

Advent 1B  
Peace, Seattle  
December 3, 2017  
Mark 13:24-37

## **WHICH NARRATIVE PREVAILS?**

**Welcome to the year of Mark, which begins today as we begin Advent. A new gospel for a new church year—but it doesn't start where we might expect.**

- Instead of starting at chapter 1 we're well into chapter 13.
- Instead of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, we're near the end of it.

As we begin this journey, which will eventually lead to God's birth among us in Jesus, there is no mention of Mary or Joseph; and no shepherds or Magi in sight. There are angels, true, but not in the roles we're used to seeing them. Instead, we're privy to apocalyptic images of stars falling, the heavens shaking, suffering growing, and the Son of Man—the HUMAN ONE—coming in glory.

STAY ALERT, KEEP WATCH, says Jesus, REMEMBER THE FIG TREE.

**It all seems so upside down and backwards. Why can't we just cut to the Christmas carols?**

That's what the rest of our culture does. Earlier each year, businesses questing for black ink, put up decorations, turn on lights, and do their level best to tantalize us with things we cannot live without—selling us the secret sauce of the season—"O YES, you CAN purchase your way to happiness."

**The good news according to Mark has a different agenda in mind.** The Jesus we meet here is a counter-cultural Jesus. A Jesus, who we'll see next week, challenges the very validity of the empire in which he is born by showing us another kingdom, beneath the radar, and inviting us—compelling us—to follow him there.

The Jesus to which Mark introduces us is no mind mannered, "go with the flow" guru, but a prophet who confronts all pretenders, God's last and best attempt to reenter this realm and to stake his claim on our existence; bringing God's reign into places where other reigns claim to hold sway.<sup>1</sup>

There may be something odd about beginning a new gospel and church year with this highly veiled and wildly symbolic excerpt from Mark's 13th chapter, but friends, these are odd times in which we live, and desperate times call for desperate measures.

What once seemed stable now seems supremely unstable. Institutions once perceived as firm and secure are wobbling. Something is shifting; the order of things as they have been is being upended we wonder what will emerge in their stead.

Every year Merriam Webster tracks the words for which people most often sought definitions. You know what two of the most frequently looked up words for this year have been? Collusion and complicity.

Not all of the shaking and shifting has produced a negative effect. The Me Too movement, which began when the predatory predilections of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein were brought into the light of day, has opened the floodgates to countless stories of women in every career path and context who have been treated as objects of gratification by men who assumed male privilege trumped a woman's right to be treated as fully human. These stories—and more of them emerge every day—

---

<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, Working Preacher.org.

are raising cautious hope that a new template may be emerging for how men treat women on the job and in the home. Stay tuned.

Mark's story of Jesus is tailor made for times such as these, for Mark seeks to do more than merely record the church's memories about Jesus. Mark's story seeks to open eyes and ears so they can detect the false promises, false claims, and false values of the age.<sup>2</sup>

Kai and I were at the Seattle Art Museum last night for a Thrivent event, and we got to take a look at the Andrew Wyeth exhibit that's running right now. I've not been very familiar with Wyeth's body of work, his hyper realism, but I came away deeply impressed and wanting more.<sup>3</sup>

One thing that becomes apparent as you view his work is how the subjects of his paintings carry deep symbolism.

- A man lying down in a boat becomes an image of friendship.
- An old house once inhabited but now empty becomes a metaphor for a marriage.
- An old snag devoid of any green branches becomes a symbol of steadfastness in the face of time.

When the world as you know it is falling apart; when the powers that be threaten to tare to pieces all you hold dear—which is exactly what was happening to the community to whom Mark addresses his gospel—then you lean on symbolic language, language with apocalyptic images and overtones, to carry a message which conventional language cannot.

There's a war being waged in our culture right now. We see it playing out each day, in the twittersphere, in the media, in congressional news releases, in the courts. It's a war of words, images, metaphors, and myths.

This war of competing myths – the stories and explanations a culture tells itself to claim and reassert its values – raged in its own way among Mark's ancient audiences.

As Jerusalem's Temple—the heart and soul of its religious life and inheritance—lay in ruins and Christ-followers wondered how long they could wait for Jesus to return, they needed to determine which explanation of reality should prevail among them.

Should they buy into the evergreen imperial myths that despise the weak, that scoff at resistance, and that perpetuate all manner of slavery? Did believers have to surrender to the lie that only more weapons can ensure peace and security? Or could the community of Jesus' followers live by a counter narrative, one that saw the reign of God growing almost imperceptibly – difficult to see with ordinary vision but nevertheless there?<sup>4</sup>

These are the kinds of questions which Advent places before us.

At a time of the year when our consumer culture would rather we turn off the news and attend to our shopping, Mark's gospel asks more of us. The voice of Jesus in Mark calls on us to stay awake and alert, for there are many more risks to falling asleep at a time like this than may first appear.<sup>5</sup>

If we are to remain faithful to the way Jesus walked in the world and walked among us, we must be ready to stand up to the negative and self serving myths that are masquerading these days as truth.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://wyeth.site.seattleartmuseum.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

When we do this, when we put our trust in him and in his way, we will never be left to walk alone.

Amen.