

One New Book for the Preacher

William V. Arnold
Myer Creek, Virginia

James S. Lowry, *The Long Road Home: and Other Short Stories from the Silences in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 104 pages.

Storytelling has many genres: cautionary tales, moral tales, dilemma tales. The list could go on and on. What good stories share in common is their ability to pull the listener (or, in this case, the reader) “across the threshold” into a way of thinking, of perceiving, of looking at things from a different angle. Take the most common expression of “telling a story”—a joke. The ultimate aim of a joke is to take the listener by surprise, to turn the tables, to intrigue and delight. So also is the case with many other types of stories.

Now, I confess at the outset that part of my fascination with stories is their seductive invitation to look at things in a new light. And, I further confess that frequently, when looking at a very familiar selection of scripture, my mind wanders a bit, and I yearn for something to draw me back into the text from a different angle, to see something new, to engage it in another way. Jim Lowry does just that for us in *The Long Road Home*. He invites us to take a fresh look at selections from the Gospel of Mark, selections which invite us to move beyond sticking with first appearances and to speculate on “the rest of the story.”

Jim is eminently qualified to take us on this journey. He is well educated, an experienced pastor, an excellent preacher, and a lover of scripture. He also possesses a distinctive qualification for writing this book—he is a good old southern boy from South Carolina, and he is a fine storyteller! “Cricket” Lowry, as he is known by his friends, has been immersed in stories since childhood. He grew up in the midst of them. He has honed and sharpened a talent for listening well and telling well.

Now, out of that wealth of background and experience, we are invited into a discipline known as “midrash”—an ancient practice engaged in by rabbis to “spin tales” as a method of digging more deeply into scripture. The aim is not so much to give a final explanation as it is to lure or seduce a devotee of scripture into more examination and exploration, thereby resulting in more profound appreciation for the richness that is there.

Out of admiration for that tradition, Lowry has dug in and immersed himself in what he calls the “silences” in the Gospel of Mark. He has been intrigued at the way the gospel writer leaves us hanging with many of the stories. For example, when Mark reports that Jesus was led out into the wilderness and tempted by Satan for forty days, we aren’t told in that gospel what the temptations were! And, since Mark predates Matthew and Luke, both of whom do describe those temptations, Mark’s first readers were left, as Lowry puts it, “to squirm, wondering what the temptations might have been (p. 2).” One implication (mine, not necessarily Lowry’s) of Mark’s lack of detail is that Matthew and Luke couldn’t stand it! So they filled in more description in order to put themselves (and perhaps us) at ease.

In like manner, to raise other questions, our author wonders how the unclean spirits in Mark 4 and 5 knew who Jesus was. And, who was the young man who

ran away naked because his linen cloth was grabbed in Mark 14. And, what became of him? Those are just a few examples of the silences that Jim Lowry invites us to wonder about in Mark's gospel. And then, he proceeds to speculate, to spin a yarn, about what might have happened.

"This book," Lowry writes, "is based on the hypothesis that Mark deliberately left strategically placed silences so his readers would have to wonder what was in them. In the act of wondering, we just might discover ultimate truth, especially if our wondering about what is left unsaid is based on what is said (p. xv)." He then takes up six silences in Mark that may leave us wondering, as they do him. He engages in midrash of his own by offering two possible endings, or continuations, for each of those passages. He then goes on to offer two tales from his own life in South Carolina that are "in sync" with the story. There is the "cake lady" and Miss Mary Jane Creighton, each bringing indirect illumination to our love of the gospel. Are those tales "true," or are they midrash on his experiences there? In true storytelling fashion, we are left to wonder about that as well.

In the final analysis, Jim Lowry tantalizes us with the possibilities that lie before us when approaching scripture. He is quick to say that he does not offer this book as a commentary on Mark, at least not in the technical sense. Indeed, it is not a "typical" biblical commentary. But, Lowry knows his Bible! He offers some commentary at the start of each passage, demonstrating that he has done his theological and exegetical homework. But, to critique this book as if it were a traditional commentary would be to miss the point. This book is an invitation to enter into a spirit of intrigue, enjoyment, and appreciation of scripture's profundity. And, our author/spinner of tales does not ask us to use his stories so much as he invites us to find our own, looking to both scripture and our own lives as resources for plumbing the richness of the Word. Jim Lowry's book is a resource for both preaching and teaching, and for lively discussion as a study book for groups.