

The Shaking of the Foundations
A Sermon on Mark 13:24-37
First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017

Introduction

Joseph Campbell was a scholar of mythology and comparative religion. He died about 30 years ago. He tells the story of going on a radio interview as part of a publicity tour for a book he had just written.

The disc jockey asked, “What is a myth?” The disc jockey then answered his own question. “The word ‘myth’ means a lie. Myth is a lie.”

Campbell said, “No, myth is not a lie. A whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of a given culture at a given time.”

The disc jockey said again: “It is a lie.” Campbell responded again: “No, it is a metaphor.” This went on for about 20 minutes.

Campbell tried to break the impasse by asking the disc jockey to give him an example of a metaphor. He had to ask several times before the host finally responded. “My friend John runs very fast. People say he runs like a deer. There’s a metaphor.”

Campbell said, “No, a metaphor would be, ‘John *is* a deer.’”

Campbell believes that this reflects the common understanding of metaphor. Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions are facts. The other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result, people consider themselves religious believers because they accept metaphors as facts. Others consider themselves non-religious because they think religious metaphors are lies.

Today’s text is often called the Little Apocalypse. It is full of mythology and metaphor. How can we understand this text in a way that deepens our faith without literally believing that the sky is falling?

First Move: Jesus’ Imagery of the End of the World

Jesus has been teaching at the temple in Jerusalem. It is Tuesday of Holy Week. As they are leaving the temple, an unnamed disciple says, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.” Jesus says, “Not one stone will be left upon another. It will all be thrown down.”

Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives across from the Temple. His inner circle of disciples is with him: Peter, his brother, Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They ask him, “When will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are to happen?”

Jesus’ response is a long discourse that makes up all of Chapter 13 in Mark. It is private teaching for these four disciples. Jesus may perceive that they are the only ones who can begin to understand.

Our text picks up halfway through the discourse. Jesus begins the discourse by telling them that there will be false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. Scholars believe that Mark was written either during or just after the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem against the Romans that led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. The Temple was burned down and the Jews were taken prisoner and exiled from Jerusalem. Mark has been called a wartime Gospel. Mark and his community are being asked by Zealots to help them fight the Romans. Mark’s community refused to fight; they also refused to withdraw to the hills, like the Essenes. Mark’s community is being persecuted from both sides, by Romans and by Zealots.

Jesus predicts that the disciples will face much suffering and persecution. “They will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings for my sake. Do not worry about what you are to say at trial; the Holy Spirit will speak for you.”

Jesus warns the disciples of the coming judgment. “When you see the desolating sacrilege, let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Woe to those who are pregnant and nursing in those days. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been seen since the beginning of creation.”

This is reminiscent of the scene in Genesis 19 when Lot and his wife are fleeing to escape God’s judgment on Sodom. God is pouring down fire and brimstone on the city as punishment for its wickedness.

That brings us to today’s text. The disciples had asked Jesus what the signs would be when all the stones in the Temple would be thrown down. Jesus now answers that question.

Jesus uses mythological language. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give any light. The stars will fall out of the sky. The powers in the heavens will be shaken.

This imagery comes out of the Old Testament to describe world-shaking events like the fall of empires. Isaiah Chapter 13 uses similar language to predict the fall of the Babylonian empire:

¹ A prophecy against Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw:

⁶ Wail, for the day of the Lord is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

⁸ Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them;
they will writhe like a woman in labor.

⁹ See, the day of the Lord is coming
—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—
to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations
will not show their light.
The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.
I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty
and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
and the earth will shake from its place
at the wrath of the Lord Almighty,
in the day of his burning anger.

¹⁹ Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the pride and glory of the Babylonians,
will be overthrown by God
like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Both Isaiah and Mark describe the Day of the Lord, when God will deliver the people from their enemies.

In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, an oracle of judgment is always followed by an oracle of salvation. Punishment is never the final word of God: salvation is.

Here is Mark's oracle of salvation.

²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming on clouds with great power and glory.

²⁷ And then he will send the angels and he will gather together his chosen ones out of the four winds, from the top of earth up to the top of heaven. [My translation].

Mark conflates the coming of the Son of Man with the Day of the Lord. Mark is drawing on the imagery of the Son of Man in Chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel. It is Daniel's vision of how God will bring justice to the world. Daniel has a dream about four great beasts that rise up out of the sea. The beasts represent four great empires that conquered Israel: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks. The most fearsome beast represents Greece under Alexander the Great. The sea represents chaos. The four great beasts have been ruling the world. God is seen as the Ancient One, an old man with a white beard, who sits on a throne, dressed all in white. He opens his judgment book.

Then one like a Son of Man comes in with the clouds and appears before the Ancient One. God gives the Son of Man authority to rule over all the peoples of the earth. The Son of Man represents humanity.

Mark updates the vision. The Son of Man now is a metaphor for Jesus. He will gather the elect from the four winds, which means from the ends of the earth. The elect are disciples who have been scattered to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. The elect are those who do the will of God and are responsive to Jesus' call to repent. They are not defined by ethnic, social or sexual categories. The elect of the new age are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female.

Jesus then turns to the second question that the disciples asked: When will these things take place. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you that this generation certainly will not pass away until all these things take place."

Second Move: The Collective Wisdom in Apocalyptic Imagery

If Christians take the Little Apocalypse in Mark literally, then they believe that the Second Coming will be an event in history when the sun and the moon will be darkened and the stars will fall from the sky. Jesus will descend from the clouds and gather the faithful disciples. Literal-minded Christians also will have to deal with the embarrassment of explaining how Jesus could be so wrong on the timing. He said it

would happen before this generation passes away. Two thousand years later we are still waiting.

Faithful Christians don't have to go there. Instead we can read the text metaphorically. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, a New Testament scholar, says that apocalyptic texts arose in the history of Israel when Jews felt alienated from the dominant religious and social structures of the time. Such as when Israel was conquered and made part of a series of empires, from Babylon to Persia to Greece to Rome. An apocalyptic worldview emerges when the values and structures of a society lose all meaning for a minority group within a society and are replaced by a new symbolic meaning system. An apocalyptic vision sees the world as dualistic. It is a struggle of good with evil, the powers in heaven with a fallen world, light and darkness.

Apocalyptic texts in the New Testament include Mark 13, Chapters 23 through 25 of Matthew, which Mary and I preached on the last four weeks, and Revelation.

Immanuel Kant, the great Christian philosopher of the Enlightenment, tells us that God is beyond time and space. Humans cannot experience anything except in the field of time and space. There is much about God that is a great mystery to us. We can only express our understandings of God through metaphor. Our metaphors are necessarily partial and incomplete.

Mythology tries to express the mystery of God. These apocalyptic texts draw heavily on mythology. The pantheon of gods in antiquity represents the powerful forces at work in the universe.

The new Wonder Woman movie is a good example of mythology. Wonder Woman is the daughter of Hippolyta, who was the queen of a tribe of women warriors. Wonder Woman is the greatest of the female warriors. A British spy escapes when he is discovered on a German ship during World War I and swims to safety on the island home of the Amazons. When he tells them about the Great War that is taking place, Wonder Woman knows from mythology that Ares, the Greek god of war, is behind the war. She goes with the spy so that she can kill Ares and end the war.

Spoiler alert. At the end of the movie, Wonder Woman finds Ares and enters into a cosmic battle with him. Ultimately she kills Ares, but she is surprised to find that the war still goes on. She concludes that violence is not something that comes to people from a god of war. She has learned that good and evil runs through the heart of every person.

This mythology of the Greek gods is ancient wisdom that wove together the transcendent and the material realms of existence. Myth expresses a larger truth that

the collective wisdom of the people has discerned. John Baldock, an expert on mythology, writes that ancient Israel became aware of an interconnectedness and wholeness. This sense of an underlying unity of all things was expressed through personification, giving rise to the concept of a supreme God with human attributes.

Joseph Campbell says that the primary purpose of a dynamic mythology is to awaken and maintain in each person an experience of awe, humility and respect in recognition of the ultimate mystery that transcends every name and form.

Mythologies become brittle when they are literalized instead of being added to by the tradition. We need to look for new symbols and new metaphors that speak to our time.

The wisdom that Mark's mythology expresses is that the eternal will endure beyond the collapse of empire. The fully human Son of Man is the reflection of God, not the four beasts in Daniel's story or the Romans in Mark's day. And not the principalities and powers in our own day. Jesus' words will not pass away—they will bring about the end of the old age and the creation of a new age.

Jesus' prophecy came true. The world as the disciples knew it did end with the destruction of the Temple. The Temple was the center of Jewish piety. A new world came into being, with Jesus at the center of their faith

Third Move: Updating Apocalyptic Imagery

For a mythology to be believable, it needs to be consistent with the best science of an age. Our best science says that the world has evolved for 14 billion years and continues to evolve. In an evolutionary worldview, there is not one death but many deaths. Each death is followed by new life or a new form of life. There is not one coming but many comings.

We are drawn to the apocalyptic motif. We often believe that the world is coming to an end, from threat of nuclear war, to irreversible climate change, to collapse of democracy. How many movies have you seen where James Bond or a hero saves us from villains who threaten to destroy the world? We secularize the myth of a religious savior.

It is easy to dismiss apocalyptic eschatology as utopian. We will never have a world where the lion lies down with the lamb and there is no more violence. Violence comes from the human instinct for aggression and self-defense. It is part of who we are. It takes spiritual discipline to control it.

We no longer expect God to intervene into human history to end an evil age and install Christ as ruler of the world. That is a literalization of the mythological.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Saying 113, the followers of Jesus ask him, “When will the kingdom come?” Jesus says, “It will *not* come by watching for it. Rather, the father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.” This is a mythology that still has legs. We in the West have not advanced nearly as far spiritually as we have in scientific knowledge.

A contemporary understanding of God sees God’s power as persuasive not coercive. God is intensely active in the world, calling out to each one of the seven billion people on our planet at each moment of his or her existence. God also calls out to every part of creation, to every animal, every plant. God calls all of creation to the good. God works with us where we are. God looks at the particular circumstances and decides what is possible for us, what small steps we can take to draw us closer to the kingdom of God. Then we act either in full response to God or partial response or not at all. What we do affects God. God is pleased or disappointed by how we respond. God rejoices when we imitate Christ. God grieves with us when we suffer a tragedy. Then the cycle starts all over again. God sends another call to us based on our response.

God can do more with someone who is deeply spiritual. Spiritual people are always working to improve their awareness of the sacred, trying to discern God’s will for their lives. God can do great things with Martin Luther King or Dorothy Day, but much less with someone who has tuned God out or who thinks they are following God when really they are just acting on their own desires and prejudices and calling that God’s will.

Thomas Keating, a Trappist priest who is the founder of the centering prayer movement, in a sermon called, *The End of Our Worlds*, offers a spiritual interpretation of the Second Coming. He says that if we reflect for a moment on the natural cycles of life, our world is always coming to an end. As we enter each new stage of life, one world ends and another begins.

Keating says that the message of Advent is not so much about the end of *the* world but all the worlds that come to an end in the natural and spiritual evolution of life. Every time we move to a new level of faith, the previous world that we lived in, with all its comfortable rituals and practices, comes to an end.

Every year during Advent and Lent we hear the message of, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is coming.” Jesus calls us to repent not just once. It is an invitation that keeps recurring during the church year. We are called to experience new birth every year.

Jesus awakens our spiritual consciousness. His command at the end of today’s is: “Watch out. Keep your eyes open. Stay awake.”

The traditional ethical interpretation is to keep proclaiming the gospel and carrying your cross because we don't know when the Second Coming will take place.

A spiritual interpretation recognizes the same commands have a deeper meaning. The Greek word, θεωρία, means to observe, behold. In the mystical tradition it came to mean to contemplate.

Keating tells us that Jesus has aroused us from our spiritual slumber. Most people are blissfully unaware of their True Self; they are consumed with the momentary desires and needs of their ego, their False Self.

Whenever we accept the invitation to let go of our present level of relating to Christ for a new one, it may feel scary. We are content with our world of reading, prayer, devotion and service. Yet Christ relentlessly calls us beyond our limitations and fears into new worlds.

If you are at the beginning of your spiritual journey, Christ may be calling you to read Scripture and pray every day. Pray more for others than you pray for yourself. Act on your prayers and do works of mercy. As you progress on your journey, Christ may be calling you to read Scripture in a different way, through the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. He may be calling you to pray in a new way, twenty minutes of silent prayer twice a day, letting go of your thoughts and opening yourself to the divine presence. Leave your thoughts behind in a Cloud of Forgetting and be still in the Cloud of Unknowing. Seeing the connection between all things will fill you with inner peace and help you bring peace to other people.

Whenever you see the kingdom spread out upon the earth and others do not see it, the end of the world has come for you. For the world as you know it has ended.

Conclusion

When God seems to be shaking the foundations of our world, we should give thanks. God is rousing us from our spiritual slumber.

When you repent, the kingdom is close. In fact, the kingdom is within you. The kingdom of God belongs to those who have let go of everything, including their images of God, and welcome the new worlds that God is leading them to.