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Where scholarship and prayer intersect

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The Spiritual Landscape of Mark
By Bonnie B. Thurston
Published by Liturgical Press, $12.95

An icon of the transfigured Jesus, attributed to the 14th-century artist Theophanes the Greek, beckons the reader in and signals the importance of what is contained within its pages. The scene is of an illumined Jesus, flanked by Elijah and Moses on a mountaintop, with apostles responding in both awe and fear. Since God cannot be experienced directly, it is through indirection, in this case through the space God inhabits, that the believer can come to know this living God. Christianity is a religion anchored in time and space. Jesus lived a concrete, physical life in a particular landscape. It is in this geographic particularity in all of its ordinariness that the extraordinary happens. By examining the landscape of Jesus? life, one can come to know him in a fresh and engaging way.

For Mark, the first of the canonical Gospel writers, geography is theological. He used physical space to give structure to his narrative. Dr. Bonnie Thurston -- exegete, poet, solitary, ordained by the Disciples of Christ, and author of five books on scripture and Christian living -- knows Mark?s Gospel well. What she offers here in this little book is not a ponderous commentary on this New Testament Gospel, but an exploration of Jesus? life through Mark?s symbolic use of landscape. Each landscape inhabited by Jesus -- desert, lake, mountain, valley, city, garden -- is plumbed for its meaning. In these places Thurston finds chaos and comfort, stability, journeying, vision, mystery, temptation, suffering and new life. Each place offers a way into the meaning of Jesus? life and death.

The importance of this book is not that it is the first to use landscape as a lens through which to see Jesus? life, but that Thurston is able to draw fresh insights from thinking spatially, propelling the reader into engagement with the Gospel text and with the compelling person of Jesus.

The book has three things to recommend it. First, the writing, while grounded in scholarship, is accessible to the general reader. The fact that the text was first delivered as a series of retreat talks means that it has immediacy; one actually feels as if one is in the presence of the author and those to whom it was first addressed. Each chapter is ?a little retreat? that begins with a prayer and makes frequent reference to the Marcan text. One is encouraged to read the Gospel passages as the retreat proceeds.

Chapters can be experienced individually, much as a discreet retreat talk, or the book can be read as a whole. Since the references are to real physical places, the reader can trace Jesus? journey from the cave in Bethlehem to the garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem on the map included in the book.

Second, the author writes with authority. Thurston speaks from a place where scholarship and prayer intersect. Her prose reflects a deeply internalized reading of Mark?s Gospel. This is not an erudite study, but rather an imaginative enlivening of the Gospel.

Finally, the book is persuasive. The reader comes to understand Jesus through the space he inhabited, and having understood is invited to follow him. Subtly, the invitation to discipleship is made. Subtly, faith is strengthened. Subtly, one confronts the need for grace and the blessed companionship of other believers. Responding to the admonition of Meister Eckhart: ?Tend only to the birth in you and you will find all goodness and all consolation, all delight, all being and all truth.? Thurston offers her work as a means to such flourishing.

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