

Proper 28 B
Mark 13:1-8
November 17, 2024

“Keep Calm and Carry On”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

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Who’s feeling optimistic after that?! Let’s be honest, looking for good news in this first section of Jesus’ so called “Little Apocalypse” is kind of like the old story of a certain little boy. “The optimistic boy woke up early on his birthday and looked out his window to see a giant pile of manure in the yard outside. He ran downstairs, got a shovel, and started happily shoveling. ‘What are you doing?’ asked a friend. The boy replied, ‘I know there's got to be a pony in there somewhere!’”¹

¹ Alyce McKenzie. “The Pony Under the Pile,” pcpe.smu.edu, November 8, 2021: <https://pcpe.smu.edu/blog/the-pony-under-the-pile-reflections-on-mark-13-1-8>.

I would like to believe that beneath this pile of destruction, misdirection, violence, and natural disaster, Jesus has a word of hope for us today. The truth is, I do believe that. But first, a little about this peculiar text from the earliest gospel.

Mark's gospel dates from the second half of the 1st century and "appears to address a mixed audience of Jew[ish and non-Jewish people] who faced persecution because of their devotion to Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Jewish messiah."²

Mark uses Jesus' words to interpret his audience's present reality of hardship and uncertainty. In verse 2, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. This was the largest sacred space in the Roman world (35 acres). It was destroyed by Roman soldiers in 70 CE. Judea had been embroiled in the Jewish-Roman War that began with a revolt against Rome in 66 CE. After years of fighting and a 7-month siege, Rome retook the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple and much of the city. Scholars argue that Jesus' followers may have been hated during this time period by both Jewish and non-Jewish sides for not taking a position in the conflict.³

If we go on a bit in chapter 13, Jesus has more "good news" for his hearers. In verse 9 he says, "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them." Taking the scholarly approach to this verse, we can assume that these events were, once again the present reality of the audience – actually happening at the time Mark wrote their gospel.

Whether Jesus of Nazareth actually said these things, we will likely never know for certain. What we do know is that Mark's author believed these

² Michael D. Coogan, Ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Notes by Suzanne Watts Henderson.

³ Ibid.

words would help to interpret the present reality of their audience. And so these next words should be heard in the same spirit. In verse 11, Jesus says, “When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

Hidden in plain sight, there is indeed a word of hope for Mark’s audience. Bookending the bad news, Jesus says, “Do not be alarmed . . . say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” In other words, Jesus tells his hearers not to fear because when the time comes, God’s spirit will speak through them. This shouldn’t be heard as an excuse to sit around on one’s hands, though.

A story is told of the famous reformer – or infamous reformer, depending on your perspective – Martin Luther, “when a professor at the University of Wittenberg, decided one week that he would take Mark 13:11 at face value. He spent no time whatsoever on his Sunday sermon and instead worked on his commentary on the Psalms. He later recounted what happened when he ascended the high pulpit of the Castle Church at Wittenberg and looked out over the sea of expectant faces. ‘Sure enough, the Holy Spirit spoke to me, and the Spirit said, ‘Martin, you didn’t prepare!’”⁴

When viewed as a whole, this text urges its hearers to fight down the predictable panic response, do their part, and trust that when the time comes, God’s spirit will act through them. But there’s a third reassurance in this text, built into the first prediction about the temple’s destruction. Jesus foretells that nothing the disciples saw that day on the temple mount would last. From a birds eye view of history, that seems like a pretty safe statement to make about pretty much everything. Good, bad, or otherwise, nothing you and I see will last forever. Perhaps, that too can

⁴ Alyce McKenzie. “The Pony Under the Pile,” Pcpe.smu.edu, November 8, 2021: <https://pcpe.smu.edu/blog/the-pony-under-the-pile-reflections-on-mark-13-1-8>.

be taken as good news. Sometimes, the old needs to go in order that something better, something more lasting can be built in its place.

In summary, the good news of this text for the original audience is this: Don't be alarmed; stay busy with the work of heaven's realm; when the time comes, God's spirit will work through you. Nothing lasts forever and sometimes the old has to go in order to make room for the new. Put simply: *change happens so don't be afraid. Do what you were put here to do and let God work through you.* Or as the British crown once said: Keep Calm and Carry On.

I don't know who needs to hear this today, but sometimes when the future looms uncertain, the progress of the past seems unlikely to withstand present struggles, and anxiety – even panic – hangs like a pall over it all, the simple message of this text counters the unknown and grounds us in the here and now. We're told not to be paralyzed by fear in the face of change. Instead, to do what we're meant to do – to carry on – to keep being the church of Jesus in this time and place.

In the same vein, one of my very favorite authors, Octavia Butler, says it this way:

“Kindness eases change.
Love quiets fear.
And a sweet and powerful
Positive obsession
Blunts pain,
Diverts rage,
And engages each of us
In the greatest,
The most intense
Of our chosen struggles.”⁵

May it be so with us. Amen.

⁵ Octavia Butler. “The Parable of the Talents,” New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019.