

# Strange Comfort:

A Sermon on Mark 13

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My best friend, Marie, is pregnant for the fifth time. She has two children. She lost two children to miscarriage. When she became pregnant this time, she was relieved to find that soon after conception she felt awful. She was nauseated, couldn't tolerate the smell of coffee, and her most urgent desire was to lie down on the couch and take a nap. These feelings brought her relief, because when she lost pregnancies through miscarriage, she had been feeling great. Now, craving Chinese food at 10 in the morning and then finding that she can't eat it when it is in front of her gives her the strange comfort of knowing that her little baby is doing just fine. Whereas the rest of us would find such symptoms as warnings that something in us is very wrong, she knows that they are telling her that something is very right.

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses the metaphor of birth pangs for the events he describes in Mark 13: "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."

Like my pregnant friend, Jesus knows that these horrors—while normally signifying that things are very wrong—will actually be reminders to his followers that in truth, everything is very right.

It probably didn't sound that way to Peter, Andrew, James, and John. It was to these four that these words were spoken. We may initially think of Mark 13 as a sermon preached to all the disciples, or at least to all twelve apostles, but this was not the case. Mark tells us at the beginning of the chapter that after Jesus made his declaration about the temple being thrown down, Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to him privately and asked what in the world he was talking about. Mark 13 is Jesus' response to their question.

These words were not spoken to the whole group. Jesus didn't preach them in the temple courts or send them echoing across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said these things privately to these men who were, arguably, the four who were closest to him.

These aren't words for the casual follower. The words of Jesus in Mark 13 are intended for those who are closest to him, who are serious about following him, who believe that what he says is true.

In asking the question, these four reveal exactly that. These four heard Jesus' prophecy about the temple, and they knew he wasn't joking. Already that week—that Holy Week—they had seen Jesus clear out the temple courts and curse a fig tree to its withering. They knew that his words about the temple were true. That is why they came to him and asked, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

These four are close enough to Jesus to know that he does not utter such statements merely for their shock value. They know that the words that he speaks are true.

So, imagine them hearing these words about being brought to trial, about a desolating sacrilege, about fleeing to the mountains; imagine these four Galilean fishermen sitting on the Mount of Olives, gazing out on the magnificent temple, and hearing their rabbi tell them that someday soon the temple would be no more and their very lives would be in danger and knowing that every word he said was true.

There is no condition stated in Mark 13, no "if this, then that." The words are stark and graphic, unencumbered by stipulations or provisions. The words are clear, and they are true.

Herein lies the comfort. Comfort in prophecies of persecution and distress? Comfort in predictions of suffering?

No, comfort in that *this* is not all there is. If these words of Jesus are true, the words about wars and rumors of wars, the words about councils and beatings, the words about fright and flight—if these words are true, then so are the words that promise his return.

Jesus knew that suffering would come to him. He knew that suffering would come to Jerusalem. He knew that suffering would come to his friends. He knew that suffering would continue in the world. He knew that someday the suffering would end.

In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

This is why he can tell his friends, "don't worry and don't be afraid." The lack of fear and lack of worry commanded by Jesus of his followers is not based on promises that they will be exempt from sorrow, that suffering will miss their houses; it is not based on assurances that wars will take place far from their

homelands and earthquakes will not happen in their hemispheres; it is not based on pledges of rescue or retaliation.

The words of comfort Jesus gives in the thirteenth chapter of Mark are founded on the truth that he will return.

So, when followers of Jesus hear of wars and rumors of wars, we hear of them not as cause for undue concern but as a reminder that the words of Jesus are true. The strange comfort embedded in Mark 13 is that when nation rises against nation and kingdom against kingdom, when there are earthquakes in various places, when there are famines—when all these things happen, it is further proof that what Jesus says is true. These horrors, while reminding us that things are not the way they are supposed to be in this world stained by sin, also serve to remind the followers of Jesus Christ that in truth, everything is very right because everything is just as Jesus said it would be.

Now, we need to be cautious with such claims. This does not mean that when war is declared we merely shrug our shoulders and go back to our crossword puzzles. This does not mean that when a tsunami wipes out hundreds of thousands, and we see the horrific pictures on CNN, we receive the news matter-of-factly and flip over to Animal Planet. Just because Jesus says that such things are going to happen in the course of the world does not mean that we as his followers do not seek to relieve suffering and promote peace. There is plenty in the rest of the gospels to teach us that.

What this does mean is that when these things happen, we as followers of Jesus Christ, are to not be afraid. Be alert, he says in these verses, be aware, but do not be alarmed, do not be afraid.

This is why when wars and rumors of wars circle the globe, and earthquakes produce tsunamis that flatten parts of the world, it is the disciples of Jesus who are the first to push back. We are the ones who protest for peace; we are the ones who volunteer to rebuild. We are not the ones who stand idly by and shake our heads. We are not the ones who pretend that the pain of those half a world away does not matter.

Because our Lord has told us to be aware, to be alert, but also not to worry and not to be afraid, we can boldly step in when others step back, and sign up when others check out.

In this chapter of Mark, Jesus actually assumes that this is how his followers will be: “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. 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 will speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus doesn't say, “Oh, hey, you know, just in case you get into trouble sometimes for standing up for your faith, just in case somebody, somewhere doesn't like what you're doing, here's a little advice that may be handy.”

Jesus says, “*When they bring you to trial and hand you over. . .*”

There is in Jesus’ words the expectation that troubles are ahead for those who are close to him. So, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, while the temple in Jerusalem may fall and Romans will slaughter the Jews; while many flee to caves and cling to false Messiahs; you—those I have called and love—do not worry and do not be afraid.

Jesus’ words were spoken to these friends of his who would live to see the temple fall, who would see Jews flee from their holy city, who would be dragged before councils and kings. What Jesus prophesied happened, the stones of the temple were thrown down when the Romans swept into the city. Of his disciples, eleven were martyred and one died in exile.

When they were on trial, they testified. When they were in prison, they sang. When earthquakes opened the doors of their cells, they stayed and converted the jailer. Just a few days after Jesus spoke these words, when women came to them and told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, they believed. They believed, and then they testified, and then they sang, and then they were killed. When they lived, they lived boldly, and when they died, it was without fear.

Was this because they were so different from us? Infused with more of God’s Spirit? Loved more by God’s son?

No. It was because they listened to their Rabbi. The Rabbi who said to them, be aware, be alert, but do not be afraid. The Rabbi who said stay awake, but do not worry. The Rabbi who said to them that they would see the Son of Man come in clouds with great power and glory.

They listened. They changed the world.

When people sometimes ask me why I believe, one reason I give is because the church is still around. Two thousand years of fallen leaders and lazy members, two thousand years of scandal and sacrilege, two thousand years of surviving on leftover time and leftover money—and the church is still here. We’re still here, because these people believed and testified and sang and made disciples of all nations who do the very same. The church is still here.

Why is the church still here? After two thousand years, why has Jesus not yet returned?

It’s easy for us to shake our heads at the apparent unresponsiveness of God. It’s easy for us to tick off the prophecies from Mark 13 that have been fulfilled and become very impatient at the one that so obviously hasn’t.

The temple’s been destroyed, the followers of Jesus have been persecuted in every century, but why have two thousand years gone by and Jesus has not yet returned? Haven’t all the rest of these prophecies been fulfilled? What is God waiting for?

Some may read into the Scripture various things about the land of Israel, some may lay out the other prophecies that need to be fulfilled first. Some may have a list with different things that need to be checked off before the return

of Christ will happen, but such people are not paying good attention to Jesus. Jesus does not say, “guess,” and Jesus does not say make a checklist, and Jesus himself does not know. Jesus says, “But of the day or the hour no one knows, not the angels in heaven nor even the Son but only God the Father.”

The comfort is that it will happen, Jesus will return, and it will happen when God the Father declares that it is time. When the time comes, we’ll know. Until then, we wait. We wait without fear, and we wait without worry, and we wait in hope. We wait with hands dirty from our work in this world; with hearts full of compassion for those who suffer, for those with bodies aching with disease and distress, for all those who long for redemption. We wait.

When I had just started writing this sermon, my pregnant friend called me. I told her that with her permission I was going to write about her. “I’m going to write about being pregnant,” I told her; she said in a heartbeat, “How much it stinks?”

Then I reminded her that at the end of this, she will hold a baby in her arms. This mother of two who knows what it is to lose a pregnancy said to me, “Hopefully.”

Hopefully. My friend lives in the anxiety that surrounds being pregnant in a world where anything can go wrong. I’ve buried stillborn babies. I’ve buried young children. We know, don’t we, that we live in a world where anything can go wrong. That is why we need more than ever to hear these words of comfort from our Lord, who says that his return to this earth is even more certain than the birth of an October baby.

But, in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heaven will be shaken. Then they will see—then you will see! Then we will see!—the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

This is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.