ReMARKable: “Watch Out!” (Mark 13) Memory Verse: Mark 13:33

April 6th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Mark 13

**[SLIDE 1]**

In the last chapter, we saw Jesus answering objections and questions from a whole cast of adversaries. He demonstrated his wisdom and authority as he dealt with confrontations regarding the payment of taxes, the idea of a coming resurrection and, of all the commandments, which one is the greatest? Our memory verse from last week answered that question. Then the chapter concludes with Jesus observing a poor widow offering her all to the upkeep and operations of the temple. Jesus declares that, of everyone who has given our of their surplus, this woman gave more since she gave all she had.

Ever since chapter 11, the temple has been the setting and the backdrop of the action. And, in a world of magnificent buildings and architectural wonders, we can easily forget to be impressed by the shapes of glass and steel that populate our skylines. We have all seen the St. Paul cathedral downtown. Maybe you have even been inside. **[SLIDE 2]** It is stately and regal. It is built of marble and filled with beautiful statues and images. Standing inside that cathedral makes one feel small. You cannot help but think about the greatness of God. For the Jews, the brick and mortar of the temple, that is it’s physical structure, **[SLIDE 3]** constituted God’s very dwelling place on earth. It was the center of their national identity and all of what they believed led to the temple. Ancient historian Josephus describes the temple this way: “The outward face of the Temple…was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays. But this Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for, as to those parts if it which were not gilt, they were exceeding white.” This temple was something to behold even from very far off. The temple itself rose to 165 feet and the foundations included some stones that measured 40’ long, 12’ high and 18’ wide.

So it is easy to see why the disciples would be so impressed by this dwelling place of God. They comment on the wonderful things that they observe. Jesus can see past the outward beauty. He sees what God sees: A white washed tomb, a beautifully decorated coffin, a vast and sprawling fig tree with no fruit. Jesus is not impressed with grandeur and glory when the spiritual reality inside is defunct. He declares that **[SLIDE 4]** “all will be demolished.” Talk about a buzzkill. Not only does such a comment dampen the mood but it also seems to speak against God himself. After all, he lives in this temple! How could the very house of God be destroyed?

There is a transition here now in verse 3. Jesus is on the Mount of Olives across from the temple and he is with his inner circle: Peter, James and John plus an unusual addition, Andrew is there as well. **[SLIDE 5]** It is interesting to note that these four men were the first four Jesus called to follow him. These two sets of brothers were the initial fisherman with which Jesus began, and here they are now being brought in on some very cryptic information, it is information that is not meant for the masses, it is intended **[SLIDE 6]** for those who seek to follow Jesus to the end. So if that is you, it is time to lean in and learn, to listen carefully. If not, than this chapter is especially difficult.

It’s rather difficult anyway because this whole chapter is very cryptic, especially to us modern readers. What we have here is what is famously called Jesus’ **[SLIDE 7]** Olivet Discourse. Every gospel includes some version of these words and if you thought our scripture reading sounded a lot like the book of Reveleation, you would be correct! It does! Because John in Revelation and Jesus in this chapter are both drawing on a certain genre of communication called apocalyptic literature. Overall, it is something the disciples would have been familiar with, the Jewish people at the time would have been familiar with it, but we are not…

**[SLIDE 8]** Imagine hearing a newscast that started reporting on **[SLIDE 9]** the escapades of Frodo and Gandalf in Middle Earth. Imagine hearing reports about **[SLIDE 10]** a dreaded dragon and rampaging orcs from the news anchor on TV. We all know the Lord of the Rings is fictitious fantasy. We all know orcs are not real. These stories belong to a specific **[SLIDE 11]** genre. We would not be confused by a newscaster talking about such things because we can properly file that information into the right bucket. But someone who knows nothing about Tolkien or his stories would find such a newscast much more confusing. So that is where we find ourselves. We are the confused ones and as such, we need to be careful to make sure we can file things into the right bucket. And that is a great challenge because we need to work extra hard in order to put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus’ listeners and Mark’s readers. We cannot simply begin applying what Jesus says here without first understanding the context in which he is teaching.

Now, Jesus is not delving into fiction. We cannot simply try to sort through Jesus’ words and set aside some of it as made up. But we need to talk a bit about the apocalyptic tradition. First of all, what does the term apocalyptic mean? I think most people take it to mean the end of the world, which Jesus does talk about here, but the term itself means **[SLIDE 13]** to unveil or to reveal. John’s Revelation is also rightly called John’s Apocalypse.

So apocalyptic writings are revelatory. These writings are very closely related to prophecy. In fact, within our Old Testament, we see some prophets, most notably Ezekiel and Daniel, cross over into the apocalyptic genre. So, even though this type of literature might sound like fantasy, we maintain that **[SLIDE 14]** apocalyptic literature is true…it communicates truth, but it does so in a very stylized way. Apocalyptic literature is very expressive and symbolic in its presentation. It includes bizarre imagery usually by way of a vision of some sort, descriptive language, a unique use of numbers, and most importantly for us, it is entrenched in the **[SLIDE 15]** Old Testament. The people who understand apocalyptic literature are also extremely familiar with the Old Testament. Which helps explain why we struggle with it so much…we are just not as informed. Our thought process is simply not steeped in the Old Testament.

As I said, Daniel and Ezekiel dabble in this type of writing. In those books you will find accounts of bizarre and fantastical visions. From around 200 BC until about 100 years after Christ, this type of literature was widespread within Jewish communities. And it rose to prominence as a response to what we call the **[SLIDE 16]** 400 years of silence. That is the time between the Old and New Testaments. There was a lot of history happening, but it is considered to be a time of silence from God. He was not sending prophets to preach his word as he had in the past. So, this silence, this distance from God, brought about an attitude of pessimism. People generally figured that God was done with this word; it was too far gone and had to be destroyed. God would judge all the rampant evil. He would gather all his people from wherever they were located and from whatever bondage they might be experiencing, and he would destroy all their enemies on the great and powerful Day of the Lord. So, in apocalyptic literature, **[SLIDE 17]** we read a lot about destruction and about world ending calamities, because what is meant to be described is the end of the world, the second coming. Again, these descriptions are not false or made up. The end will come. The Messiah will return. The collection of his people and the judgement of his enemies will occur, but, under the guise of apocalyptic language, it would have been understood that these events are not being described literally. Jesus is not laying out a schedule to follow, however, the truth of what Jesus says remains.

So as we sort through this chapter, we are going to take note of some very specific imperatives Jesus addresses to his disciples, which as we have seen throughout Mark’s gospel, means you and I as well. So even though some of this chapter will be confusing, these imperatives will ring out as crystal clear.

**[SLIDE 18]** So we have already heard Jesus speak about the unbelievable destruction of the temple. This is something that does happen historically in 70 AD, about fifty years after this conversation takes place. And as I mentioned, such a thing seems impossible to these disciples, so they have some questions, like **[SLIDE 19]**  “When will this happen? Are there any signs that indicate when it will happen?”

And already we come to our first imperative: **[SLIDE 20]** ((Verse 5, watch out! Watch out for what? For deception. Jesus informs us that many will come in Jesus’ name trying to deceive. Have you seen examples of that over the years? Have you ever heard of a pastor or a church leader deceiving people? Or the destruction brought about by charismatic cult leaders? Yes, it happens much more than often then we think, and so we are told to watch out! Jesus then goes on to talk about **[SLIDE 21]** war and conflict between nations…have we seen that? Earthquakes and famines. Have we seen that? These things are just the beginning says Jesus. He uses the word **[SLIDE 22]** *odin (o-deen)* which means birth pangs. This is not just normal pain or suffering. It is the pain that comes before new life. The final coming of the kingdom will be preceded by the travail of labor pains that intensify and increase until new life breaks forth.))

Verse nine, again, watch out! This time Jesus is talking about general **[SLIDE 23]** persecution. He is under no illusions here. He knows his followers will be arrested and brought before councils and tribunals, they will be beaten and killed. Jesus assures the disciples that the Holy Spirit will be with them, that they need not worry about their own defense. But the birth pangs will get worse. Even family members will accuse other family members. They will turn on one another and turn each other over to the authorities. This was not a new idea. The prophet Micah prophesied such a situation. Micah 7:6 states that a man’s enemies will come from his own household. Now this was a reality for the original audience of Mark’s gospel. People were being persecuted for their faith. Many did not know if they could trust their own family members. Many Jews were more than happy to report on someone who had recently become a Christian. So Jesus’ words here land quite a bit differently on folks who are undergoing the experiences being described. But let us recall, at the end of chapter three when Jesus redefined the idea of family. He proclaimed that **[SLIDE 24]** those who do the will of God…they are my brothers and sisters. This was a shift that early Christians truly had to take to heart.

Verse 13 sums up the Christian experience… **[SLIDE 25]** You will be hated because of my name Jesus says. So what should be done about this situation? **[SLIDE 26]** Stand firm! We are to watch out for deceivers; watch out for persecutors, and though it all…stand firm! Salvation is on the way.

But things seem to get worse. Jesus talks about a disgusting and destructive thing standing where it should not be…and Mark informs us that we should **[SLIDE 27]** understand. Riiight…thanks for that Mark…Well, one thing we need to understand is that Jesus is referencing something commonly called **[SLIDE 28]** the abomination of desolation. The prophet Daniel talks about this event and we note in 167 BC a king called Antiochus Epiphanes came to power and took over the Jewish temple. He sacrificed unclean animals on the altar, he put up his own image inside the holy areas and he even used the temple grounds to open a brothel. This certainly was an abomination that brought desolation to the holiness of God’s temple. Some would say that Jesus recycles this imagery to speak of the destruction that will be coming at the hands of the Romans. Things will be so bad that people should flee.

**[SLIDE 29]** Verse 23 issues another imperative…Not that you know what is up ahead…for the third time: watch out! Then Jesus gets very broad in his scope. He fully embraces the imagery of apocalyptic language as he speaks of the sun becoming dark and stars falling from the sky, planets will be shaken…basically the crumbling of the whole universe…and then comes the Son of Man on the clouds in great glory and splendor! Another reference to the picture Daniel painted almost 600 years earlier. And there are also references in Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah that speak of God gathering his people together. In other words, Jesus reaffirms the prophetic message laid down in the Old Testament.

He then shares a parable. **[SLIDE 30]** We can observe the state of trees. We can look at their leaves and tell when summer is coming. This is a sign to us of what is to come. In the same way, when you see these things happening, trouble brewing, persecutions and wars and catastrophes, you know that the time is nearing. Yet then Jesus says in verse 30, **[SLIDE 31]** “this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen.” This is a tricky verse. It seems to indicate that Jesus was mistaken. We are 2,000 years later still waiting for the Messiah to return. It’s hard to know what to make of this. Maybe Jesus meant “generation” in a symbolic way….maybe “all these things” happening is a refence to the fall of Jerusalem, which does actually occur within the timeline of that generation. However we might land on this verse, we can all get behind the clarity of verse 32: **[SLIDE 32]** No one knows when the day or hour will come…not even Jesus is privy. It is according to God’s timetable. It is imminent. It is sure. It is not a matter of if Jesus will return, but when. So what should be done about this open-ended schedule? For the fourth time….Watch out! And here is also added stay alert! Watch out! Stay alert! That’s what you do. That’s the life of a disciple.

Another parable helps us here. God is like the master of the house **[SLIDE 33]** who had left his servants in charge. That’s us…we are the servants. And here is the key…look at verse 34, he has given each one a **[SLIDE 34]** job to do. We each have a job to do…we each have a responsibility. What is your job? Maybe you’re not sure. Ask God! He’ll tell you. Ask your brothers and sisters in this place. We need one another to help name the gifts and talents we see in one another. And, I want to mention that different seasons in life might call for a different job for awhile. So if you are not sure what your job is, that’s okay. Know that you have one and ask God what he has for you to do. We dare not neglect our job. It is both an honor to serve the master and also a terrifying thing. What if I mess it up? What if I can’t get it right? What if I am unprepared or inadequate for the task? Well, hallelujah, welcome to it! We are all inadequate. We are all unable to get our job done on our own. So what should we do about the jobs we have been given? Verse 35: **[SLIDE 35]** Stay Alert! God is not interested in us perfecting every detail. He knows we will make mistakes…he can handle that. What he will not accept is to come home and find his servants sleeping on the job! And to close out this chapter, it is almost as though Jesus breaks the fourth wall. He is speaking to his disciples, “What I say to you I say to all,” then it’s as though he looks directly into the camera and speaks directly to you and me: Stay Alert!

This is a tough chapter. It is hard to understand the specifics. But do not let the confusing aspects cloud the loud and clear message to disciples: Watch out! (Four times) Stay alert (three times) Stand firm (one time). Christ is coming! And as his servants, our whole life is a preparation to meet the King. We have a job to do. Let us do it as best as we can. It may not be perfect, but we are going to give it everything we’ve got! Doing this work is not drudgery…it is how we live in hope. Doing this work is how we watch out, how we stay alert and how we stand firm! Amen.