

## Mark Story: First Nations Version Small Group

### Values, goals, and boundaries

Informational email sent out to those interested included:

- Learning how to embody and practice decolonizing our engagement with the Bible
- Following the sentiment that in the Bible, "story is everything!" see [Erna Kim Hackett's Post on the Advent Story](#)
- Meeting you where you are at and contributing from where you are at-- we are managing living in a pandemic, and we are all different and complex people
- Posture of exploration, not extraction-- reading the Bible is not an equation, we all have different processes and will come out with different ways to "apply" the text to our lives
- Leaning into discomfort-- this is probably going to be different from the IV Bible studies you've been a part of before, but it has proven to be very life-giving!

In practice, what got added on:

- Being open to let the text help us interpret what we were experiencing in our personal lives, spiritual journeys (as many of us are deconstructing/decolonizing), and as a society
- Looking for and calling out when the text was liberative, freeing, refreshing, helpful, etc., even when we didn't have an explanation or interpretation
- Not prescribing, and sometimes not even sharing with the group, our "applications", as we realized they might not be helpful for everyone to hear
- Letting the staff who participated be *people and co-learners*, not holding them to any expectations of leading or being more progressed in their process
- Holding and interacting with emotions, trauma, and painful change surrounding Mark, the Lent season, and atonement theology

### Logistics

- We split the book into 4 sections to make a 5-week Bible Story (rather than Bible Study), with one introductory meeting to begin
- We read 4 chapters of Mark on our own each week. We encouraged everyone to read like they would any story or novel-- with excitement and curiosity
- During our 90 minute meeting time, we caught up and centered ourselves, then took time to post in the chat what sections we would like to discuss in the group. Once sections were posted, the facilitator (me) put the sections in order and each person would read aloud their section, and begin speaking their thoughts/impressions. Time was left for others to chime in at every section, then we would move on to the next.
- One group member said that this was a very efficient way of reading through the whole book of Mark. Although that wasn't the goal, it was true that it allowed us to get straight to the point, addressing everything that was impressed on us AND leaving space for productive conversations.

## Themes and take-aways

Phrasing of First Nations Translation (Western → FNV):

- The Gospel/The Good News → The Good Story: "News" signals in us flashy, urgent, life-or-death emotions, meant for the broadest, most far-reaching audience possible, while "Story" implies/requires a relationship between the teller and the hearer. It bestows dignity onto the hearer as one who can interpret/make meaning, but also requires respect bestowed to the teller, as the one passing knowledge. "News" is often a single, tightly controlled narrative (which the Western Church is all about-- control), while "Story" is rooted, not controlled, by the relationship between the teller and the hearer, and by the sacredness of Place.
  - Example: 3:11-15 "When the ones with evil spirits saw him, they would fall down at his feet and wail, 'You are the Son of the Great Spirit!' But he warned them over and over again not to tell anyone who he was. *He did not want evil spirits spreading news about him.* Creator Sets Free went up the mountain and gathered to himself some of his followers. He chose twelve of them-- to learn his ways by being with him, so he could send them out to tell the Good Story and to have the power to force out evil spirits-- and he called them message bearers."
- Teaching → Medicine: (Referring to a story by Native staff, Leah Johnson) many things are referred to as "good medicine" by Indigenous cultures, i.e. spending quality time, sharing stories, sharing a good meal. All these things are taken into account when thinking about health and medicine because of the holistic nature of Native culture. We loved the fact that something traditionally academic, left-brained, and disembodied in the western point of view could be expanded to be more holistic and welcoming coming from Jesus.
  - Example: 1:27 "The people were dumbfounded and began to ask each other, 'What is this teaching? What new medicine is this? He even tells the unclean spirits what to do-- and they do it!'"
  - Example: 2:12 "Right away the man stood up, and, in front of them all, he rolled up his sleeping bundle and walked out. Great amazement filled the hearts of all who were in the house as they gave praise to Creator. 'Who has ever seen this kind of mysterious and powerful medicine' they asked."
- Kingdom of God → Creator's Good Road: The imperialistic, exceptionalistic, militaristic nature of the western church has traumatized and exhausted all of us in the group, so shifting from "Kingdom" to "Good Road" was refreshing and freeing for all of us right off the bat. One member mentioned how she loved the imagery of a road-- that humans by nature may wander off without ultimate condemnation, and that it looks different at different points of the journey. Others loved the embodied nature of walking, and the rootedness in place and land that walking a road encourages. It is a lot more inviting and much less hierarchical than a king and his kingdom.
  - Example: 1:15 "'The time has now come!' he said to the people. 'Creator's Good Road is right in front of you-- it is time to return to the right ways of thinking and doing! Put your trust in this Good Story I am bringing to you.'"
  - Example: 1:17

Accounting for social locations within the stories:

- Reading how Jesus interacts with different types of people with their different social locations helped us enter into how multidimensional and complex people are, including Jesus. We referred to the [Cycle of Gospel Living](#) as a way to interact with the character and also with our own identities when reading Mark. People found this tool very helpful in how they could make the gospel more inclusive, relatable, and nonlinear.
  - Example: 5:21-43 Jairus and the Bleeding Woman
  - Example: 7: 24-30 The Syrophenician Woman
  - Example: 10: 35-52 James and John Request Power and Bartimaeus Requests Healing

Honoring the sacredness of space/place/land:

- We took note of all the times Creator Sets Free talks about, retreats to, and relates to the land and centering the place, rather than the event, of healings and teachings. Jesus obviously teaches in parables, or stories, about the natural world, and he goes up mountains and returns to his homeland to reveal himself and pray. But we noticed that many times, he doesn't permit the news of his healings to be spread, and rather, he tries to keep the event rooted in the place where it happened-- perhaps honoring the location and the people present at that moment above the supposed universal implications that healing might have been interpreted as having. We noticed that we have been taught to project profound meaning onto these healings, which oftentimes leads to contradiction and misappropriation of the interaction. We simply forgone that process and chose to see the relationships and the places as sacred.
  - Example: 8:23-26 "He took the blind man by the hand, and led him to the outside of the village. He rubbed some of his spit into the man's eyes and then laid his hands on him. 'What do you see?' Creator Sets Free asked the man. He looked around and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees walking around.' Creator Sets Free put his hands over the man's eyes again. His sight returned and he could see everything clearly. He then sent the man to his home and said to him, 'Do not go back into the village.'"

Testimony from participant:

"Thank you for asking us to join you in this work Tami. I've already started another Good Story Group (GSG) with our GCF here at Vanderbilt and our first meal will be next Sunday. Our community discussions and processing the trauma of colonization together allows more room for our community to have a shared memory around the hope of Creator Sets Free.

I am learning to allow Creator Sets Free to open my heart and search me for ways that I have made the error of pushing an ethnocentric narrative that conflicts with the intent of the writers of our Good Story. Reading the scriptures through FNV provides an opportunity to read the sacred writings of our faith in a way that honors the storytelling tradition of indigenous community members. At the same time it allows the Holy Spirit to use this traditional storytelling to rekindle a heart of worship for our Good Creator through these indigenous translators."

-- Nate Fields, GFM Staff at Vanderbilt and [Plant for a Change](#) Manager