

EMBODYING MARK

*Fresh ways to read,
pray and live the Gospel*



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SPCK

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Contents



<i>Words of thanks</i>	iv
Introduction	v
1 Into the Wilderness	1
2 Following the Teacher	14
3 Following the Healer	26
4 Following the Shepherd	39
5 Following the Beloved	52
6 Following the Lover	65
7 Following the King	78
8 Into the Silence	91
Epilogue: Embodying Mark	99
<i>Notes</i>	102
<i>Scripture index</i>	105

Words of thanks



I have come to regard this little book as a love letter to God and to my neighbours on the way of the Beloved. I am grateful to SPCK for giving me this opportunity, and I am grateful to the people who nurture in me the kind of love I talk about here and who make good things possible through their presence in my life. Among those beautiful friends, a few have shown me particular kindness in the course of this project. Thank you to Andy, Becky, Beth, CC, Charlie, Elizabeth, John, Kirk, Sally and Sara (and others I will remember as soon as it is too late to add them here) for their encouragement, help and prayers; to my gentle family of faith at Anstey URC for listening lovingly as I preached my way through things; to Aunt Sally, who deserves a small book of thanks of her own for proofreading the book multiple times, creating the index, and being constantly joyful about all of it; and to Robert for walking with me through the muddy and the golden and loving me all along the way.

Introduction



You are invited on an eight-stage journey with Jesus, God's Beloved, through the Gospel of Mark.

This is your guidebook to a multi-dimensional experience of this story. You will be invited to explore Mark creatively, intellectually, spiritually, physically and emotionally, and to discover in your exploration of the story an encounter with God, who loves you and who sends you out to embody that divine 'I love you' in the world in a way that only you can.

You can take this holy journey on your own or with a group. You can spend as little or as much time as is possible and desirable for you. Just as an afternoon in Paris would be worthwhile and a year even better, so any length of time exploring Mark will be well spent. You could dedicate a long weekend to reading this whole book and all of Mark on your own. Or you could have a series of weekly, biweekly or monthly meetings or mini-retreats with a group (see 'Suggestions for groups' below).

Because Mark is endlessly fascinating and infinitely rich, the experience offered by this book can be repeated at different times in your life, and each experience will reveal something new about God, the Gospel and you.

Whenever you are ready, you have an open invitation to set out on your adventure with the Beloved – and to see what happens next.

How to use this book

Each chapter is orientated around a **Focus text**. Alongside each of these is a longer **Reading through Mark**, which places the text in context and also guides you through the whole of the Gospel by the end of this book. Each chapter has a theme, drawn from the text and reflected in the chapter title. Most of these invite you to consider something about

Introduction

Jesus as you follow him through the Gospel. The first and last depart from this slightly in ways that will make sense as you read them.

Read each text aloud, or hear it read in a group or with a friend. The Gospel was written at a time when few people could read. Stories circulated orally. Then, once they were written down, one person would read them aloud to others. Even on their own, people probably did not read silently (Acts 8.30). When you experience the text aloud, you are doing what it expects you to do. Try reading in the voice you would use if you were telling a story to a friend, with that kind of enthusiasm, pleasure and emotion. If you are reading for others, consider yourself the bearer of God's good news, a gift of love, because that is what you are (Isaiah 52.7).

As part of your exploration of each text, try praying it.

Praying the text

This process is flexible, beautiful and fruitful. You will find that you can do this in whatever time is available to you and in any setting. It can take two minutes or as long as you want it to take; if you wish, you can carry a word, image or phrase with you and leave the door of your mind open to God all day. Once you have experienced this once or twice, you will not need to refer to these instructions again, but feel free to return to any parts that could help you as you pray (or as you lead others in prayer); sometimes having someone else with us in prayer, even only in writing, can be good. This practice is also called *lectio divina*; search online for that phrase if you'd like to know more.

1 Become physically present

Sit comfortably upright with your legs uncrossed and both feet on the ground (you may stand, lie or walk if sitting is uncomfortable for you or if you happen to be walking, standing or lying when you want to do this). Lift your shoulders and place them back gently on your torso. Adjust your abdomen if you need to by pulling it back slightly so that you are straight and not sway-

backed. Imagine a cord pulling up gently through the crown of your head so that your head sits lightly on your neck. Rest your hands comfortably on your lap. If you are holding tension anywhere (shoulders, face, hands), let that tension gently fall away. Close your eyes if you wish. Notice how your body feels, your feet against the floor, your weight against the chair. Notice the temperature in the room, whether the air is moving or still. Attend to the feel of the air in your nostrils and in your lungs.

2 Become mentally present

Direct your attention to this moment in your life as you prepare to meet God in the text. Become aware of what you hear around you, what you smell and (if your eyes are open) what you see. Observe what is going through your mind; then let it drift by as you let the tension drift from your body. Give yourself permission to lay aside temporarily anything that is drawing your attention away from the present, with the assurance that you can think about that again later. If it helps to set a time limit, then assure yourself you will pick back up where you left off in precisely that time. If it helps to make notes of things that are pressing on you in order to lay those aside, do that. If it helps to place some concern or question in the hands of God or to place your entire self before God in your mind's eye, do so. Then continue gently and kindly redirecting your thoughts and energy to the present moment (relaxing your face and shoulders again, as needed).

3 Become present to God, and become aware of God present with you in love

You might imagine opening the door of your mind to God, or you might imagine walking towards God. You will find that as you sit in silent expectation, images of God will come to you. These may be different at different times. Some may stick with you for ever; others may be fleeting. Allow yourself to engage with these different images and draw near to ones that are most

loving to you. For some of us, the image of God as a father is extremely comforting. For others, a female image for God can be healing. Male and female human beings are both created in God's image; both can show us things about God's love, and yet God is beyond either of those. The key thing is that God loves you, so you may open your imagination to images of love and see what the Spirit offers. You may find yourself drawn to an image of Jesus in his humanity. You may be drawn to an image of the Spirit – in fire, cloud, darkness, light, the sound of the wind, the descent of a dove. You may find that an image of the Creator–Father–Mother–Lion–Dew–Lover–Warrior–Shepherd (all images for God in Scripture) first member of the Trinity draws you. Approach whatever image best directs you to the Beautiful Mystery of the one who loves you now in this moment precisely as you are today.

4 Read the text slowly with God

Feel free to pause over any word, image or theme that draws you. Dwell in the moment in the text with whatever thoughts, questions or feelings it raises. You need not read to the end. Bring yourself to the text in the presence of God in the way that you might sit with a person you love over a hot drink or an iced tea and share a story or a word of encouragement. The words might be important to both of you and might tell you something about your friend or yourself, and you might remember them for ever; but the most important thing in that moment (the thing that makes the words possible) is the love you share with your friend.

5 Speak to God

When you have read all of the text (or as much as you wish), commune with God in your mind's eye or aloud. Is there a particular image, phrase or theme you'd like to lay before God as a gift or a question? Has the text raised any feelings or memories you'd like to share? The text may evoke something

that seems utterly unrelated to it, and that may be the gift that it gives you today and the prayer that it opens up. If nothing comes to you, that is also perfectly fine. Being present with God in the moment is all that matters.

6 Sit in silence

When you have finished, sit with God. You may think of this as listening for God. You may think of it as being still and knowing that God is God (Psalm 46.10), which is sometimes what we most need. God is always happy to have you there, and spending time in the presence of divine love makes us blossom.

The **Thinking about** section offers food for thought about the ‘Focus text’ and the theme for each chapter. You are invited to explore the Gospel as a story and to consider how you might locate yourself in that story. The Gospels each tell God’s love story with the world, and if we choose to follow Jesus, we become living embodiments of that love. The ‘Thinking about’ sections give you a chance to ponder how Mark’s particular telling speaks to you.

Alongside attention to the details of the text, these sections also explore the larger context of Mark. Individual passages often become richer and clearer when we see how they fit into the full sweep of the narrative. The study also draws connections to other parts of Scripture and situates the text in that larger biblical story.

The **Suggestions for prayer and embodiment** build on the ‘Thinking about’ section and encourage you to explore further what the ‘Focus text’ could mean for you. In addition to providing invitations into prayer, imaginative reflection and embodiment of the text, alone and with groups, they also encourage other kinds of creative expression. Feel free to adapt these suggestions to suit you. Often you are invited to write, sketch, colour or paint, but add to those anything else that interests you: sculpture, dance, carpentry, photography, videography, baking, building, collage making, flower arranging, experimentation with glue, construction paper, and ribbon that you find in the bottom drawer or rocks you find in the garden.

Introduction

As you create, give yourself permission to experiment freely in the way a small child would. The goal is not to do or make something perfect (although if you happen to be gifted at something, that is lovely). The goal is the experience of creation itself. See what happens and consider what that might tell you about God, the world or yourself.

Some of us may want to try all the exercises, to linger in the imaginative aspects and to take our time settling into a place of prayer. Others of us meet God best when we are active rather than reflective, and so selecting a single exercise, moving more quickly into the creative expression and choosing an activity that feels productive or practical might be most fruitful. Find what is best for you.

Consider collecting your notes and creative expressions so that you can review them at the end. You may wish to have a single notebook in which to record some of your reflections.

Individual exercises may be done in a group setting with time for contemplation followed by time for discussion. Exercises designed for groups may also be adapted for individuals.

The **Words to take with you** (Hosea 14.2) are phrases from the 'Focus texts', which are easy to remember, so you can slip them into the back pocket of your mind and then take them out and contemplate them as you go about your days (or chew on them, like Ezekiel, who is told in 3.1–3 to 'eat this scroll'). You can repeat them intentionally as a prayer or let them make themselves at home in the way that a piece of a melody will sometimes become our constant companion.

The **Poetry to pray**, drawn from Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs or Isaiah, reflects the theme or 'Focus text' or emerges from the 'Thinking about' section or exercises. Poetry is especially good for prayer because we connect to it on different levels simultaneously and because the images speak to us as much as the ideas. See the 'Praying the text' section above, and do this as it suits you and as time permits. As the instructions mention, you need not read all of the text that you share with God.

The five **Supplementary passages** also reflect the theme or emerge from the 'Thinking about' section; some of them are cited there or mentioned in the 'Suggestions for prayer and embodiment'. These will enrich your engagement with the 'Focus text' and demonstrate

how the theme for the week plays out in other parts of Scripture. You may wish to pray these (or any) texts, but it is also fine simply to read them as extra food for thought as you go along.

Remember to treat this book as a guidebook. A guidebook might direct you to the Eiffel Tower and also tell you where to find the best hot chocolate on the Left Bank, but if you only want, or have time for, one of those, you can always look at a postcard of the Eiffel Tower while you enjoy your drink! You and the Holy Spirit will together make use of what is here to shape the experience that will most help you meet God in the story.

Suggestions for groups

The material offered here is suitable for meetings or mini-retreats and is appropriate for any time of year. If you wish to work through the book during Lent, Chapter 1 corresponds to Ash Wednesday week and Chapter 8 to Easter week, and you will meet for the Epilogue some time later. Monthly meetings spanning an academic year (or any eight- or nine-month period) would also work well.

A basic meeting could include: preparation for prayer, since all of the work with the text is prayerful (see again the ‘Praying the text’ section, parts 1–3); presentation of the ‘Focus text’, with some silence afterwards (see ‘Praying the text’, parts 5–6); selected ‘Suggestions for prayer and embodiment’; discussion, which can emerge from the presentation of the text or from the exercises or be based on the ‘Thinking about’ section. A mini-retreat might also include: ‘Poetry to pray’; presentation/discussion of ‘Supplementary passages’; sharing of the ‘Reading through Mark’ with members of the group taking various parts; additional ‘Suggestions for prayer and embodiment’.

Try to assign the opening presentation of the ‘Focus text’ in advance (preferably to a group rather than an individual) to give time for thought and preparation; in some chapters there are suggestions for ways to enrich this presentation. People need not memorize the text, only read and present it as creatively and lovingly as possible. Some may find this challenging; those people sometimes turn out to be the most surprisingly wonderful readers! You can find creative ways to include and encourage everyone without pressuring anyone unduly. Non-speaking parts are possible. Everyone brings something

Introduction

uniquely beautiful to the embodiment of God's good news. Many exercises offer ways of presenting texts other than reading aloud.

Ideally, group members will work through the chapters on their own before the meetings, but even if some do not, they will be able to participate; the initial reading/performance of the text will introduce it, and exercises centre on prayer and creative expression in which everyone can be involved. If some people have already done individual exercises that you do in the group, they can ponder those again or try other creative expressions of them.

In the Epilogue, you are encouraged to meet again to experience the whole of Mark together in some way. You could do this within the confines of the group, or you could invite others to be in the audience or to participate in the presentation itself. You will find suggestions for this in the Epilogue, but it is something to have in mind as you plan together.

You may also wish to share some of your individual creative expressions with one another or a larger group. You could do this as you go along or wait until the end and ask people to bring to the final Epilogue meeting anything they'd like to share.

Sharing the experience online

You are welcome to share your ideas, images and links to video clips. To be in conversation with others along the way, please visit <www.onthewayofthebeloved.com>.

1

Into the Wilderness

Focus text	Mark 1.1–15
Reading through Mark	Mark 1—2
Poetry to pray	Isaiah 40.1–5, 27–31
Supplementary passages	Matthew 1—2 Luke 1.1—2.40 John 1.1–18 Isaiah 65.17–25 Luke 4.16–21
Words to take with you	Prepare the way of the Lord.

THINKING ABOUT MARK 1.1–15

Beginnings

Beginnings move us. Every beginning we choose to make, however small, every shift of our attention, our energy, our bodies, our hearts towards something new, moves us towards a slightly different future.

Beginnings of stories also do something to us. If the first words can capture our attention long enough to draw us in, then the beginning will set us on our way in a certain direction with a certain sense of where we are and with inklings of where the story might be taking us.

‘In the beginning’, the biblical story opens with God. God speaks the story into being, calling order and life out of formlessness and chaos. Then, when Scripture talks of new beginnings, it is again always

Into the Wilderness

a question of what God will do – God creating new heavens and a new earth, God creating a people Israel, God creating a way where there is no way (Isaiah 65.17–25; 43.1–2, 16–21). God’s creativity stirs at the centre of biblical beginnings.

And so the writers of the Gospels, as the stories of Jesus came to be called from the Greek word for ‘good news’,¹ also start there in one way or another, with God doing something new. They situate the good news of Jesus within the eternal love story of God and the world. Then they find ways to entice us into the story too.

The Gospel of John opens ‘in the beginning’ with a burst of glory and shows us the Word–Son before time at the heart of God, speaking insuppressible light into being. Then the Word is made flesh in the first-century person Jesus, heralded by the witness John, already preparing the way from the Gospel’s earliest verses.

Matthew begins with a genealogy that sets Jesus’ story at the summit of the story of Israel. Then the miraculous baby, who is himself God-with-us, is born. And we see the star and visitors from afar, a murderous king and innocent deaths, a flight into Egypt and Joseph’s sacred dreams of angels.

Luke begins with a note to the most excellent reader, then takes us to the temple, where Gabriel foretells the birth of John. The stories of two impossible births made possible by God unfold to the cadences of prophetic poetry, echoing Israel’s sacred stories of God’s surprising abundance, justice and grace. And we see the manger, shepherds with their heavenly host, Mary pondering all these things in her heart.

Mark’s particular telling has elements of all of these and yet, like each of them, is utterly distinctive.

Like John and Genesis, Mark opens with a beginning: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ It could be the title for the next 14 verses, it could be the title of the whole book, or it could be both things. Mark 1.1–15 certainly lays out a beginning, establishes a context, puts things in motion, does all the things a good beginning does. But there is a strong sense in which the whole book is also only a beginning with a future stretching out beyond it, all the way to us and beyond us into God’s for ever.

After the opening pronouncement, Mark reaches back into God’s promises to Israel. Through them, God speaks to the coming anointed

Son. Mark calls on Isaiah, and certainly if the church were to choose a single prophetic book that has most helped us find words for what Jesus means and to express our hopes for our future with him, it is that one. Mark 1.3 is drawn from Isaiah 40, which makes an appearance in the early chapters of all four Gospels, while Mark 1.2 has echoes of Exodus 23.20 and Malachi 3.1. So in two verses Mark evokes several memories of Israel's story and situates Jesus there, addressed by God already in 1.2, promising to send this messenger who will prepare the way. Then the messenger-baptizer John appears.

Along with God, Jesus and John, we ourselves seem to be invited into those first verses. That voice in the wilderness cries out through time: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight' (Mark 1.3).

And before we know it, we are in the wilderness, hearing John calling us to be made new. If we go out there with the crowds, if we stick with this story, which moves so quickly and with so much urgency that we can hardly stop ourselves, we will be part of Mark's beginning too.

There is no baby in this beginning. No human parents (although we will catch a glimpse of Mary and of brothers and sisters later). No manger, no star, no farmers from down the road or magi bearing costly gifts, no threatening king (not yet, but a shadow of one will fall over 1.14). Only God, a voice, a river and crowds of people responding to this prophet who brings back memories of Elijah. All of them are coming out with us to the baptizer preaching a turning towards God's new thing, an awakening for sleeping souls, a straightening of what is twisted, a release from all that binds for those who are willing to go out into the wilderness of new beginnings and meet God.

Then the one stronger than John appears at the Jordan, an adult Galilean emerging from that crowd of Judeans: Jesus, who we already know from Mark's introductory proclamation of holy goodness is the Anointed One, the Son of God.

The Son himself comes to take part in this mind-changing baptism, and Mark lets us see what the Son sees: the heavens torn apart (Isaiah 64.1). This is not an opening (as in Matthew 3.16 and Luke 3.21) like the opening of a lift door or a vault, where a tidy, complete closing is bound to follow, but an irreparable rending of the bounds of heaven and earth – a visible manifestation of God breaking through with his reign of powerful, heart-rending, heart-healing love that makes new.

Into the Wilderness

Then the Spirit like a dove – perhaps as Gerard Manley Hopkins imagines it with ‘ah! bright wings’ – descends on the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Mark lets us overhear the voice of the heavenly parent speaking eternal love to this adult child: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (1.11).

The voice will return in 9.7 with a more public declaration of love and a command to disciples through the ages to listen to this beloved, Spirit-bearing Son. Then in 15.38, as Jesus cries out and breathes his last, the tearing of the temple curtain will signal again the heavenly breach, and in that moment a Roman officer will recognize the Son. But here at his beginning only Jesus sees and hears God’s claim on him, as we watch through the window of Mark’s words.

Then a strange thing happens. Mark cuts to the chase. We may not see it as strange any more because we know the story so well, but surely if we didn’t already know it, this is not what we would expect.

After that beautiful, life-altering moment, Jesus doesn’t return straightaway to Galilee trailing clouds of glory. The voice of divine love doesn’t start him on a gentle way through life. Rather, God’s love prepares him for a battle that he is uniquely able to undertake. It is the conflict behind all the work he’ll do with all those crowds, all the sick and dying and demon-possessed, who begin to appear immediately in this first chapter. It is the conflict behind the opposition of the Pharisees with their ideas of how he should behave² and the fearful calculation of the chief priests, elders and scribes, who feel threatened to the point of murder, and the brutal work of the Roman soldiers, who finally kill him.

The assurance of divine love prepares Jesus to face the enemy who will stand behind all those challenges and speak through all of the unclean spirits, who populate the landscape of this Gospel more than any other. God’s love descended on Jesus in the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness to bring God’s best near, even in the face of the world’s worst, to bring life where there is hopelessness, fear and despair.

Days of beasts and angels

The verb translated *drive out* in 1.12 is the same that will be used when Jesus *casts out* demons. In Luke and Matthew, the Spirit *leads*

Jesus out. But Mark's image is of a person thrust forward into God's love-fuelled battle for the soul of creation.

Then Satan tempts him. We all know it, but it is perhaps easy to forget that evil is not only cunning but can also be dreadfully appealing in its way. If it only repelled, it could not tempt. Matthew and Luke tell us the nature of this temptation. They suggest that Satan is tempting Jesus to take the golden path that you might think a heavenly blessing would open up. But Mark does not say.

We perhaps find clues in later references to Satan. He is in 4.15 the one who takes away the word that is sown in people, like birds eating seeds on a path, and so perhaps here he seeks to devour the word that is sown in the Son himself. Then in 8.33, when Peter rebukes Jesus after Jesus first tells his disciples that he will suffer and die and rise again, Jesus turns and rebukes Peter with the words: 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' So here in these days of temptation, perhaps Satan suggests, as Peter will later do, that the way that leads to the cross must be a terrible mistake.

But what Jesus knows, what we know, is that no path is golden without God and that God's path always is. Even if it doesn't look that way, particularly when our sight is dimmed by weariness or pain, still God's way holds the golden light of life in it.

Although Mark doesn't tell us about the temptations, he does give us a bit more information about the wilderness.

The word *wilderness* may evoke different things for different ones of us. For some of us, the wilderness is somewhere wonderful, holy and beautiful, where our souls are restored; and perhaps we might so imagine the first wilderness of 1.3–4, where the good news begins with the voice of God's messenger calling people out to him and the dove descending on the holy Son.

But there is another kind of wilderness that most of us know in one way or another. Sometimes it may be an actual place of lonely desolation where evil prowls. But it could also be a wilderness of the heart with personal beasts that creep in the corners of our minds and carve out territory in our nightmares and haunt foggy days of heartsickness. This wilderness of Jesus' temptation is surely that sort of place.

Into the Wilderness

The word for the *beasts* of 1.13 appears only here in the Gospels, but it runs rampant in Revelation, appearing dozens of times to evoke the embodiment of evil (see, for example, Revelation 13 and 17).

So there are wild beasts in Jesus' wilderness.

But there are also ministering angels. Not only does he have the Spirit soaring in his soul and the memory of that voice, God's beautiful claim on him; he also has God's messengers.

The word I have translated *minister* – the angels *ministering* to him – is also translated *serve, wait on or provide for*. Later, in 1.31, after Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, she gets up right then and there and *serves* everybody. That is the same word. It is also used of the women at the cross in 15.41, where we hear that they used to follow him and *provide for* him in Galilee.

There is one more occurrence of this word, in 10.45. There we find that it is Jesus' own vocation: 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

So serving is no small thing, and it is comforting perhaps to know that Jesus, the beautiful servant par excellence, has minister-messengers of God attending him all along. *Messenger* is another way to translate the word for *angel*; it is the word in 1.2 for the messenger God sends to prepare Jesus' way. Even before the messenger-angels in the wilderness, there is John sent to make Jesus' paths straight, and then there are women, until the very end and even beyond it at his tomb, who serve him all along his way as the angels do here in these 40 days and nights.

Then he returns to Galilee (1.14). And now, we are told, John the Baptist has been arrested, and later we will learn that Herod has him executed (6.16). So even here in this first chapter, it is certainly never all easy. Even with God's love on the loose, the Spirit having flown through the bounds of heaven and earth for ever – even then good people die. The very best people even.

The word for *arrested* is also translated *betrayed or handed over* and is later used repeatedly of Jesus, betrayed by Judas, arrested by the religious authorities, handed over to Pilate, who hands him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. So in that brief whisper of bondage in 1.14 is foreshadowed the future of the Son and of

his followers, who Jesus says will also be arrested, handed over and betrayed (13.9–12).

But that is never the last word. Satan has met the stronger man with the power to bind what is unclean and deathly. God's life and love make a way through even the worst. Jesus takes that way so that we can see. Even though we don't see the whole picture, we can see that beyond and even within the pain that we know is present in this life, God reigns, and the kingdom of God takes root and grows. And beyond the cross stands an empty tomb.

Following the preacher of God's good news

Here are a few things we might wish to contemplate about Jesus' beginning in Mark as we begin our own journey with him through the Gospel.

We might contemplate God's parental, eternal love breaking through anything that we imagine keeps God somewhere else. We might consider the Spirit's winged descent, the driving power that gives Jesus the will and the strength to face Satan. We might remember that Jesus has his time of temptation in his own wilderness, that it is real temptation in a real wilderness with wild beasts but that, even there, there are ministering angels.

Then we might ask: What about us?

We are not called to be little Jesuses. We don't have to be because he's already been Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he still does God's work in us, with us and for us.

And yet even in Mark, Jesus' story does not begin with him alone but with that voice crying in the wilderness and the ones who come to turn their lives around, to wake up to God's newness and love. Lots and lots of people go out there to the one preparing Jesus' way. We might find ourselves among them. We might find that we are also called, not just once but again and again, to turn and wake up and be more completely God's own, to *repent*.

The noun appears in Mark only in 1.4, in the baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins, which John is preaching. Then the verb appears in Jesus' first words in the Gospel, the summary of his preaching (1.15): 'The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Introduction

As you create, give yourself permission to experiment freely in the way a small child would. The goal is not to do or make something perfect (although if you happen to be gifted at something, that is lovely). The goal is the experience of creation itself. See what happens and consider what that might tell you about God, the world or yourself.

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Consider collecting your notes and creative expressions so that you can review them at the end. You may wish to have a single notebook in which to record some of your reflections.

Individual exercises may be done in a group setting with time for contemplation followed by time for discussion. Exercises designed for groups may also be adapted for individuals.

The **Words to take with you** (Hosea 14.2) are phrases from the 'Focus texts', which are easy to remember, so you can slip them into the back pocket of your mind and then take them out and contemplate them as you go about your days (or chew on them, like Ezekiel, who is told in 3.1–3 to 'eat this scroll'). You can repeat them intentionally as a prayer or let them make themselves at home in the way that a piece of a melody will sometimes become our constant companion.

The **Poetry to pray**, drawn from Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs or Isaiah, reflects the theme or 'Focus text' or emerges from the 'Thinking about' section or exercises. Poetry is especially good for prayer because we connect to it on different levels simultaneously and because the images speak to us as much as the ideas. See the 'Praying the text' section above, and do this as it suits you and as time permits. As the instructions mention, you need not read all of the text that you share with God.

The five **Supplementary passages** also reflect the theme or emerge from the 'Thinking about' section; some of them are cited there or mentioned in the 'Suggestions for prayer and embodiment'. These will enrich your engagement with the 'Focus text' and demonstrate