could quit doddling and get on over here, we'd appreciate it." They were from...Southern...Bethany and had the Manners to prove it. The next day when Jesus hadn't come, they sent him another message. It was short: "Anytime now, Jesus" it said. Another day went by and still no word from their friend and their brother was on death's door. "Jesus, where the hell are you?" they wrote.

It was the next day that Lazarus died. And another four before Jesus finally showed up. When word finally reached the sisters that Jesus was on his way, Martha, the organized, efficient, and controlled one took a cue from Mary, the impulsive sister, and ran out to confront their so-called friend. Her face was seared with tears. She threw herself into his arms and pounded his chest. "If only you'd been here," she shouted, "if only you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died." The gospel of John has tamed her tone over the years, I think. I don't blame her anger, her desperation. I would've been upset, too.

Later, after she'd calmed, and Jesus made it to their home, he was confronted by the tempestuous one—Mary—who told him the same with a steely sadness. "If only you'd been here," she nearly whispered, "my brother wouldn't have died."

I don't know that it exactly happened that way. But I know the *story* is true. That is, I know what loss and fear and uncertainty can do to people. Some love the story of Lazarus because of its famed two-word verse: Jesus wept. Others find it meaningful because Jesus brings Lazarus back. Jesus calls him forth from the tomb and that gives us hope. And it should.

The gift this story holds for us today, though, isn't in those tidbits. The gift, the promise for this room of brokenhearted disciples uncertain about where we head next, is in Mary and Martha confronting Jesus and telling the truth about the way they feel, that if he'd only been



there, things would've been different. If only God had been present, if only God had not abandoned them, things would be different.

Whenever something hard happens, we try our best to reckon with it—to make sense of it and to make it alright however we can. And so, I'm sure that there are those of you here in this room who have tried your hardest to believe it when someone says to you about whatever tragedy you're encountering, "God's got a plan." You want to believe that. You want to agree when some hugs you and says, "God's in control." But really, each is a human attempt at describing the indescribable and making sense of unbelievable.

And in the of us fumbling for the right words, you're shaking your fist. And shouting through hot, angry tears or whispering in a steely sadness, If only you'd been here, this wouldn't have happened. If only you'd been here, my friend wouldn't be hurting. If only you'd been here, my grandchild would still be alive. If only you'd been here, my baby wouldn't have died.

If only you'd been there, God, innocent people, our siblings in faith wouldn't have been slaughtered in your house of worship.

And not a single soul here would blame you for feeling it, thinking it, or saying it. That is, no one will blame you or me for speaking the truth.

Here's mine: I believe in the good news of the gospel. And the good news for Mary and Martha is that the story wasn't over yet. Death didn't have the last word. So for now, we'll rail at God, we'll ask God over and over again why he let it happen? Where God was? What the the hell God was thinking? We'll shake our fists at God, shouting, "If **only** you'd been here! If **only** you cared enough!" God can take that. God's big enough to hold all of that—our disappointment, anger, broken-heartedness, our uncertainty, our fear.

A year ago, last week, two significant events happened in the life of our church. The first was that two of our members of our congregation were confronted in the bank parking lot by someone who was clearly waiting to confront someone, anyone, about how my being a gay pastor was leading this congregation down a dangerous and wrong path. A few days later, a woman called and told me I was leading this church to hell (literally to hell) for showing Hocus Pocus on our lawn—that I was introducing the devil into our congregation. I remember thinking to myself, "Bette Middler is certainly devilishly fun in the movie, but she ain't Satan."

Many of you remember those two occurrences, but what you might not remember is that between those two events, we had the State Troopers on site. Why? To help us form an emergency plan. That is, they were here to help us figure out what to do if what happened in Pittsburgh yesterday and Texas a year ago November 5th, happened here. I stood behind this giant pulpit and asked them, "what should I say?"

Yesterday hit me in the gut. And I spent most of the morning wondering how we could make it to the rainbow after the flood when it feels like we're still in the middle of the storm.

We've spent three weeks on the wickedness of humanity, the failure of humankind, and a flood of destruction. My God, we need a rainbow. But how, when it feels like the waters are rising and the rain keeps coming.

The summer before I left for Connecticut, I was lamenting to a pastor friend about whether or not to leave my last church and take my first solo pastorate. "I just don't know what to do," I told her. She listened to my worries, the carefully crafted pros and cons list I'd made. And when I was finished, she looked into my eyes and said, "Jon, God is faithful."

Later that afternoon, I was driving back home thinking about what she had said to me. I recalled the countless Vacation Bible Schools where I was taught the story of Noah's Ark—and

how, after what seemed like an endless, insurmountable time of destruction and darkness, the sky was filled with a sign of God's faithfulness.

A summer afternoon storm had just come through that day—you know the kind, steamy and thick. I glanced up from the road and there before me was a rainbow—God's sign of faithfulness. I nodded my head acknowledging what lay before me and repeated my friend's words: God is faithful.

Years later, just this March in fact, I was waiting to board my flight to Atlanta to preach at the funeral of a baby who lived just a few hours after being born. We'd just made it through the second Nor'easter of the year up here, and I was so, so glad that my flight was on time. I'd pulled out my computer to start writing the very sermon I was scheduled to deliver the next day, when I looked out a window to watch a plane take off. It was still cloudy outside, but just through the clouds across the runway, a piece of light broke through. And there, in front of me was a rainbow. I looked at it through misty eyes, then said it again: God is faithful.

Months ago, as I was planning worship for the fall, I decided that we'd spend September with Adam and Eve, October with Noah and his ark, and November with Abraham. I dutifully divided up scripture assigning chunks to each day, knowing that the last Sunday we encountered Noah would be the Sunday we finally found the rainbow. After a few rounds with Amazon, our rainbow was finally delivered and Aimee, our awesome admin, and I came in one night last week and hung it up. "It's so pretty," I shouted. Let's be real—squealed—when John and Vern hoisted it into the ceiling. Little did I know that a few days later, I'd walk into this very room early on a Sunday morning with tears in my eyes, devastated at what happened less than 24 hours before and so, so relieved it wasn't us, only to stare at this rainbow and say, "God is faithful."

Here's what I believe: I believe that God is big enough to hold our anger and heartbreak, our fear and our despair—And I believe that God can handle us telling the truth.

I believe that things get stormy—that we don't always know when the flood is over. And I believe that in the middle of a nor'easter, the clouds can part just enough for a rainbow to peek through.

Yes, I believe things are grim, but I believe God is faithful. I believe things are violent, but I believe God is faithful. I believe things have got to change, that we've got to call out white-supremacy, anti-Semitism, and bigotry whenever and wherever they appear. And *still* I believe God is faithful.

So that's what we will hold fast to—not the heartache of this world or its violence or its anguish or its hopelessness. But to God's faithfulness, to these little bits of rainbow that remind of us of God's promise... and to each other. Yes, life is hard. Yes, life is scary. Yes, life is uncertain.

But God. Is. Faithful.

## APPENDIX B: THE YEAR OF MARK SCHEDULE

Special Event/Liturgical Designation	Week #	Date	Primary Passage	Story of Scripture	Topic/Theme of the Day
	1	7/9/17	Mark 1: 1-8	John proclaims the coming of Jesus	Introduce what we're doing;
	2	7/16/17	Mark 1: 9-15	John baptizes Jesus	
	3	7/23/17	Mark 1: 16 - 20	Calling of the first disciples	
Fifth Sunday	4	7/30/17	Mark 1: 21-34	Teaching in Synagogue, Exorcising of demons, Healing Peter's Mother in Law	
	5	8/6/17	Mark 1: 35 - 45, Mark 2: 1 - 12, Mark 3:1-6	Leper being made clean, Healing of the Paralytic, Healing of man with withered hand	
	6	8/13/17	Mark 2: 13-28	Teachings: new wineskins, eating with sinners, fasting	
	7	8/20/17	Mark 3: 7-35	Who is my family?	
	8	8/27/17	Mark 4: 1 - 20	Parable of Planting seed on rocky ground	
	9	9/3/17	Mark 4: 21-34	Parables about the Kingdom of God (incl. mustard seed)	
Kickoff Sunday	10	9/10/17	Mark 4: 35 -41	Calming of the Sea	
	11	9/17/17	Mark 5: 1-20	Gerasenian Demoniac	
	12	9/24/17	Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43	The Healing of Jairus' Daughter	
	13	10/1/17	Mark 5:25-34	The Hemorrhaging Woman	
	14	10/8/17	Mark 6: 1-29	You can't be a prophet in your hometown, commissioning of disciples, John's Execution,	
Homecoming Sunday	15	10/15/17	Mark 6:30-44, Mark 8:1-10	Wilderness Feeding of the 5000, Feeding of the 4000	
	16	10/22/17	Mark 6:45-56	Jesus Walks on Water	
Fifth Sunday/Reformation Sunday	17	10/29/17	Mark 7: 1-23	Traditions of elders v. commandment of God	
All Saints' Sunday	18	11/5/17	Mark 7:24-30	The Syrophoencian Woman	
	19	11/12/17	Mark 7:31-37, Mark 8:22-26, Mark 9:14-29	Healing the deaf man, blind man, epileptic child	
	20	11/19/17	Mark 8:11-21	The disciples misunderstand	

Reign of Christ	21	11/26/17	Mark 8:27-9:1	Jesus' first Announcement (of his identity), The Cost of Discipleship	
Advent 1	22	12/3/17			
Advent 2	23	12/10/17			
Advent 3	24	12/17/17			
Advent 4	25	12/24/17			
Christmas 1/Fifth Sunday	26	12/31/17			
Epiphany	27	1/7/18	Mark 9:30-51	Jesus' second announcement, warning on discipline	
Baptism of the Lord	28	1/14/18	Mark 10: 1-16	Marriage and Children in the Kingdom	
	29	1/21/18	Mark 10: 17-31	Egalitarian Economic relations in the kingdom	
	30	1/28/18	Mark 10:32-45	James and John want to sit with J in heaven	
	31	2/4/18	Mark 10:46-52	Healing of Blind Bartimaeus	
Transfiguration	32	2/11/18	Mark 9:2-13	Transfiguration of Jesus	
Lent 1	33	2/18/18	Mark 12:1-12	Parable of the Vineyard	
Lent 2	34	2/25/18	Mark 12:13-27	Paying Taxes to the Emperor, dispute with the Saducees,	
Lent 3	35	3/4/18	Mark 12:28-34	Love Your Neighbor	
Lent 4	36	3/11/18	Mark 12:35-44	Beware of the scribes	
Lent 5	37	3/18/18	Mark 13	Exhortation not to be distracted from the movement by distressing events	
Palm Sunday	38	3/25/18	Mark 11:1-33	Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Turning Tables in Temple	
Easter	39	4/1/18			
	40	4/8/18	Mark 14:1-9	Anointing Jesus for Burial	
	41	4/15/18	Mark 14:10-26	The Last Supper	
	42	4/22/18	Mark 14: 26-42	Praying in Gethsemane	
Fifth Sunday	43	4/29/18	Mark 14:43-52	Betrayal	
	44	5/6/18	Mark 14:53-65	Jesus Condemned by chief priests	
Mother's Day	45	5/13/18	Mark 14:66-72	Peter's denial	
Pentecost	46	5/20/18			
	47	5/27/18	Mark 15:1-15	Jesus is condemned by Pilate	
	48	6/3/18	Mark 15:16-39	Jesus' Crucifixion	

	49	6/10/18	Mark 15:40-47	Jesus' Burial	
Father's Day	50	6/17/18	Mark 16:1-8	The Resurrection	
	51	6/24/18	Mark 16: 1-17	The Resurrection (Long ending)	Focus on how this ending was added; tell 'the rest of the story'; the story still being written today.

## APPENDIX C: EMAIL FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

### **From a member of Westfield, a mid-forties Japanese immigrant:**

It absolutely helped me read and understand Jesus' life "in sequence."

When different excerpts from bible were introduced to match the theme you wanted to preach, message was well sent, but it was more "spiritual" messages.

Through the Year of Mark, I feel like I finally understand who Jesus was and why he was (is) so important.

I feel that I'm far more educated in terms of gospel and religious understanding. At the same time, you went to Israel, and some facts/words had become far more realistic through your FB postings, etc. and it gave me a sense of belonging to the God's house, but not just a group of nice people (at Westfield).

It was extremely helpful to participate in bible study as well; it is difficult to understand a passage from a gospel when it's read only once from the pulpit...

The Year of Mark helped me to understand Jesus: what it means to live like him through these actions and what he scarified for us.

I also learned he was a person, with faults. He was chosen, but he was not always pleased with the fact; he probably resented his fate and he probably was not very confident sometimes...and these were my surprises. Jesus did not choose, but God chose him, and Jesus has decided to fulfil the God's wishes. (I always think of the relationship between Dumbledore and Harry!!!) Loyalty to God was a big theme, I think.

Over all, my major feedback is the Year of Mark educated me a great deal, and it was clearly a different experience from the years before you implemented

**From a member of Westfield, an early sixties retired music teacher:**

As a teacher myself, I'm always looking for ways to expand my world and learn more. Since retirement, that world has shifted from school to, largely, Westfield UCC. Going in, I saw Bible study, combined with my trip with you and Greg to Israel, as the right way to learn about this thing called Christianity. A Congregationalist in my formative years in Norwood, Mass, I'd heard Bible stories before of course, but never in an organized, adult way. I'd never taken and studied Jesus' life and times in a consistent straightforward way and our study of Mark was a perfect way to do that and have more of a clue. I missed the month of September 2017 unfortunately due to travel but was there for most of the rest of the year.

I bought the recommended online Bible that Jon said he used and found it very easy to manipulate. I enjoyed the triple reading aloud of the passages with the admonition to listen for key interesting words or phrases. I enjoyed reading aloud. I enjoyed the discussions and learning new biblical phrases and words that are used in its study. Being able to learn from reading Mark and then the ability on our Israel trip to see the actual sites where they happened made my Christ education ever more palpable and real. I had a number of very moving moments in Israel and have been surprised by emotionally moving moments just sitting in church. As a (perhaps uptight) WASP, I'm glad to be more in touch with this side of me which I've never really accessed adequately before. Historically, I don't cry easily.

A year later, I feel like I'm more understanding of references that are made in sermons and also specifics of the church year. I love the way you pull things from these ancient readings and make them applicable to today's troubled world and to today's everyday life and how to daily live it. Over a year ago during one service, we had a Sunday of going to different stations around the church. One of them had little cutout stars with a word on each. We were encouraged to take one star from that station. I took "grace". That star with its reminder has been in my wallet ever since and I look at it every time I open my wallet. I'm still unsure of what "grace" actually is, but I'm also still pretty sure I can still use more of it as I chase down the elusiveness of its meaning for me.

I've learned that religion is a very personal and ongoing journey for those who choose to jump in. That it is a positive journey, and that it really helps in negotiating today's world of unrest and disruption. I'm so glad I'm here. I look forward to every Sunday and to continue my Bible study.

Thank you, Jon, for your guidance.

**From a member of Westfield, an early sixties Human Resources professional:**

Just some comments on the Year of Mark. I'm hoping this will all make sense.

The first time you and I talked one on one, you gave me a copy of the New Testament with the suggestion that I read the four gospels in the order of Mark, Luke, Matthew, then John. I did that. I read them all in that order several times and understood the stories, but that's it. I understood the stories.

I've read the Bible, but it has only ever been stories to me. I loved the Old Testament stories as a kid and I read them over and over. As a teenager and young adult, the New Testament stories became more interesting to read, and learning about Jesus in my catechism and CYA classes enforced those stories.

But the Bible was always just stories. These are the stories of God and creation and sin. These are the stories of Jesus, his miracles, and of sin.

Aside from the wonder of the creation story, the three things that I "felt" when reading the Bible as a kid and young adult were Peter's betrayal of Jesus, the seemingly careless apathy of Pilate, and the crucifixion of Jesus, all of which were upsetting to me. The rest of the book was just stories.

Then I returned to church and heard your sermons, went to Israel, participated in the beginning and the end of the Year of Mark, and I haven't stopped reading the Bible since.

You taught us how to read and how to think about what the Bible says, and how to take it in small pieces and really focus on what the words mean. In doing that, the physical, historical, and cultural contexts, the poetry, and the imagery just all of a sudden came to life - or something. I don't mean that to sound trite or so dramatic, it's just that everything clicked into place and made sense on a deeper level.

That was a tough year for me. Simplistically speaking, I was thankful to meet with a group of people each week whose focus matched mine. Not so simple was when things went a little crazy in my life and I stopped coming. There were so many weeks that the only peace I found was in reading my Bible and carrying the lessons in my heart and mind.

Now that I understand it differently, I read my Bible almost every day. Sometimes I read it for pleasure - I'm working my way through the story of David again. He's pretty fascinating, but I have questions. Sometimes I read it for comfort, and peace of mind and heart. Since my first trip to Israel, I sometimes read it for information and I research people or places that were previously just parts of stories. I've purchased a few reference books to help sort through my questions, and a book of gospel parallels that sometimes serves only to raise more questions.

Did the Year of Mark change how I read and understand the Bible? Absolutely. Do I feel more



comfortable talking about the Bible? Maybe. There's so much to know and I can't keep all of the different books straight in my head, but I want to know more and I have a much better understanding of what I read, and that matters to me more than I can say. Did the Year of Mark deepen my faith? More than I ever would have thought possible.

Everything about the Bible clicked into place at exactly the right time - the time that I needed it most. In that single time in my life that I felt the most alone, I was the least alone. It's weird how that happened.

Hopefully, this email has been of some use to you.

Everything you do for us as a congregation makes a difference. You're a fantastic Pastor and a true blessing to all of us. Thank you for everything.

**From a member of Westfield, an early seventies retired nurse:**

Sure, I'd be happy to!

My knowledge of Mark's gospel as well as all of the other books we used for background or further explanation, was deepened. I enjoyed hearing the comments from the other participants as well as the different reading styles expressed as we read each passage 3 times. The characters really came alive. Some weeks I'd sit in church, early on Sunday morning and wonder how in the world your sermon would connect it all! Some weeks I didn't get it but most were spot on and lived with me all week. Reading from different translations was also impactful. When do we start again? Can't wait!!!❤️