

## STAY WOKE

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 by Pilar Millhollen

Readings: "For Calling the Spirit Back From Wandering the Earth in its Human Feet" (Joy Harjo);  
Mark 13:24 – 37

Don't you love an apocalyptic reading as we enter the first week of Advent? As I read over our selected texts from the lectionary for this week, I was shocked at the through line of crisis that bound them. Isaiah's portion cries out for rescue and asks forgiveness of sins; the Psalm for this week similarly entreats God to show up and restore the people; and then of course there is this challenging passage from Jesus' preaching in the Gospel of Mark, which launches us into the season in which we await an earth-shattering shift in humanity's trajectory. In this season, which Christians know as Advent, we generally become caught up in the secular activities of decorating our homes, baking more desserts, going to more parties, and most of all, spending inordinate amounts of money to shower our closest friends and family with material items. But these activities and expectations also intensify the stresses that we face during every season of the year for those of us who cannot afford our rent, or to properly clothe ourselves, or who wonder where the next meal is coming from. Christian or otherwise, the Advent season inevitably holds a sense of urgency, a calling forth of a need for humanity to rearrange itself, to rewrite its narrative toward a vision where urgency is no longer felt, a vision where everyone can breathe out in relief that they have enough. So as I meditated on our texts for this morning, I came to realize that my own frustration with the darkness in Mark's gospel required my deepest attention to hear God's word – not just in its complexities, but also in its starkness.

Nobody likes the Gospel of Mark. Or rather, nobody likes to *hear* the gospel of Mark. And it's understandable why – it cannot be read without acknowledging the context of the war during which it was written. As the earliest of the gospels in canon, it emerged around the time of great conflict during the Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire around 66 or 67 C.E. – several decades after Jesus' death. Its stark and concise testimony narrates a kind of primitive biography of an unlikely prophet who is the real Son of God, an inversion of the divine identity claimed by the emperor. The Gospel of Mark is a paradox; it defies the idea that God is on the side of the ruling state, and it reframes the reality of the reckless use of state power wielded over a people who would rise up against it. Picture this: in the midst of a gruesome war, people are passing around this short report, about the length of an article in the Atlantic Monthly, describing a radical rabbi who is actually a Son of God, hell-bent on restructuring society and crucified as a state criminal only to rise from the dead just the way Caesar is supposed to. See, there was a Greco-Roman narrative around the divinity of each emperor, whoever was in the throne, which became popular after Julius Caesar was deified after his assassination. Have you ever seen an ancient coin with the bust of Augustus Caesar? On the "tails" side is the inscription *divi filius*, meaning "son of the god." Within this cultural context, Mark's gospel, in its unelegant Koine Greek – the equivalent of common street language – is an outrageous reversal of the accepted norms around power and recast this implausible radical guy as an anointed savior of the world.

It is a dubious claim. And yet, it awoke generations to come.

Our passage this morning is one that immediately follows a text that the lectionary surely loves to leave out – probably because its extreme language is, understandably, frightening. But it isn't unfamiliar. In what theologians have called the "little apocalypse," Mark's early 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jesus uses the alarmist language of the Hebrew prophetic tradition to foretell an almost exact

account of what Mark's late 1<sup>st</sup> Century listeners would be experiencing during the Jewish Roman War. The apocalyptic literature of the Hebrew Old Testament most famously appears in the book of Daniel, where a similar vision is told of a human leader, a son of humanity who comes to earth to establish an eternal reign of peace and justice. But only, of course, after everything falls apart. Mark's Jesus takes this image and reimagines it, warning that the temple in Jerusalem, the economic and social center of Judaism, will once again be destroyed in a coming time of great pain and suffering "such as has not been and never will be." Earthquakes, famine, and war mark just the "beginning of the birth pangs," he says, a clue that the creation is about to undergo a violent but necessary rebirth. This motif would have been familiar to Jews, as it mimics references in other prophetic texts such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Micah - that tie the immediate circumstances of crisis to a greater arc of cosmic justice. In the subsequent days, Jesus continues, they will suffer persecution that tests their mettle and false leaders who will test their ethics - they must "stay awake," he charges, in order to survive this coming era. This declaration leads into our text for this morning, where the stars fall and the heavens quake, and then, I suppose, the good stuff happens: Jesus appears like Daniel's prophecy, to "gather the elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." What's significant here is that there is no judgment between the righteous and unrighteous as we heard last week in Matthew's gospel and other apocalyptic narratives. Instead, Jesus shares a more positive message of salvation from the suffering of those who he has already identified as *his people*. This was not the time for an in-depth analysis of who's in and who's out here; in the middle of war, when things are not looking up for them, they didn't need to be told they were about to be judged; they needed to be lifted up, fortified and encouraged to stay strong and keep on the path of a doing what is just and good. It's almost as if Mark's Jesus is saying, hold on, children of God, because justice is coming and *you are gonna see it*. You will be *a part of it*. But do not falter in who you are here and now, because there are too many people that will make you want to give it up. There is too much pain that will threaten to make you want to sell out, to give in to the voices of moral relativism and the reality of the coming winter where we fear that our needs and our neighbors' needs will not be met because the powerful few who hold sway over our lives *say* they will protect the vulnerable but plunder the earth of its resources; they *say* they represent families while pulling healthcare for the child with a disability and the elder with a failing heart; they *say* they follow the Jesus who fed the hungry but try with all their might to cut food stamps and meal programs for the sister who works 12 hours a day for minimum wage; they *say* they are lifting up the working and middle classes but reduce taxes for billionaires while the young college student cannot pay for his education and the family of color is pushed out of the home they saved long and hard to buy with a bogus loan meant to prey upon the income that is only 75 cents to the white family's dollar; they *say* they operate with moral concern and ethical integrity but will champion sexual predators and child molesters to make decisions about women's and children's bodies.

In this scenario, the fantastic story that Mark tells us does not seem so dubious.

The poet, musician and playwright Joy Harjo, whose words we heard earlier, offers us an alternative angle on the same need to stay woke. As a member of the Muskogee nation, an indigenous American tribe, her writing is informed by centuries of marginalization, a voice that speaks directly to the folks Jesus calls kin. She calls out to us in our fervor, our frenzy, our pain and our numbness with a kind of "what to do" list when the world is too much with us. She begins with the simplest of actions: open the door, step outside...breathe. This small action reconnects one's body - where histories lie stored - with the ground that holds it up. "Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial jitters," she instructs, as a balm for the wounds of colonialism

that have yet to heal in this struggling land. But some of her most important instructions are the hardest – ask forgiveness. Don't worry. Watch your mind. Let go of regrets, shame, failure...and, in the brevity of her message, she doesn't give us a step-by-step how to accomplish these things. Only a distinct sense of confidence that we can, and we will, return to ourselves, to a state of wholeness. To a state of being truly awake. And in that state, that woke state, where we have a 360 degree awareness of the gravity of our lives and the quiet power we possess, that's where we become available and responsible for helping each other to also wake up. "The journey might take you a few hours," she says, "a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand, or even more." That's frustrating...but what she means, I believe, is the same thing that Jesus means when he says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." This comes directly after he says, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." This would seem to indicate that hey, this tribulation is urgent, this massive shift is about to happen in your lifetime - Mark's gospel was meant to prepare its listeners for Jesus' imminent return to earth, but the genres in which the gospel writers framed their narratives were not literalist either. Because, like any journey worth taking, the woke ones had to hold an expansive perception of possibility, to hold the paradox because every life, every culture, every system that makes up our experience of being human, is dynamic, fluid, and ever-evolving. Keep alert, keep awake, Jesus tells them, because no one knows, not even me, when this will all come to fruition. But you gotta stay in it. Do not check out, even though the journey might take a few hours, a day, a few years, a hundred, a thousand...more.

I wake up every day to the same news that you do. And it scares me. It enrages me. It makes me ask what God is doing – or not doing – in our lives. And then I remember that we are not powerless, as long as we keep awake. I remember that God is doing a new thing in me every time God says, "Speak up. *Do not* let the opportunity to speak against evil pass you by. *Do not* let this day, this week, this year go by without writing, calling, organizing, marching, protesting, the evil that threatens to make you throw up your hands and say, "I am only one person and the forces of empire are too much." What if Jesus had said that? What if at Gethsemane, he said, nope, this isn't worth it and nothing's going to get better? What if those who believe in the power of transformation, in the unlikely triumph of the itinerant working class preacher said, "well, we tried, but we're not seeing results, so I guess we'll just go home and see what happens." We don't get to do that, because we are people of the living God, we are people of the God who warns us to keep awake, because *we are the revolution*. We are the gears through which God's new thing works, we are the agents of this great transformation that began to take place when this child of unwed refugee parents was born. This is what Advent is about. It is about God doing a new thing on earth and asking us to get on board. The wheels have already started turning – and we're on this journey for the long haul. Yes, it is disruptive; yes, we are hitting potholes; yes, it may feel like the whole creation is having birth pangs. Indira Ghandi puts it this way: "When you take a step forward you are bound to disturb something. You disturb the air as you go forward, you disturb the dust, the ground. You trample upon things. When a whole society moves forward this tramping is on a much bigger scale and each thing that you disturb, each vested interest which you want to remove, stands as an obstacle." Our job right now is to not let the obstacles dismantle our work. Our job moving forward is not to let the obstacles dismantle our *souls*. Call your spirit back, as Joy says – when you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed. Nourish your spirit as we venture into this season because it will need preparation for this journey. It will need to shore up its reserves so that you, beloved, can stay woke. Get on board, and get ready. Then, you can help the next person get on board and get ready. The transformation is coming.

