

First Presbyterian Church
Mark 13:1-8, “Keep Watch”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/17/2024



“Do you all these great buildings?
I tell you that not one stone will be left on another;
Every one will be thrown down.”

Slide: Twin Towers

What if Jesus had been standing beneath the twin towers in New York City
when he spoke those words?

When 9/11 happened, our world in the United States was shattered.
This was not just an attack, it was not just buildings blown up,
it was not just a devastating number of lives lost ...
this was the symbolic unravelling of the United States’
untouchable status as the global superpower.

If Jesus had spoken these words while standing beneath the Twin Towers
as they dominated the skyline of the greatest financial district on earth,
someone within earshot of his words might have been forgiven
if they chuckled under their breath.

In this passage, Jesus speaks to the disciples about how they should deal
with an even more distressing scenario that would happen
in their own time.

The temple complex in Jerusalem was incredibly beautiful
and had been under construction for 50 years at the time Jesus
suggested every stone would be thrown down.

While it was not yet finished, it was already
one of the most complex and architecturally stunning
buildings in the ancient world.

Jesus' prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in 70 AD.

The Roman governor demanded tribute directly from the Temple funds,
which prompted a tremendous revolt against Roman authority
lasting for several years.

A Roman general laid siege to Jerusalem for months before finally
breaking in, and the resulting battle totally destroyed the temple complex.

It was, actually, much more devastating for them
than 9/11 was for the United States.

For the temple was not only the center of their global identity,
it was also the center of their spiritual identity.

The *meaning* of this event – both in anticipation and once realized –
went far beyond an accounting of fallen stones and lost lives.

The destruction of the Jewish Temple upended Jews' sense of self,
their most central religious practices which revolved around
the Temple, and their relationship to the Roman world.

But the *meaning of Jesus' words* pointed even deeper than that:

Jesus' was identifying a time when God would transfer authority
from the Temple system of worship through the Law of Moses
to Jesus himself.

What we learn from Jesus in this passage might surprise you
and provide a new way of looking at the headlines of our own day:

Jesus teaches us how to be people of faith in times of great
upheaval in society.

The first thing that happens in this chapter is that
Jesus leaves the temple, never to return.

Commentator Dale Bruner says that when this happens,
“the Holiest of Holies has left the temple.”

Then in verse 3, we have a change in setting.

Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives, *opposite the temple*.

An ancient historian notes that from the Mount of Olives
you could see directly into the entrance
of the temple complex.

Sitting *opposite* the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew
come to Jesus privately, and they ask him,

**“Tell us, when will these things happen?
And what will be the sign
that they are all about to be fulfilled?”**

The disciples have asked Jesus a question *about the temple*.

When they ask, “When will *these things* happen?”

they mean, “When will every stone of the temple be thrown down?”

In his answer, Jesus addresses this question,

but he also looks further into the future
than just the destruction of the temple.

Sorting the two out is where things get difficult.

Again, Dale Bruner helps us out here. He writes that,

**“Jesus’ sermon about *current* events,
especially the imminent destruction of Jerusalem,
becomes a window through which to see Jesus’
view of *end* events,
especially the coming of the Son of Man.”**

In other words, Jesus gives two answers to the one question asked by the disciples.

He both responds to their question about the temple being thrown down
and he speaks of the day when all powers and authorities
will be thrown down before the Son of Man.

But...despite providing two answers,
Jesus *does not* give the disciples
the kind of answer they were looking for.

Jesus *does not* provide a road map of what is to come after the temple
is destroyed.

Instead, he uses the temple scenario to tell them two things:

- 1) What life will be like while they wait
for the end of all earthly structures.
- 2) How to orient themselves in the meantime.

Look at the first thing Jesus says in verse 5,
“Watch out...”

Jesus’ first words are about *paying attention* to what is happening.
Not just in the headlines – those are obvious to everyone.
But watch out for what is happening in your own heart,
in the lives of your neighbors.

Pay attention to the larger story that is being told about the world.

“Watch out ... that no one deceives you.”

Jesus is primarily concerned that we do not get fooled
by other people who use our natural anxiety about the future
to distract us from being a people
who are centered around Christ.

In our present moment, our country is facing a challenge to its frequently
celebrated claim to being the leading democracy in the world.

The American church's identity is not found in America's political status.

The identity of the church in every age is found in the life of Christ
and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

However, if the church hitches its wagon to a political power,
it risks losing its true identity and will share the same fate
as the political movement it endorses.

Jesus was worried about his followers becoming targets for disinformation
and so he says, "Watch out that no one deceives you."

The next thing Jesus does in verses 6 to 13,
is he describes all kinds of things that are going to happen,
but these are not referred to as "signs."
They are called "birth pains."

First, there will be false Messiahs.

People will come claiming to be the one who will save the world,
and he says, "**Don't believe them.**"

Second, there will be global unrest. Wars and rumors of wars.

And Jesus says, "**Do not be alarmed. The end is still to come.**"

Third, there will be ecological disasters such as earthquakes and famines.

And Jesus says, "**These are just the beginnings of birth pains.**"

Fourth, there will be persecution.

Christians will be handed over and flogged
and will testify before the leaders of the nations.

And Jesus says, "**The gospel must be preached to all nations.**"

Along with that, people will be brought to trial.

And Jesus says, "**Do not worry about what you will say,
because the Holy Spirit is speaking through you.**"

Fifth, families will be split apart and betrayal will take place.

And Jesus says, **“Those who stand firm to the end will be saved.”**

Can you think of any era of human history since Jesus
in which any of these things were missing?

But Jesus wasn't giving people signs that would predict
when he was coming.

*Jesus was describing what could be expected
from life between the first Advent of his birth
and the second Advent of his return. [REPEAT]*

Now hear the very last words from Jesus in this passage of teaching in v. 37:
“What I say to you I say to everyone: watch.”

Keep watch. Pay attention. Be mindful. Focus. Be alert.

When facing times of great consequence, the most important thing we can do
is to keep our minds attuned to what is happening from God's perspective.

Do not be distracted by outrage and fear-mongering.

Do not be numbed by social media
and streaming television / movies.

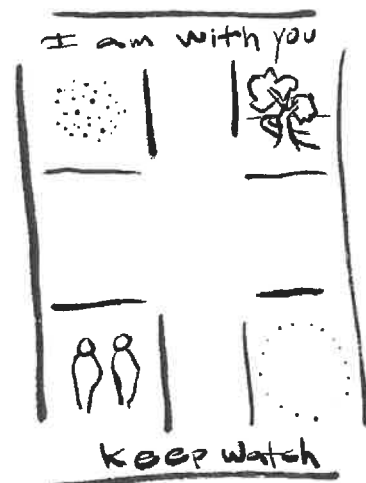
Do not become a tool of multinational corporations
who use our low attention span to serve
their bottom line.

This is a season when our society needs the church to be a distinct people of God
able to discern the signs of the times.

This is not a time for us to be fearful, hopeless, malleable pawns
in the chess match of politicians.

STORY: CREDO

Slide: Rule of Life



Your way of paying attention won't look the same as mine.

But the church of Jesus Christ faces a crisis of attention.

If we do not pay attention and see what is really happening,
if we blithely hitch our wagons to political movements,
we will be mere copycats of the world around.

The way of Jesus has never been winning

through supremacy of intellect, strength, or numbers.

Jesus wins by living with unimaginable love for all the losers.

When we pay attention with the mind of Christ,

we will not merely see opportunities to gain and wield power.

We will see neighbors who are fearful, hurting, and in need of support.

Jesus never endorsed a political candidate,

but he always paid attention to people suffering under abuse of power:

Women, immigrants, LGBTQ neighbors, houseless neighbors...
vulnerable people.

Will we have eyes to see and learn and be present

among the people Jesus calls friends?

Our hope when life goes wrong is that our faith is made for times like these.

Our hope is that God is not done with this world.

Jesus calls us (and empowers us!) to be mindful.

To be thoughtful and intentional.

To be people of faith who serve as a light in the darkness.

What Jesus said to the disciples, he says to all of us: Keep watch.