



**“ENCOUNTERING”**  
**SCRIPTURE: MARK 13:24-37**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, December 3, 2023, Advent #1**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Mark 13:24-37**

"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.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

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

The Word of the LORD  
**Thanks be to God.**

---

The beginning of Advent is like being startled awake when it is the middle of the night. Darkness surrounds you. You've had just enough sleep to wonder if you need to fully wake up or if there is any way you could go back to sleep.

There's a liminality to this semi-awakened state. Your eyes are still adjusting to the dark. You may have been in the middle of a dream that still lingers. You may wonder if the dream was real. You may wish you could stay there but as you wake up the dream quickly fades away.

Our sense of self is diffuse in this semi-awakened state—before the default mode network of our brain has really revved up and started talking to us about things to worry about, about our past and our future, about who we are in the world.

The DMN is the part of our brain that gets busy when we are still and awake. It's why we can struggle sometimes with quiet, with being still. The DMN is the location of our inner critic, of our ego, of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and how we relate to others and to the world.

Think of Advent as an invitation to rearrange the furniture in your brain, to play with dreams and that semi-awakened state in a way that loosens our grip on the stories we tell ourselves so that we can be open to a new story and to a new feeling about how to be in the world.

Advent is actually sort of like a psychedelic journey. Advent is about mystical experience. Advent is about transcendence and how it changes our experience of everyday life. Advent is about unknowns and mystery and learning how to be unknowns with vitality, with hope, with wisdom, and with vivid dreams and holy imagination.

Psychedelics like mescaline, psilocybin, and ketamine are being more broadly used again as treatment for PTSD, depression, existential distress, addiction.<sup>1</sup> The power of these substances is that they shake loose the ego's hold on our self-understanding, on the stories we tell ourselves. Part of how they do this is not just to stimulate our imagination, but they quiet the DMN.

Many people who have been involved in these treatment methods have reported vivid visual metaphors of their sense of self dissolving or disappearing. And they have a profound experience of interdependence and deep connection and love at the center of existence.

- There was a lot of research about the medical promise of these substances in the 40s, 50s, and early 60s. But in the later 60s they fell out of favor as the political landscape turned more and more toward the criminalization of drugs during the Nixon administration.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the history and use of psychedelics:  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/awe-and-psychedelics-with-michael-pollan/id1561860622?i=1000634586833>

- This beginning of the “war on drugs” was rooted in white supremacy and racism and was a part of Nixon’s “southern strategy” to lure white southern voters to mistrust the liberals who were too permissive about racial change. In other words, find ways to stoke the fires of racial resentment and the criminalization of being Black.
- The criminalization of drug use became more and more racialized during the Reagan years. And the racialized impacts played out more and more in both Bush and Clinton presidencies.

As research has resumed in the last 20+ years about the profound impact that psychedelics used in a safe, supportive, and controlled context can have on things like depression, OCD, and PTSD, there is more and more data being shared about how the mind can be changed and healing can occur.

Because the use of these substances has been illegal for several decades, researchers also got curious about other practices that can induce similar states in the brain. They found things like intense breathing practice and deep meditative practice can induce similar detachment of ego and self.

For centuries Buddhist teaching and practice has taught and habituated this same kind of consciousness—that the self is, on some level, illusory. That interconnection is ultimate truth. The emptiness of emptiness, Sunyata, is the Mahayana teaching about this deep and infinite interdependence. Independence is a delusion of conventional reality. Meditation, chanting, control and practice of breath—all of these things habituate the brain to non-attachment and to visceral awareness of deep connection and interdependence.

Jesus’ teaching invited people into a similar letting go of ego, and into a changed relationship to self in how we understand the world and relationship. His Jewish heritage and his exposure to other teachings of his time—perhaps including Eastern understandings of no-self, informed his life of compassion and his teachings about love as the most impactful way for human beings to heal the world and disrupt oppressive systems. His Jewish heritage taught him about the common good and the gift of making promises to each other and the faith practice of right relationship with humans, with creation, with God through observance of Torah. There were also mystical strains of many spiritual practices at the time that taught the gifts of repetitive prayer, movement, and breath. And no doubts things like ingesting plant and like fasting were a part of what Jesus learned and taught.

Advent is an invitation to this kind of shedding of the sense of self in preparation for God’s incarnation, in preparation for the second coming of Divine Love. If we are so focused on ourselves and are too ego-driven, then the darkness of Advent can feel like something we want to avoid.

Darkness disarms and dissolves—we can't see the edges of things, where things start and stop the same way. Darkness is an unveiling; it is a revealing by way of concealing the things that we cling to, to make the world make sense.

Enter Mark's "Little Apocalypse"

The Gospel of Mark is perhaps the gospel that lends itself the most to a Buddhist reading. It is about non-attachment, it is about mystery, and the limits of conventional reality to tell us what is really real. It is about rearranging the furniture of the brain.

Most of Chapter 13 of Mark is labeled the "Little apocalypse" because he trades on traditional apocalyptic imagery—the forces of nature reversing, the way things work exploding, the truth being unveiled.

Apocalypse is really not about the future at all though—it is about an unveiling of hard truth in the present as a path to change so that we can realize a more promising future.

Mark's Gospel is known for Jesus' repetitive call for the disciples to tell no one: the Messianic secret. Jesus is mysterious and secretive. The people who you think should understand and get it don't, and people who are unlikely messengers of wisdom are the ones who get it!

The Gospel writer wants to reframe and refashion understandings of Jesus, and understandings of Messiah. Jesus' Messianic identity and what that means is something the gospel writer plays with throughout the Gospel.

The Gospel plays with time; it is written post destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, but it is written as if that cataclysm is a predicted future occurrence. The Gospel writer is trying to make sense of Jesus in light of that of the destruction of Jerusalem under the guise of a world where that destruction had not happened yet—but our anticipation of the destruction should make us change our ways.

Mark is writing from the future about the past as if it was going to be the future.

Apocalypse plays with time in order for us to have a fighting chance to make the most of the time we have. It changes the way we see the past, the way we live in the present, and the way we anticipate the future.

That's what the journey of dissolving the self into a deep knowing about our interdependence is all about—changing our sense of self in time so that we can most fully embrace the life we have. It is a letting go of attachment so that we can be present with zest and vitality. Life can be lived more fully when death is not what we fear.

Darkness is not just a way to the light, it is a beautiful, promising place of growth and wisdom.

There are many different ways to shake loose our attachment to a sense of self, to the narratives that we tell ourselves about ourselves that may not serve us anymore.

At Grace Covenant, we're so blessed to have Carol Hovis in our community. The Enneagram is one tool that can support us in this journey to loosen our grip on ego or loosen the grip that ego has on us.

Being more self-aware about what drives us, and the stories we tell ourselves, the deeply formative wounds that we carry and that we can change our relationship to—this is learning to work with our shadows.

Advent is really shadow work, in the shadows where we face our fears of the dark, when we first encounter darkness, it can feel like there's nothing there or that whatever is there is really scary. Tools like the Enneagram teach us that there's actually a lot of life and growth in the shadows, there's actually freedom there.

Our work around white supremacy is another way that we are working together in a white dominant culture to shake loose from the grip that the narrative about self that white supremacy has taught us has had on us as bodies and as collectives and institutions.

White supremacy has taught that we are individuals, independent, competitive, self-centered.

White supremacy has taught us that there is a stacking of people and groups that needs to happen for society to work.

White supremacy has taught us about hierarchies.

And remember whiteness is not where beliefs of supremacy started, those have been around since the beginning of time.

Whiteness is just the particular carrier of supremacy that was born as America was born.

It was born out of greed. It was born out of insecurity. It was born out of fear and trauma. It was born out of a fear of really looking at the self in a new way, the self in a bigger world, where our ways are not the only ways.

So, our work in loosening the grip white supremacy has on us is a very promising part of learning to befriend the dark, learning that the binary of light and dark is not serving any of us.

It's not serving us in terms of our own internal journey. It's not serving us in terms of our collective journey, and it's not serving us in terms of our capacity to really connect with what is ahead of us in an unknown future.

It's kind of like what the writer of Mark's gospel did: looking at the past from the perspective of the future, and then rewriting our narratives of the present, as if we're still in the past.

That kind of playing with time, that kind of inner Apocalypse that allows us to change our relationship to the narratives of the past to free us up to really embrace the best possibilities for the future, are what Mark's Gospel is doing in this little apocalypse: inviting people to re-orient ourselves to loss, to catastrophe, to the things that seem to take away all the things we hold dear, to the things that strip us of what we have come to count on to make us feel safe, feel confident, the things that have made us feel like we know who we are in the world.

The destruction of the temple was a loss of everything, a loss of the way they moved in the world, the way they made sense of the world.

Being able to experience catastrophe, loss, tragedy with true grief and lament, without grasping for a past we can never go back to is what allows us to learn, to trust God to create a new future with us, through us, and for us.

A future that doesn't include us grasping at the past, but a future that involves us learning that the play of light and dark is life. We need both.

Darkness itself is not a place to quickly extinguish or rush through, but a place to linger, place to listen, a place to use all of our senses, to learn what it feels like to trust God when we can't see what's ahead of us, and we can't really even see all of what is around us right now.

Encountering the dark with our faith leading the way is our best hope, not just for a bright future, but for a world where we do not curse the darkness when it engulfs us in its divine embrace. Do not rush your way through this Advent darkness, Grace Covenant. We are not alone. We can trust the divinity of this darkness. We are just beginning to receive all that is here for us.

Thanks be to God.