

Sermon: We're Here Because
Text: Mark 13:24-37
Date: December 3, 2017
Context: WWPC
First Sunday of Advent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

And what I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake.

Let's start with the obvious and admit that 2000 years is a long time to keep awake. Let's also agree to another rather obvious point: it's deeply strange to begin the Advent season by reading a text like this one.

With Christmas now on the near horizon, we are not announcing the arrival of Jesus on the world's stage. Instead we seem to be heralding the apocalypse, the end of the world.

This particular passage in Mark is often called the mini-apocalypse, I guess because in just a few verses it describes the moment when heaven and earth shall pass away -- something it takes the Book of Revelation -- the Granddaddy of apocalyptic literature -- 21 chapters to do.

I am sure there is some sacrosanct rationale for this long-standing tradition of starting Advent with the end of the world.

But whatever it may be, I'm not going to bore you with trying to explain it, not just because I don't know what it is but because I want to begin with what I think is a much more interesting point: there is something fishy about this text.

David Jacobson of the Boston University School of Theology explains it this way:

“Toward the end of a sixteen-chapter narrative about Jesus [that is, toward the end of the Gospel of Mark] early first-century Jesus suddenly begins addressing his late first-century hearers, in the [third]-person and often in the imperative mood. This is why many commentators on Mark see this particular part of the Gospel as most closely corresponding to the situation for which the Gospel was written” (workingpreacher.org for December 3, 2017).

Let me put that in simpler terms. New Testament scholars generally agree that Mark was the first Gospel to be written down. It was compiled some forty years after Jesus left the world stage.

First the first fifteen chapters of the book, the author of Mark (let's agree that it's Mark) has Jesus speaking one way. He consistently refers to himself using the first person pronoun "I", just as the rest of us do.

His stories and lessons are drawn from and focused on the events that are happening at the time he's preaching and teaching them.

But here, the author switches things up. Jesus suddenly begins referring to himself as "he". And most commentators agree that the inspiration for this story is the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is important because that devastating historical event occurred four decades after Jesus's death and resurrection.

As we're noted before, this kind of scholarly analysis often upsets people who take the Bible literally. It can unnerve readers who assume that the Bible was somehow dictated by God to a group of scribes who recorded every word verbatim and infallibly.

But like it or not, that is not how the Bible was written. I make this point again today because you can consider these kinds of insights suspiciously. Or you can consider them respectfully and reverently.

And when you make that shift, the Bible suddenly becomes more useful and more relevant to people like us, that is, to seekers and disciples dealing with the realities and challenges and of life in the 21st century.

For example, you learn that texts like this so-called mini-apocalypse are less about the literal end of the world at some future time. Instead they are more of a theological commentary about the status of the world as it is right now.

They are a form of what scholars call crisis literature. They are meant to help readers navigate national or spiritual or moral emergencies.

Like when the Temple of Jerusalem fell, that historical moment when the symbolic heart of Jewish identity and culture came crashing down around the Jewish people in a ruinous heap.

Forty years after Jesus left them, Mark wants his followers to stay awake. To have hope. To trust and believe that they will get through this crisis because Jesus would not abandon his followers back then, and he will not abandon them now. By his Spirit he will continue to be Emmanuel, God with them and for them.

Which is to say these stories, this form of crisis literature, are for times like the one we're living in right now.

Just a little over a year ago, I drove out to Highland Farms for our November Just for Fun event. By coincidence, it happened to fall on the night after the election.

Most of us expected a different candidate to win that election. Had that happened, had that candidate broken through America's last glass ceiling, I'm sure we would have commented on that, as it would have been a truly historic moment.

But the event was not meant to be a political gathering. It was a regularly scheduled time of fellowship around a shared meal that happened to coincide with the election.

But then history threw us a curve ball. So instead of delivering the short remarks I had planned to make, I spent part of the evening giving out hugs to people who were literally weeping.

And perhaps a bit like the author of the book of Mark, it fell to me to offer words of hope to people whose bright view of the future had shifted overnight, a view that had suddenly become dark and foreboding.

Since then, the sun has not gone dark, exactly,
and the moon still gives its light
and the stars have not fallen from heaven.

But it's also true that the sun has been frequently obscured by a series of monstrous hurricanes. Tiki torches, rather than the moon and the stars, have lit up the night sky on occasion.

And as story after story breaks about the pervasiveness in this country of sexual assault and sexual misconduct, Hollywood stars and political stars and TV stars -- some of them deeply beloved--have begun to fall in such rapid and spectacular succession it's like the Perseid meteor shower out there.

Much more could be said about the threats we've faced this year, and the disasters we've witnessed. And the disasters we've resisted. Not to mention the heartbreaking personal losses we've experienced as a church family in 2017.

But I think it's enough to say that, as happened to those late first-century Jews, it feels to many of us like we're in the midst of our own mini-apocalypse, like the pillars of American identity and culture have come crashing down around us.

I'm aware that we've touched on these themes periodically this past year. Plus, my brief is not to preach bad news. My brief is to preach the Good News.

So here is some good news to anyone who wonders if we're going to get through this dark time. This is not the first period in world history that has felt apocalyptic, and we are not the first people in the world to live through such a time.

To illustrate, I would like for you to join me in one of the imaginative exercises we do from time to time.

If you're willing, I'd like for you to close your eyes and come with me as we travel to France. The year is 1916. Take a moment to shift yourself across the Atlantic and back a century.

You're sitting in a trench somewhere along the upper reaches of the River Somme. Except you're not actually French. You're English, so you're not entirely sure why you're here in the first place.

What you do know for certain is that you're flanked by Allied troops in a line that stretches out to your right and your left for several hundred yards. There are still other soldiers -- hundreds of them in fact -- hunkered down in similar trenches barely a stone's throw away.

Some of these trenches are filled with troops who are on your side. But some of them lie on the other side of a tangled expanse of barbed wire. And these trenches are filled with many hundreds of men facing back at you, tasked with the job of shooting you and your fellows.

You've been here now for four months. When you first arrived in July, the heat was stifling.

But you endured it because you thought it would all be over soon. You thought you would capture the ground you and your mates had come here to take in a matter of days, a few weeks at most.

But now it's November and you're freezing. And hungry. And exhausted.

Yes, your side has made some incremental gains, but you can measure your progress in yards rather than miles.

Worse, you've surrendered some of this hard-won territory, retreating under the relentless pressure from the other side. So it's advance/retreat, advanced/retreat, like a deadly game of Sisyphean tag.

And so, there you sit in what feels like a literal hellscape.

You have a pocket-sized copy of the New Testament in your coat, its pages dog-eared from daily use. Lately you find yourself drawn to a story in the Gospel of Mark that seems like it might have been written about the exact circumstances in which you find yourself.

The world you've always known, the world you have always loved, this world has effectively ended for you.

Even at noon the sun is obscured by a black cloud of smoke from artillery blasts.

When darkness finally falls you realize you have not seen the light of the moon for weeks. You've forgotten what stars look like. The only light is the terrifying flash of bombs bursting all around you.

If the story in Mark is true, you wonder if this might be the time Jesus is about to return. You certainly hope it is.

But you also wonder how much longer you can stay awake, waiting for him. You wonder if you even want to stay awake, whether you want to be alive in a world that's been reduced to a smoking ruin.

But he does not return. And eventually the sun rises yet again. Then, just as you take out your pocket Bible for your morning prayers, the soldier next to you stands up. His head is above trench level. You worry that you might see him die.

But you do not see him die. Something else happens instead. Something that takes you totally by surprise. Something wholly wonderful. Something that involves not just your eyes but your ears.

He begins to sing. “We’re here because, we’re here because, we’re here because we’re here.”

The words are new but the tune is familiar. You’ve sung it every New Years Eve for as long as you can remember.

He finishes the refrain and begins again. On the next verse, you join in. And on the verse after that, other men join in. The simple chorus continues to repeat until all the trenches around you are filled with the sound of men hunkered down and singing.

You can’t tell if it’s a lament inspired by the absurdity of war in general or by the hopelessness of your specific situation.

Or whether it is a declaration of resolute hope, rooted in the belief that these dark days, this ongoing nightmare, this mini-apocalypse, will eventually pass and the smoke will clear and the sun will fill the sky by day and the moon and the stars will shine in the night once again.

Or maybe it’s both of those things, both a song of mournful lament about the way the world is, and a declaration of resolute hope about the way it will be again someday.

You can’t really say for sure. The only thing you know for certain is that, apart from the sweet cry your baby daughter made when she took her very first breath -- inhale! -- it is the most beautiful sound you’ve ever heard in all your life.

You might even be tempted to believe it is a chorus of angels singing, but for the barbed wire and the acrid tang of poisonous gas in the air. Then you realize, that’s exactly what it is, a chorus of angels.

And so you close your Bible and give yourself, heart and soul, to the singing.

I owe the idea for that story to the writer John Green. He first heard a shorter version of it when he went to hear his friend and fellow author, Amy Krouse Rosenthal, do a reading from the new book she had just published.

In relating this story, John noted that he suffers from bouts of clinical depression and acute anxiety.

(You can hear the full account here: [youtube.com/watch?v=oNzyc3h2GkI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNzyc3h2GkI))

At the time he went to hear Amy, he was, as he himself put it, *in a period of intense unwellness*. He was losing himself *to intrusive thought spirals and a chest-crushing depression*.

He managed to get to the event but he was miserable, stuck in his own mini-apocalypse and trapped in such a dark mood he felt he was not going to come out of it, at least not that night.

Then Amy told this story about how a group of British soldiers began to sing this song, We're here because, we're here because we're here because, we're here because we're here.

Amy admitted that there was no obvious answer to why the soldiers were singing it. She allowed that it is possible to hear that song as a meaningless gesture, a hopeless lament.

But then she went on to say that there was a whole other way to hear it. And when she explained what that was, John Green's darkness lifted.

We're here because we're here. Meaning, we are here together, so that even when we feel alone, we aren't, really. Because, as John Green put it, we are part of a vast and deeply interconnected "us." In more theological terms, we are part of the Body of Christ.

And we are here. We are alive, right here, right now. And so we sing this song as a declaration of resolute hope.

And that declaration is fully warranted because *hope is not foolish or idealistic or misguided. Hope is true*.

Hope is the correct response to the arc of history, because we know that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, and when it feels like it's not bending, or it's bending too slow, we grab it with both hands and we pull with all our might.

And that's when we remember that hope is not a feeling. Hope is something we wage.

And, yes, sometimes we have to wage it in the dark. Indeed, most often we have to wage it in the dark, when the sun has gone dim and the moon will not give its light, and the stars are falling from the heavens, but that's what makes it hope.

John Green concluded his story by noting that some years are longer than others and that, for him, 2017 has been a very long one. *Good and bad and difficult and amazing and joyful and terrifying and very long*, as he put it.

I would have to agree. This year has been very long and very hard. And I'll confess that 2000 years after Jesus left the world's stage, it's tough to stay awake in 2017.

But I would also say that that, *We're here because, we're here because, we're here because we're here...*