

Who's Leading – Mark 13:1-8

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Maybe like never before, human beings are open to the possibilities of being influenced by a wide array of forces. It seems we're as willing as ever to consider the presence of a wide variety of voices that could impact our fortunes.

One of those forces that is not new is the American electorate. Not unlike countless other times in our history, Americans went to the polls a couple weeks ago and decided to go a new direction. In a rather decisive way, the electorate voted to give the Republicans another go at increasing our good fortunes as a country. Many cheered this; others bemoaned it. Rest assured, in two years or four years, the electorate will decide whether this was a good idea.

While increases in voter turnout were a very good thing for democracy this year, I wonder again if we put too much emphasis on the roles of public officials and their impacts on our lives. Politics has become like sport or entertainment. Our spirits, and it seems our hopes, rise and fall on the shoulders of candidates whose positions on issues aren't clear to us but who either stoke our love or our hatred.

Can this or that candidate empathize with enough voters? Are they in tune with the needs of "real" people? Are they kind and respectful or out of touch? Are they too old or too inexperienced? Because of their persona alone, will we follow them?

We're all like sheep, willing to be shepherded by candidates—largely based upon how those shepherds make us feel.

We're also open these days to listening to voices that aren't even human, like chat bots—non-humans who come oh-so-close to being the human friends we value.

Over the past few months, companies like OpenAI, [Meta](#), [Microsoft](#) and Google have given their AI chatbots new conversational modes with eerily human voices and personalities. Said the CEO of Microsoft AI recently, "I really believe that we're on the cusp of creating these new companions that are so meaningful, [with] lasting friendships." (Wall Street Journal, 11-14-24)

Unlike voice assistants like Alexa and Siri who hit the wall years ago with their abilities to play songs for us or tell us the weather, these new chat bots are tearing down that wall because of three elements: their vast knowledge, their voices (which make them sound exactly like real people), and their speed (They typically answer in one to four seconds, and you can jump in to redirect or clarify at any time in a conversation.)

Artificial intelligence is taking the place of human intelligence in ways vastly different or improved from prior models. Much of that is good, but it's still not a worthy substitute for true human connectivity. We think.

And then, there's UFOs. Former government and military officials told a congressional panel this past Wednesday that UFOs are real, and Americans deserve to know the truth.

In 2022, Congress held its first hearing on UFOs in more than 50 years. Since then, lawmakers and the public have heard from military and intelligence officials who have testified that

they have seen UFOs and that they could pose risks to national security.

Americans' fascination with unidentified flying objects goes way back, however. We're continuously curious and intrigued by the possibility, and now probability, of these unique foreign invaders existing.

And then we come to spirituality and religion. Today, those who identify as non-religious in this country are at an all-time high.

At the same time, however, there remains an intense interest in all things supernatural, both inside and outside of organized religion. Outside of organized religion, we're seeing the explosive growth and use of psychedelics, including in parts of the American elite. Business tycoons have been reported to have taken ketamine, magic mushrooms, and the hallucinogenic drink ayahuasca.

Some have described micro-dosing on these substances as "lifesaving" and even beautiful.

In the church world, the rise of Pentecostalism has led to intense interest in faith healing, prophecy and insights gained from dreams and visions. Much of this spiritualism is taking place in independent charismatic churches, which aren't accountable to any denominational structure. There's no formal process for ordaining pastors. If a charismatic leader can gain a following, he can build a church, and many millions of people will follow self-described "prophets" and "apostles" when they claim to hear direct revelations from God.

Despite the fact we've become a less religious nation, we're as drawn to spiritual matters as much as ever, it seems. We've always felt a pull toward the transcendent, and we still do.

So, we have politicians vying for our allegiance, we have chat bots from our technology companies posing as our best friends, we have this fascination with UFOs, we have more and more people attracted to supernatural forces like psychedelics. And we have an increasing number of faith healers and self-promoting prophets. We can't resist, as a people, being drawn to them.

Enter Jesus, who would have us tap the breaks on our growing fascination with all of them.

"Beware that no one leads you astray," he said. "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."

Jesus said this to the disciples who were fascinated with the hows and whens and whys of impending destruction that Jesus had forecast based upon people's adherence to worldly things such as the great big buildings Jesus said would come tumbling down.

His words are strikingly relevant to a 21st century audience that is faced with the allure today of different voices or forces we otherwise might think could lead us down a better path.

The influence of those other things I talked about is not necessarily bad anecdotally. It's just that what Jesus cautions his followers to be aware of is the danger of putting anything ahead of Jesus and what Jesus stands for.

And that harkens us to once again return to the core principles of his identity. He's one who truly takes into account the well-being of all. He's the one who doesn't overpromise when it comes to what he offers his followers—forgiveness, renewal, hope. He's the one who is humble, truly loving, and who genuinely loves each of us uniquely and all of us equally.

A politician of either party today can't do that; a chatbot can't do that; a substance can't do that; a slick, self-promoting preacher can't do that.

At the end of this text today, Jesus warned that tough times would come. This was just the beginning of the birth pangs, he said, the wars, earthquakes, and famines.

We always have to be careful in making inferences as to Jesus' intent with his words, but we can almost sense Jesus was saying, "All this other stuff — there might be some good in it, but it's not truly going to get you through it. Beware of what others and other stuff promise you. Beware of what they're selling. They can't do what I can. They are NOT me."

In this post-election period in America where politicians rush in to save, in this time of great distraction due to this amazing technology that is changing the world, in this time when there is great allure with ideas and things that have been historically on the margins and are inching their way into the mainstream, Jesus would say, "Be careful that they don't lead you astray. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the light of the world. I am the way, the truth, and the life."