

**First Sundat of Advent**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**12-03-23**

**Mark 13: 24037**

Welcome to a new year in the life of the Church. Today we begin the season of Advent and the Church marks the beginning of another liturgical year. You may remember that our lectionary is divided into years A, B, and C. Each year begins on the First Sunday of Advent and ends with the Feast of Crist the King, which you all celebrated last week. In each liturgical year, the Church celebrates the testimony of a different Evangelist, in year A we read almost exclusively from Matthew, in year B we read Mark, and in year C we read Luke. Today, we begin the year of Mark, but let me share a brief story with you first.

My wife and I just returned from Portugal, an old and beautiful country in the Iberian Peninsula, right next to Spain. In fact, the two countries share a common history which includes hundreds of years of Arabic rule when they were controlled by the Moors. One of the legacies of the Moors is seen everywhere today. As you walk around the ancient cities, you see building after building covered completely in beautiful and colorful tiles. According to a tour guide, each tile's size, color, and intricate designs tells the story of the town, the neighborhood, or the building they adorn. Some of the patterns are quite simple, while others show graphic stories of conquests, the beheading of enemies, the work of the crusaders against the Moors to regain control of those cities, and scenes of various saints spreading the Gospel in the liberated territories. The facades of these buildings take your breath away and you walk away astounded and somehow changed by the grandeur and beauty you witness, and by the stories the panels tell.

But there is a story behind the story of each of these buildings. In the Arab mind, only God's creation is perfect and can be perfect. Human creation, regardless of how carefully planned and flawlessly executed, is by nature imperfect. This is a realization that was fully accepted and celebrated by the Moors and the Christians who inherited their art forms. Each building façade contains a small place where the pattern breaks, creating an imperfection that is celebrated. It is these breaks in the pattern, these small imperfections, that in a way became the signature of the artist or group that created the work. The human creators placed within their magnificent works a visual reminder of humanity's imperfection to honor God, who is the only creator of perfection.

These small imperfections do not distract us from the great story the murals tell us, but they add a unique feature that makes each mural different from the next. The Gospel of Mark is like one of these murals. It tells a story that is beautifully human and powerful, but in the eyes of Matthew and Luke, and many others, it is an imperfect Gospel. For starters, both Luke and Matthew believe the story Mark tells is an incomplete story. Each of them then take the Gospel of Mark and add crucial information they believe he missed.

Second, Mark has been called “the Gospel of breathless delight,” because it lacks some of the sophistication of the other Gospels. In fact, it is as if a child is narrating for his mother all the events of the day, seldom talking a second to breath: “First we did this, then we did that, and after that we went here and then there, then suddenly this happened, and then that happened.” Third, Mark seems to pay more attention to what Jesus did than to what Jesus said, and even when he gives as a crucial piece of Jesus’ teaching, it is often reduced to a few verses. Lastly, Mark seems to end in the middle of the story. Mary Magdalene and her friends arrive at the tomb to anoint the body and find a young man (not an angel) who tells them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing” (Mark 16:6-8). There are no post resurrection appearances; no post resurrection teaching, no promise of the Holy Spirit, no Great Commission, no Ascension into heaven. It simply ends with that mysterious saying, “And they said nothing.” In fact, this ending made many people uncomfortable, and someone (we do not know who) added an additional short ending, and then someone else an additional longer ending to fix the problem. But these endings are not original to Mark.

Today we enter Mark, but let me forewarn you that where others see imperfection and deficit, I see incredible wisdom. The story Mark tells us is deeply human and incredibly comforting. It is interesting, however, that the Lectionary writers introduce us to the Gospel of Mark at Chapter 13. Today Jesus tells his disciples to stay awake because nobody, not even Jesus himself, knows when the end will come. The focus today is not about who Jesus is, where he came from, who his family is, what his mission entails, or any other typical theme that would mark the beginning of a story. We don’t start with “Once Long time ago,” or even “The beginning of the story of Jesus Christ.” We begin with a description of the end of days, a warning about the day of judgement, and an imperative statements to stay awake and watch out for the signs of the end.

I see the wisdom in starting the story at Chapter 13. This chapter more than any other section of Mark gives us valuable insights about the writing of the gospel. Mark is the first Christian Gospel to be written. Up until now the “Proclamation” of the Gospel took the form of oral traditions and the letters of Paul and the Apostles. But now Mark sees the need to commit the events of the life of Jesus to writing for several reasons: 1. Nearly 35 to 40 years after the death of Jesus, some preachers were claiming to be Jesus returned, leading some astray. (Mark 13:6, 21-22). Writing an accurate record of Jesus’ actions and words becomes necessary to combat these false teachers. 2. By the year 66-70 many of the original Apostles and first-witnesses had been martyred or had died of natural causes. Additionally, many Believers were being arrested (Mark 13: 9-13). The loss of the authority represented by these first witnesses necessitated the creation of another reliable source of authority. 3. Mark 13:14 mentions a “desolating sacrilege” that had taken place. This most likely was an image of the emperor placed within the confines

of the Temple. The Gospel assumes that the Temple is still standing, which means that the Gospel was written before the year 70, when the Romans destroyed the Temple forever. Having a written account of Jesus's prophecies about persecution and the destruction of the Temple would provide much needed hope to a community under duress.

For those in the community who are losing hope that Christ will return soon, Mark reminds them that only God knows when the end will come and that the role of the believer is not armed revolution, as much as it is watchfulness and preparation. They have to look at the signs and be ready: "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" (13:24-26). A bit earlier on he also said there will be, "wars and rumors of wars; nations rising up against nations; earthquakes, and famines." (13:7-8).

Many religious people have seen these signs in almost every generation since Christ's resurrection. There have been Christian groups and cults that have gone through extreme measures to pinpoint the actual date and time of Christ's return. I believe, however, that the signs have always been with us and they are with us today. Wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land, and other armed conflicts around the globe; natural disasters everywhere; poverty and famine; political unrest, polarization, etc. In fact, the signs are so severe that many have wondered if the beginning of the end of times is upon us. I want to remind you, however, that prophecies about the end have always been popular in our history, and they remain popular even today. This is precisely Mark's point. The signs are all around us and, because they are, today is the day of preparation. The preparation cannot be delayed to an event yet to come that will mark the beginning of the end. The preparation has to begin today. The Son of Man could come this very hour. His angels may already be in flight, gathering his faithful ones. The point is that we don't know when this will be. And because we don't know, we must live each second as though it might be our last here on earth, because in fact it may be our last.

Beware and keep alert! These are the two postures believers need to assume as we await for the coming of our Savior. There is something else we must do. Jesus tells the parable of a master who leaves on a journey and gives authority to his servants to take care of his affairs until he returns. We are not just asked to be alert and watchful we are also asked to engage fully in our Master's affairs. We are given authority to handle his business. In fact, the best way to prepare for the Day of the Lord is by taking care of the Master's business, which is none other than the salvation of the whole world in his Son. We are to advance his kingdom by preaching the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth and we are to take care of the least of his children. We discharge the authority he has given us by loving others, taking care of the least of his children, preaching the Gospel of his Son and remaining actively engaged in the advancement of his kingdom. We are to encourage each other to wakefulness and we are to engage in Christian mission and evangelism. This is the only way to prepare today, this very day, because the signs are all around us, and the end may come very soon. May God give us the courage and the desire to do his will. Amen!