

Temple talk: Mark 13:1-8

by [Keith D. Herron](#) in the [November 14, 2006](#) issue

As Mark tells the story, Jesus spoke these words from chapter 13 at the end of a Tuesday just days before his crucifixion. He and the disciples were standing on the Temple Mount, gazing at one of the most opulent temples ever built. The white marble courtyard walls glistened in the bright sunshine. Massive stone columns lined the perimeter, holding up the porches that surrounded God's great earthly plateau. The temple walls were covered with sheets of gold that nearly blinded approaching visitors. Josephus wrote that the gold on the temple "reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it were forced to turn away. . . . It seemed in the distance like a mountain covered in snow, for any part not covered in gold was dazzling white."

During the week of Passover the city's population exploded as religious wayfarers arrived—a congestion of pilgrims, priests, beasts, and lots and lots of money. And there they all stood, gaping at the blinding wonder of the temple wall and thinking about how magnificent it was. That is, until Jesus stunned the group by blurting out, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Hard to imagine? Perhaps it might be like standing on the mall in Washington, D.C., during a bright, sunny Fourth of July celebration with hundreds of thousands of visitors. Seeing past the breathtaking grandeur of the moment, an orator is overtaken by a vision and imagines the utter desolation of everything in sight. It would be as if the speaker had the ability to envision the destruction of every significant building of our national capital and to see in their places only rubble and smoke and destruction.

Jesus looked past the swarm of visitors, past the cacophony of sights and sounds, past the towering temple, and saw only ruins. There was no rhyme or reason to his view of things, of those glories reduced to a heap of rubble, with buildings like a child's wooden blocks strewn carelessly on the floor. The disciples were bowled over by what Jesus described and the clarity of his vision. They asked him, "When will this be? And what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

Every generation of believers has struggled with those questions, yet the answer has been no over and over and over again. To those who fear that the end is approaching, Jesus speaks with unwavering certainty and clear advice. He warns of misleading voices and contorted messages that are intended to strike fear in our hearts. He does not pretend that chaos will abate; in fact he is clear that chaos will precede the end. It is, he says, “but the beginning of birth pangs.”

There are Christian fearmongers today who heighten the hysteria of the times with their warnings. Jesus tells us simply, “Do not go after them.” Even when the sky is falling? Even when the world seems to be coming to an end? “Do not go after them.” Do not be terrified.

When he first appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, Jesus told them, “Peace be with you.” Peace—not chaos and confusion. Peace—not fearfulness or trembling. The Prince of Peace came among us bringing the hopeful message that we can have peace in the midst of strife and hardship. The message of peace has been a part of the gospel message for centuries, although it was as fragile for those early Christians as it is for us.

Jesus soberly warned that the future would not be secure. He pointed to a time that was coming when the children of God would not be safe from evil in the world. Arrests and persecution were the ways the world announced its opposition to the good news of God’s reconciling love through Jesus. Believers who followed Jesus had to be ready to pick up their crosses and die with him. Most of us have experienced virtually nothing of persecution. But persecution has come in the past, and will come again.

There are nations in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East today where a Christian witness is not safe. Yet believers there and elsewhere are urged not to fear what they might need to say when the hour of trial comes.

For the first 300 years after the ministry of Jesus, Christians suffered tremendously. They were hunted like animals, brought before various magistrates and kings and challenged to renounce their belief in Jesus. Many recanted under threat of torture. But many more clung courageously to the faith, refusing to claim any other name than Jesus’ name and thus joining a large group of believers who became the church’s heroes by their martyrdom.

The promise of Jesus is that when our moment of truth comes we need not fear that we will lack the courage to say what is needed. We don't have to concern ourselves with whether the words will rise up in our throats. The presence of God through the Holy Spirit will be with us and will give us what we need to say. Jesus offers us his peace as a gift of grace in that moment.

The "passing of the peace" is the sign that the church has lovingly shared through the harshest of times. When we enact this ritual, we may forget its power and its history: it has been practiced in times of great duress and suffering. When one of us takes the hand of another and says, "May the peace of Christ be with you," and the other responds, "and with you," we offer testimony to Christ's peace, and we prove to the unbelieving world that we are God's people.