

Like a Bell

A Review of the October 3 Performance of The Gospel of Mark Alive

One of the things I like about bells is that the sound keeps reverberating long after the bell is struck. When Messiah Lutheran Church's steeple was struck by lightning in July 1998, the flames devoured the bell tower and sent the old bell crashing to the ground, creating a crack that permanently destroyed its capacity to ring. That old bell had rung for Sunday worship services, for funerals, for weddings, sending out the reverberations of a message and a presence into the neighborhood around us. The neighborhood itself grieved the loss of that bell's toll.

As the congregation began its journey away from the old place to a new location and a new building on the highway, we had hoped to have a new bell tower in front of the church with a new bell. For better or worse, we chose to leave that additional cost out of our mortgage, and so, twelve years later, we have neither a bell tower nor a bell, only the old cracked bell, rusting in front of the church, like an ensign of whence we have come. Slowly, though, it dawned on us that the congregation no longer had a bell, because the congregation and its visible presence on the high way was becoming the bell. Lightning had destroyed the old so that the new could come into being, so that our welcome and our witness could reverberate, not just to the immediate neighborhood, but to the whole Iron Range and beyond.

Last Wednesday night, October 3, as people started pouring into Messiah's worship space for the Rev. Bert Marshall's performance of *The Gospel of Mark Alive*, it reminded me of people coming to the invitation of a tolling bell. Teenagers, children, seniors, and everyone in between came, many members from our congregation, but many people I had never seen before: they heard the bell and came to its invitation. Our church was packed to overflowing. The energy was electric, and that was even before Bert called out with a voice like a bell, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!"

The next two hours were extraordinary. Although it was indeed a performance, and of the very highest caliber theatrically, it was not simply a performance. Rev. Marshall entered into a pocket of power that exists within and between the words of this tersely packed gospel, and relentlessly invited everyone there to enter into that same pocket as well. That Gospel *is* relentless. In its totality, and as he channeled it, it does not permit us to stop and question or interpret Jesus. It rips at the fabric of the old wineskins to make room for a new wine. It presses in on us like the crowds pressed in on Jesus and does not permit escape, his or ours. It dumbfounds us with the dumb-founding of the disciples, whom he playfully presented in all their Duh moments. It tickles us with an ironic humor we often forget belongs to Jesus, and troubles us with his unanswerable question, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose their own life?"

And yes, we heard Bert say Judeans instead of Jews, dominion of God instead of Kingdom of God, Shut up instead of Be silent, Whoosh instead of Immediately, and spoke the Shema in Hebrew. Bert worked his voice like a musical instrument, his guitar and drums like a voice, and the audience like an instrument as well.

I do not want to give the impression that it is easy to listen to one person presenting the gospel of Mark for two unbroken hours. That would make it entertainment. It is hard work to pay attention for that long, especially in our sensory overload, Attention Deficit Disorder culture. Bert Marshall's performance demands something of audiences, demands us to enter in, to do the work of engaging with all that is said and all that simply cannot be said. It demands ultimately that we let go, let go of our myriad preoccupations, and ultimately let go of our own insistence that we "get it". We're not going to "get it". The Gospel ends with an unfinished sentence. It won't let us say "Now I finally understand."

What I anticipate resulting from this extraordinary evening is not comprehension but reverberation. The bell that sounded bringing people on Wednesday night into a packed house was ringing as they left. Three days later it is still reverberating in me, as it is, I am sure, in all those who came. It is the reverberation, as of the cracking of an old bell struck by lightning, cracking open to the beautiful, terrifying resonance of a new bell that rings us beyond the proportions of a sensible life, to the disproportionate call of a relentless Creator of new beginnings.

Thanks belong to many, but especially to Bert Marshall himself, for his own disproportionate offering of himself to internalize the Gospel, and his time in driving all the way from Massachusetts to Minnesota to make it happen. In such disproportions lies the faintest sketch of Another's. Let that bell keep tolling!

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