

December 6, Advent 2B (Mark 1:1-8)

Advent calls us to take the myths of Christianity seriously.

by [Julia Seymour](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue

“What genre is the Bible?” she asked me, over a table full of half-empty wineglasses and scattered paperbacks.

There was a distinct breeze as the heads of everyone else in the book group turned to look at me, pastor, resident theological answer dispenser. I sipped from my glass and said, quietly, “Mythology.”

Her eyes grew wide in shock, but I wouldn't retract what I said. I piled on, “Myths give meaning. Calling it mythology doesn't make it untrue. It's just what is. It becomes something more when you accept it, trust it, shape your life around it.”

The air in the room had shifted. Someone else cleared their throat and brought our attention back to the book of the month, a novel of magical realism that inspired the whole discussion around genre. I knew the conservative Roman Catholic woman who had asked me the question didn't like my answer. A couple of others present might have liked to continue the discussion, but it seemed like dangerous territory. Best to retreat and live to be heretical another day.

The season of Advent underscores the mythology of our faith. We have a rogue truth teller in John the Baptizer. His wildness is symbolized by his untamed diet and his untanned clothing. His appearance prepares us for the spiritual truth he brings, undomesticated and lush with potential. The truth teller speaks of another one who will be coming at an unspecified time.

The one who is to come is promised to be even fiercer. In preparation, the truth teller moves the cleansing rituals from indoors, a controlled space, to the outdoors. In a river, an uncontrolled venue, the truth teller reshapes the washing act to be one of reorientation. Those who participate in this ritual are reoriented to the priorities and commands of creation's life force. When they give themselves fully into the

power that seeks to shape them, their whole lives will change.

Even as the truth teller pours the water, he speaks of how the one who is to come will do the same act but in a spiritual way. The anticipated fierce one will reshape by divine power, introduced as the Holy Spirit. Mark 1:1-8 states that the one who comes in fierceness comes from the one who gave words to the prophets and will be accompanied by the holy power beyond comprehension. This is not fan fiction; this is canon of the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are so used to the mythology of Christianity that we have become immune to both its power and promise. If we no longer hear the transforming quality of the stories, they shift from myths to fables. We look for the moral of the story and then we move on, lesson learned. The ongoing strength of myths is that they show us the world as it is and how it can be, how it has been, and how it will be. Advent is born out of the dynamic tension of Christian mythology—a celebratory waiting and a redeeming hope.

Joseph Campbell writes, “We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet.” The glorification of the individual in both political and spiritual life has eroded the basic purpose of Christian mythology, which is the formation of a community of the beloved. This mystic sweet communion links those at work in the Lord in the present together with one another and with those already at rest in peace. The stories of our faith are not our history, they are our present. As such, they affect the reality of creation here and now.

The stories of Advent are the myths that shape how we are called to be in the world as followers of Christ. We are the truth teller, the God-bearer, the righteous mensch, the angel-accompanied everyman, the forbearing elder, and the faithful questioner. In our life pageant, we will play all the roles and sometimes more than one at a time. We must also look to the other players around us. We are in a community of supporting roles to one another so that the story plays out to the glory of God and not to our triumph or detriment.

It will always make some people uncomfortable to think about the Bible as mythology. Surely, we must have a better word, a clearer demarcation, for a book full of the stories of how the Eternal Divine has interacted with the mundane throughout time. That is exactly why it is mythology, though. If we do not take the words seriously, they become the same as any other story we may read, interesting

to our imagination and perhaps somewhat inspiring. Nothing more.

When we take the words too seriously, we worship the book itself. Our praise is not directed at the revelation, but at the paper, the ink, and the binding. We deify translation and interpretation. From there, the life of faith becomes one of rules and past and future tense. We struggle to bring present relevance to the worship of a book.

When we hold the writings of scripture lightly, as mythology, the Bible can do what good mythology does. It connects us to the natural world. It broadens our cosmological and theological imagination. It reminds us of the heights of human goodness and the depths of human depravity. The Bible as our shaping mythology locates us in God's universe and gives us an understanding of what it means to be located therein. It is only from this place that we can truly know what it means to prepare the way.