

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 3, 2023

Hope for a Hurting World

Mark 13:24-37 First Sunday of Advent

Happy New Year, y'all! We're starting a new church year as we enter into Advent. Maybe Happy New Year doesn't seem quite right with the texts we get this morning – they aren't exactly... happy go lucky texts, are they? "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken... Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Happy New Year?? And Advent blessings??

Today, our Gospel reading comes from what we call the "little apocalypse" in Mark. I'm excited for this New Year. The Gospel of Mark is the gospel brought to the forefront this year. And Mark is my favorite Gospel. Anyone else here love Mark? I know it is an... odd favorite Gospel. What are y'all's favorite Gospels – your favorite telling of the story of Jesus?

I'll make a case for the Gospel of Mark – and hopefully give some key for today's text in the process. I may not convince you that Mark is the best of all the Gospels. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine writes, "Mark is an acquired taste: savor it slowly, let it lead, and let it challenge."¹ We'll have all year to savor it. But today, I hope to at least... decode it a bit and give you the keys for wrestling with Mark this year.

As I read it, the whole point of the Gospel of Mark is to give hope in a hurting world. The Gospel of Mark was likely written during the Jewish Roman War from 66-72CE. Most put the Gospel of Mark shortly before or after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70CE.

As I've been thinking about the Gospel of Mark, it strikes me that I'm drawn to Mark for the same reason I'm so drawn to Advent. It is an honest text. Sometimes brutally honest. It is raw. It is intense. The author of Mark doesn't mince words (Matthew and Luke both tend to soften Mark's

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News*, Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition, xiii.

language). Where Mark will tell us that the heavens were torn open, Matthew and Luke will tell us that they were opened.

There is an urgency in the text. In the original Greek, nearly every sentence starts with the word Kai or de – both meaning and. The phrase “and immediately” appears 42 times in 16 chapters; 11 times in the first chapter alone. (Yes. I counted – thanks to some computer software, that’s not too bad.) You see, the writer of the Gospel of Mark was living in a world turned upside down, in a world marked by chaos, a world that seemed like it was coming to a rapid and violent end. The reality of the Jewish Wars is reflected in the style and substance of the text. Their world was shattered. Everything they knew – or thought they knew – turned upside down.

The question becomes: “Where is God?” And I would guess that we are all too familiar with that question at the moment. The war in Ukraine is still raging. There is unspeakable violence in Israel and Gaza. There have been climate disasters – wildfires and floods – that are becoming all too familiar. Poverty, political brokenness, racism, anti-LGBTQIA+ attitudes and policies directed at kids – especially trans kids. Where is God in all of this? The world is not okay. The world is hurting. People are hurting. We long for something different. For our savior to break in again. And bring life again.

About Advent but I think it applies well to Mark, Debie Thomas says this, “The first gift of Advent is the permission to tell the truth, even if that truth is laced with sorrow. We are invited to describe life ‘on earth as it is,’ and not as we mistakenly assume our religion requires us to render it. Into our surrounding cultures of denial and spin, apathy and hedonism, we are called to speak the whole truth: we need God. We need God to show up. We need God to stay. We need God to love, hold, deliver, and restore us.”²

The Gospel of Mark starts with the “beginning of the Good News”, but leaves us hanging at the ending – never quite resolving the text. Jesus doesn’t ascend to Heaven. Jesus doesn’t give a final lesson. The women run from the tomb and say nothing to anyone for they were afraid. That non-ending ending pushes us to run from the tomb to shout the good news from the roof tops, participating in making resurrection real, finding new life here at the empty tomb again and again. It pushes us to read the story again and

² Debie Thomas, “Naming Where We Are,” *Journeys With Jesus*.
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

again. Back to the beginning. It is a rhythm that we've gotten so accustomed to in the rhythms of the church year.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine puts it this way:

“We start again, knowing the end of the story and knowing what we have done in the past year, and we learn anew. Each year we return to the beginning, and each time we see new things. The young man sends the women and the disciples back to the Galilee, where we can follow them, not in the text, but in our imagination. We are back to where we saw John immersing people in the Jordan and preparing them for the Messiah’s arrival. Again, we hear the parable of the sower, and so we check for the depth of our roots and for thorns in our way. We are back in a place of miracles and exorcisms, and of the death of the Baptizer. We travel again with Jesus to Caesarea Philippi and to the Mount of the Metamorphosis, where we first hear the prediction of the cross and only now, ever briefly, see Jesus in full messianic glory. We reread Mark 13, the Little Apocalypse, and locate ourselves in this in-between time, between the Resurrection and the end of the world, which is surely coming, although we cannot ever know when. We watch Judas do what he must do and consider again our own potential for both fidelity and failure. We watch the youth flee from Gethsemane, and then, maybe, see him again at the tomb. We listen for the women’s voices, and when they do not speak, we fill in the story, Jesus’s story, and our story, again. Each time we pass through the Gospel it is not the same, for we are not the same. Each time we are confronted with new mysteries and challenges; each time we find partial answers and temporary comfort.”³

Mark holds two profound realities side by side: this world is hurting, God’s people are hurting, and yet, God brings Good News here and now in Jesus. Mark wants to give hope to this hurting world that God is working to tear down anything that tries to separate us from God. God is committed to us. And to this world. To transform it. To make it new. To bring life where we expect to find death. Even when that fact terrifies and amazes us.

Mark 13, this little apocalypse, as terrifying as it may sound, is supposed to give a message of hope – as all apocalyptic literature is supposed to do. It does so, first, by telling the truth of the chaos of the world.

³ Levine, 153-154.

When the world feels like it is going to hell in a handbasket, Jesus reminds us that the worst of the world is never the end to the story. The assurance is that God is in control, even when everything feels chaotic, and that justice will finally prevail. The worst will come to an end.

In the midst of chaos, in the midst of a world seemingly ending, in the midst of apocalyptic imagery, there is a promise. That what is isn't what will be. This isn't what God has in mind for you or for me. Somehow, even when it doesn't feel like it, or seem like it, God is still in charge. God is still active. Christ is coming. Recreation is happening. Keep alert or you may just miss it. Today, Jesus, in Mark invites us into an active waiting. Of keeping alert to God's action in a world that just doesn't make sense anymore

In Mark's story, the worst is still yet to come. And it is imminent. Mark 13 is just before the passion narrative. Jesus is telling us to keep awake, just before the disciples fall asleep in the Garden. Jesus tells us that we do not know the hour, just before Peter denies Jesus three times by the time the cock crows. Jesus tells us to keep alert, just before he goes to the cross. Keep alert. Easter dawn will come.

We need Jesus in our lives and in our world. We need God to make good on God's promise and to continue to recreate this world into the world that God intends for us. We call on God to transform ourselves, our communities, and our world. We call on God to be God-with-us in this world that has been turned upside down. So we watch. We wait. We hope. For God-with-us to break through again. Not to return to normal. To the way things have always been. But to a new and better world – for us, our families, and the rest of the world.

And the promise of Advent is this – as summed up in our reading from 1 Corinthians. God is faithful. God is true. In the best of times but also in the worst of times. God is faithful. And God promises to do a new thing among us. God promises to continue to work to recreate this world. The promise is that we are God's people. And nothing can ever change that. Amen.