

“Don’t Believe the (Exclusive) Hype”

Mark 13:1-10

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Are you ready? Are you prepared? Anyone who’s seen my office lately knows I’m not. Deadlines seem to creep up faster these days. And I know I’m not alone. Blame it on the accelerating pace of technology, or the squeeze of unemployment, or the frenzied pace of our time, many people I know seem to be behind the curve. I can’t make the meeting this week, I’ve got a deadline. I have to stay up late tonight, I’ve got a deadline. I can’t make dinner, I’ve got a deadline. I don’t have time to play with the kids, I’ve got work to do.

Are you ready? Are you prepared? The disciples didn’t ever seem like they were ready. And I don’t think it is because they were lazy. Jesus drags them from town to town on a steady pace of healing, amid crowds that make them question their decision to sign up for this job. It appears to me that their failure to watch has nothing to do with their work ethic, their commitment, or their time. It has nothing to do with their interest, their love for Jesus, or their wish to follow him. Perhaps they were so worn out from the work that they didn’t have energy left to focus on anything else. Perhaps they were so occupied by the pace of work that they missed signs they might otherwise notice.

Jesus spends much of Mark’s gospel telling them to watch, translated in this text as “beware.” Watch that no one leads you astray. Watch, for they will hand you over to councils. Watch – false messiahs will appear. Watch – you do not know when the time will come. Jesus tells them to watch all throughout Mark’s gospel yet time and time again they are found to be sleeping on the job, too tired, or distracted, or occupied to see the coming reign of God right before their eyes.

Jesus claims this failure to be ready is no accident. There are those who try to lead the disciples astray. False messiahs who want the disciples to read more into the signs of the times than they should. Those who use wars and natural disasters and political disorder to spread fear and panic among people, to heighten their anxiety, and distract them from keeping watch for the coming reign of God.

It’s a politics that we are quite familiar with in our time. The issue doesn’t really matter, the tactics are the same. Talk about tweaking health care in fairly conservative ways – government-run health care isn’t even on the table - and there are voices who speak of socialism and government takeover. Talk of peacemaking and engaging enemies with dialogue instead of threats and there are voices who speak of treason and hurting the troops. Talk of extending marriage privileges to a small group of gay citizens and there are those who talk about the downfall of civilization. We know well the politics of inflation, the politics of fear spread among the people to distract them from staying focused on the values that Jesus has taught.

Don't believe the hype, Jesus tells his disciples, stay focused on the message and the hope that I have given you. Part of the hype during Mark's time was being perpetuated, in part, by a group of Jews called the Zealots. Mark's gospel was written decades after Jesus' death when Israel found itself at war with Rome. Hostilities broke out a few years before Mark's gospel was written. Claiming that God would fight on their side if only they had the courage to take up arms, the Zealot revolutionaries believed the signs of the times pointed to an imminent, miraculous military victory.

Claiming God on their side, these religious freedom fighters turned the Temple into a staging grounds for their own vision of a purified Israel, cleansed of Gentile influence. The Zealot leaders ordered the execution of anyone who suspected of advocating surrender to Rome.¹ On the other side of the conflict, Roman soldiers would not discriminate in their bloodthirsty rage against Israel. All Jews would be their targets of their wrath. Hundreds of thousands of Jews would die in this revolt.

Mark's community of Christians – Gentiles and Jews – were caught in the middle. They would be spared no mercy by bloodthirsty Roman soldiers on the one hand, and rejected by Zealot Jews who saw Mark's diverse community as unpatriotic or even blasphemous on the other. Mark's community would be shunned by Zealots and Romans alike because they embody a gospel of inclusion. The existence of their community, Mark argued, is a sign to the world that God's salvation, God's saving work is for all.²

I realize that this reading offers with it a temptation to glorify Christians, without merit, as radical universalists harangued by close-minded Jews and bloodthirsty soldiers.³ And I realize that this kind of anti-Jewish reading has long been a staple in Christian worship. But if you buy this reading of the message, as I do, that we are called to testify with our lips as well as with our community to God's inclusive embrace of all people, then clearly Jesus' critique of religious extremism isn't limited to Judaism. The work we're called to do begins within our own Christian house.

I was reminded of this on Tuesday night when we welcomed an earnest brother and sister in the faith to our session meeting. These Presbyterians from another

¹ The Romans first attacked Galilee, killing or selling into slavery an estimated 100,000 Jews. Zealot leaders who escaped to Jerusalem killed anyone in the Jewish leadership who did not share their vision. See Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, (New York: William Morrow and Company), 2001.

² See Brian K. Blount, "Watch Out!" in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2002. I do question whether both historically and in the contemporary church, Jesus' statement that "the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations" (v. 10) is really understood as a gospel of "universal inclusion" (Blount 211). This is, however, the way I understand the gospel claim as I make clear in the sermon. It is important to recognize that Jesus' work in my reading is understood as extending the promises made in the original covenant with Israel to Gentiles. It does not mean replacing or superseding that covenant.

³ It is important to note that many Jews rejected the Zealot vision. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai was smuggled out of Jerusalem and surrendered to the Romans in return for the establishment of a school of learning. While called a traitor in his day he is widely recognized as forging a new Judaism that could survive without a Temple. Thus to portray followers of Jesus as the only opposition to the Zealot vision (or worse, the "Jewish vision") is a misreading of history.

congregation in our presbytery wanted to speak to us about the ministry of evangelism. After some biblical admonitions, and witness stories, one of our elders said, “The three people that I work closest to at the office are a Muslim, a Hindu, and a Jew. Are you telling me I should try to convert them?” The presenter went on to try to strengthen our faith by proving Christianity to be superior to all others. Muslims and Hindus “are easy,” he said, they worship “dead gods.” It was at this point, that I sensed the meeting was about to get out of hand and I worried that I might have to physically restrain some of our elders. And so we thanked our fellow Christians for taking their time to meet with us and saw them to the door.

As we processed some strong feelings among session members, one elder said, “You know ironically I do think we need to do more evangelism. Because when people like us who really do believe what we know to be the message of the gospel – a message of inclusion – when we keep our mouths shut, that message of exclusion is the only message that is heard.”

I think that’s what Jesus is saying in Mark’s gospel. The good news must be proclaimed to all nations. The good news must be preached whatever the consequences. We must not be misled into preaching a religion of exclusion, a religion of superiority, a religion of purity. We must preach the message that the invitation into the reign of God is for Gentiles and Jews, blacks and whites, gay and straight, Muslims and Hindus and Jews, too. The invitation into the reign of God can hardly be tolerated by extremists who call on the name of God to bless their own agendas, who claim the signs of the times as proof that God is on their side. The invitation into the reign of God must be shared with a world that can scarcely stand to hear it.

Jesus was convinced that those who preach this gospel should expect harassment, should expect persecution, should expect the cross. And while we live in a nation with a high tolerance for speech, I’ve seen glimpses of what he’s talking about. Almost everytime I’ve spoken on written on gay inclusion I’ve gotten letters filled with threats and hatred claiming that the signs of the times point to God on their side. I’ve been called a traitor for speaking out for peace. I’ve had my faith as a Christian questioned for suggesting that Jews don’t need to convert to my faith, that belief in Jesus may not be as important as following him. There is a seething anger just below the surface of some people in just about every faith, an anger that can hardly imagine that God is big enough to love more than one people, more than one way, more than one faith.

And so I’m thankful that in the midst of that exclusive message of my faith is bigger than your faith, my God is bigger than your God, God is on my side and not yours, I’m thankful that I have seen that gospel message preached. I daresay it was preached several years ago when blacks, whites, Latinos, and immigrant from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean all joined together to fight measures that would have criminalized feeding and clothing undocumented immigrants. The next week we met with Senators Mikulski and Sarbanes and they all wanted to know, “How in the world did you people – representing groups that usually fight with each other – how is it that you came together?” I saw it last Saturday when a diverse group of pastors and teachers and children gathered together to

declare a playground sacred. I see it every Advent when our church joins Baptists and Episcopalians and Methodists and AMEs and Pentecostals, and Community Churches to watch out for the reign of God together. I see when we gather with our Catholic and Episcopal friends across the street to discuss differences that Christians used to kill each other over.

And this is how we watch out for the coming reign of God. Not by allowing ourselves to be distracted by the signs of the times, to be swallowed up by the fear of the newest shooting, or the newest terrorist threat. Not by allowing our times to be swallowed up with the pace of life that wants to distract us from being with each other. Not by occupying ourselves with work, or tasks that do not feed us or feed a hungry world. But we embody it, we live the message that we have received, sharing the good news of God's radically inclusive invitation into a world that we have already seen embodied in Jesus Christ: a world where differences do not lead to war, to hate, to segregation, to inequality, to injustice, but to peace, love, hope, and joy.

There's a legendary story about a teacher of Kate and mine from seminary who died a few years back. Shirley Guthrie, the author of *Christian Doctrine*, one of the most widely read primers on Christianity theology. In the 60s he was known for his call for racial integration and many southern Presbyterians called for his resignation. He was getting too political, they said. He was called to appear before a session of a large all-white church in the south. They called him before the session and the asked him, Professor Guthrie are you a universalist or are you not? "No," Guthrie said, "I'm not a universalist. I believe there are some people who when they get to that heavenly banquet they will look around and see who's sitting at that table – and they will decide they just don't want to be there."⁴

My friends, the church is called to prepare people right now to sit at that banquet that is coming. Are you ready? Are you prepared?

⁴ This story is recalled from memory from my time with Shirley Guthrie and his students and admirers at Columbia Theological Seminary. I'm sure a more accurate version is published somewhere.