

Mark 13:24-37      Signs, Fig Trees and Jesus

I'm one of *'those people.'*

Not the pumpkin spice is everything, people.

I'm one of *'those people,'*

who is ready for Christmas stuff  
to come out in October

—*'those people.'*

I've been listening to Christmas music  
since mid November.

While I don't decorate

until after Thanksgiving,

it is only out of respect for Tripp

would obviously doesn't get

*'the Christmas spirit.'*

My tagline is when you love Jesus like I do,

it is always Christmas—

ask Tripp, there's no comeback

for that statement.

Now, I don't think it is difficult

to tell what time of the year it is

—contrary to what Jesus says;

we don't have to even go looking for signs,

they've been out at every retailer

since before Halloween!

And speaking of signs,

we have a very confused

fig tree in our yard.

Most of us don't think of fig trees

as a good sign anymore,

not like they were in the ancient world.

I doubt many of us

even have fig trees.

We are mostly familiar

with figs packed in glass jars of preserves

or in the yellow package

of Fig Newton cookies.

But as I said, our fig tree,

I think it is confused.

Though, who can blame the tree?

Bless its heart it, was 67 degrees

last Wednesday afternoon

and by this coming Wednesday

it will drop into the 20's at night!

I can see our fig tree  
through the window over our sink  
in the kitchen.  
Even though an unnamed, bearded husband  
mistakenly chopped it down  
to a stump a few years ago,  
it has managed to sprout new shoots  
and continues to grow  
toward the sky.

That first year,  
I thought it was gone forever,  
but the fig tree has proven quite resilient.  
In fact the other week  
I noticed figs, actual fruit(!)  
beginning to grow on the tree.  
I don't even really like figs  
but I was overjoyed  
to see the fruit coming back!

But this week,  
scrubbing pots on Monday night,  
I noticed the leaves on the fig sapling,  
(I guess it isn't quite a tree yet),  
I noticed the leaves  
were curling up and dying.

Those leaves have been so vibrant,  
growing wide and sprawled like a hand;  
I wondered what had gone wrong.  
If we are supposed to be able  
to look at the fig tree  
and know what is coming  
—well right now,  
it doesn't look so good.  
But perhaps I have a confused fig tree.

If, instead of the fig tree,  
we look around other places  
for some signs—  
maybe downtown,  
our church,  
my living room, your den,  
then I'm sure  
we will have no trouble  
telling what is coming.

We had to explain again and again

to our 4 year old  
that the neither the manger scene  
nor the elf on the shelf, Alice,  
were allowed to come up from the basement  
until after Thanksgiving.

She was never satisfied  
with that answer.  
Waiting is tough,  
especially when the signs  
are all around you.

A friend of mine on Facebook  
said last Wednesday,  
“it isn’t even Advent yet  
and I’m already tired of waiting.”  
I’m tired of waiting too.  
In fact, I’m with Isaiah,  
go on and tear the heavens open  
Jesus, and come on down.

Good news, spoiler,  
Jesus already has.  
It is the return that we are awaiting,  
the return that we have no clue about  
—the waiting for the return,  
that’s what’s tough—  
not knowing the hour or the day  
and that is what probably  
makes us look for signs.

But the signs here, are a jarring warning.  
Have you noticed  
that we almost always start Advent  
with a message to prepare?  
Or a message to repent,  
or make the crooked ways straight?

Advent doesn’t begin  
with a sweet baby or Away in a Manger;  
not with angelic greetings  
or even a gender reveal party for the baby.

**No Advent is a jolt,**  
it is a cry in the wilderness;  
it is a caution to pregnant  
and nursing mothers in the end of days;  
**Advent seems to always begin  
in an unexpected way.**

This Advent text  
is Mark's little apocalypse,  
a glimpse into what will happen with,  
*The Coming of the Son of Man.*  
And while it may sound  
like the end of the world,  
doom and gloom,  
I don't think it really is.

When scholars talk  
about the coming of the Son of Man,  
they assume that Jesus  
is talking about the resurrection  
—it was certainly an eschatological event<sup>1</sup>;  
the event that *is a decisive end*  
to the old ways of sin and death  
in the world.

So if the coming of the Son of Man  
is really the resurrection,  
then passage may take on a different  
meaning altogether.

Later in Mark's gospel-  
(*when trying to arrest Jesus for the crime of heresy*),  
the high priest asked Jesus,  
"Are you the Messiah,  
the Son of the Blessed One?"  
Jesus answers,  
*"I am; you will see the Son of Man  
seated at the right hand of the Power,  
coming with the clouds of heaven."*  
Again, a reference to his power,  
his resurrection over sin and death.

The world didn't end  
when Christ was resurrected,  
It began.

This is a text chalked full of warnings:  
to be alert;  
to watch the fig tree;  
to beware, for you don't know  
when it is coming;  
keep awake!

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher R. Hutson, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1 Advent through Transfiguration* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press: 2008)

But maybe all these warning are  
not for the end,  
but for the beginning.

Right before our passage  
is a verse of anticipation for living in troubled days.  
The verse just before we are told  
that the sun will darken  
and the stars will fall,  
is a verse of hope and assurance.

But backing up,  
Mark's chapter 13 bears witness to events  
that traditionally tell believers that  
the world is coming to an end.  
But looking at the chapter  
through the lens of resurrection means,  
not an ending,  
but a beginning.

At the start,  
Jesus and the disciples  
have been in the temple,  
sparring with the temple officials  
when Jesus decides  
that it's time to reveal  
to them, *again*,  
that the ways of the world  
are not the ways of God.

The disciples marvel  
at the Temple's magnificence,  
and wrapped up in their marvel,  
is the deeply imbedded understanding that this building  
was the dwelling place of God on earth.

Jesus's series of warnings  
of the temple's destruction  
does two things  
—it reminds the disciples  
that the temple is just a building;  
and for Mark's community,  
living through the First Jewish Roman War  
—20years later—  
watching the Romans sack the temple,  
it reminds them that the temple  
isn't the only place

where God can be found.

In fact, Mark has Jesus say,  
these stones you see at the Temple  
won't be here for long.  
The disciples are mortified to hear this—  
they still haven't quite grasped  
that *in Christ*,  
the dwelling of God  
*is* at its fullest  
and it renders the temple  
to, well just large stones.

So as they travel,  
they beg Jesus  
to tell them more  
about the coming destruction.  
Hence the warnings and signs.

So the second thing  
this passage does, is give hope.  
Mark has cleverly taken  
*'the coming of the Son of Man'* text from Daniel  
and inserted that message  
into his story  
to encourage his community.

This shows Mark's community  
that even when things seem bad,  
God will save God's people.  
Even when things are at their worst,  
you will see the Son of Man  
coming in the clouds.

That is what Mark  
wants to remind his community  
—remember how God saved the people  
in the time of Daniel,  
well now in Christ  
even in the midst of this turmoil,  
you will be saved.

And if we can reach back to Daniel to interpret what was then,  
then we can also reach back to what was then  
to interpret what is now.

That is why verse 23,  
the verse right before our passage  
catches me... Jesus says,

“But be alert;  
I have already told you everything.”

Now, that could be  
that Jesus has just told them all  
of what they need to look  
for when the Son of Man returns.  
But since we are now,  
2000 years past those warnings and signs,  
it is fair to say we are tired of waiting.  
And it is fair to say that  
we aren't always looking for the signs.

“But be alert,  
I have already told you everything.”

Friends as we begin our season of waiting,  
*be alert*—Christ has already  
told us everything.  
God has already torn the heavens  
and come down.

You don't need me to point out  
the signs that things aren't going well.  
You don't need me to tell you  
that the sun will be darkened  
and the moon will not give its light,  
the stars will fall from the sky.

The world ends all the time.

The sun darkens every time  
we get an Amber Alert  
on our phones.

The moon ceases to shine  
every time cancer claims  
another loved one's health.

Stars fall from the sky  
every time another shooter  
kills innocent people  
in senseless violence.

No, we don't have to look  
far for the signs.

Leaders and entertainers left and right,  
losing their jobs  
because of unacceptable  
and intolerable sexual behavior.  
I suppose the powers of the world  
in high places are indeed shaking.

And so we are prone to search—to see *the Son of Man*  
*coming in the clouds*  
*with great power and glory...*

But Christ has already told us everything.  
We aren't **just** waiting  
of course for a baby in a manger.  
That has already been;  
what we wait for  
is the resurrection  
to take hold **in every life**.

We are not just waiting for the baby,  
we are waiting for the power of Christ  
to be in our lives now.  
And the good news  
is that our waiting  
is only a turning over.  
Waiting for Jesus  
is like waiting to breathe  
—you don't have to even think about it.

Because Christ has already  
told us everything—  
like, *I am with you till the end of the age*.

Christ has already  
told us everything,  
like, *look at the birds of the air,*  
*they neither sow nor reap,*  
*nor gather into barns,*  
*and yet your heavenly father feeds them.*  
*Are you not of more value than they?*

Christ has already  
told us everything,

like, *For mortals it is impossible  
but not for God,  
for God all things are possible.*

Christ has already  
told us everything,  
like, *death will be no more,  
mourning and crying and pain  
will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.  
See I am making all things new.*

When Jesus comes into our lives,  
his resurrection is like the four winds  
from the ends of the earth  
rushing into the world's ending and beginning.

Take a lesson from the fig tree;  
you might feel as though  
you've been chopped down to your roots,  
but wait...

The Lord is coming,  
and is in fact has come,  
and is even now present  
and you will sprout new branches  
and new growth and produce fruit.

It doesn't matter how your world ends;  
divorce,  
addiction,  
job loss,  
death.<sup>2</sup>

Christ has already told us everything  
—the heavens are torn open all the time.

Resurrection is not only about  
something that happened once;  
resurrection happens when children  
are put in amazing foster homes  
and healed by love.

The Son of Man coming in glory  
happens when,

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<sup>2</sup> In part inspired from Dennis Sanders, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/december-3-advent-1b-mark-1324-37>

after months and months of waiting and searching,  
you find another job.  
Christ's glorious coming in the clouds  
happens when  
even though the marriage has ended,  
you find that you are better parent  
and a better friend  
and in a better place  
spiritually and emotionally  
to be loved and  
to extend love to another.

So pay attention to the signs.  
Not the signs that say  
the world is ending,  
but to the ones that point to its beginning.

Watch the fig trees.  
Watch them come to life  
and produce fruit even  
when they've been chopped down;  
even if when the days are hot  
and the nights are cold.

They bear fruit because Christ  
has come and will continue to come to us  
—you may not know the day  
or the hour that the master of the house  
will return.

But Christ does come,  
and he always bring feast,  
of bread and wine,  
complete with preserves and Fig Newtons.