

November 17, Ordinary 33B Mark 13:1-8

Jesus tells the disciples a hard truth: nothing you see here is going to last.

by [T. Denise Anderson](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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This essay is on a biblical text assigned for November 17, and I'm mindful that you may be reading it sometime after the November 5 election in the United States—though I can't say for certain that the matter will be completely settled by then. If the very recent history of US elections and the rhetoric around this one are any indication, things will be very much up in the air. Or perhaps the counts have been so decisive that you know who the next president will be and now await their inauguration. Either way, chances are you currently find yourself in a liminal space.

That word *liminal* comes from the Latin word *limens*, which means “threshold.” You're going from one space to another, but you're not really in either space. It's an odd and unstable place to be. In creative writing, a liminal space is the time between a major incident and the protagonist's resolution about it. In anthropology, liminality is the ambiguity or disorientation that takes hold in the middle of rituals, which seems especially pertinent to the work a lot of you do.

I remember preaching from this Mark text during one of those weeks that drive preachers crazy. It was a week when events in the news compelled us to crumple up previous sermon drafts and start all over again—more than once. Two Black people were gunned down by a racist in broad daylight at a supermarket just minutes from where I work in Louisville, Kentucky. Three days later, 11 people were massacred by an antisemite during Shabbat services in Pittsburgh. Then another school shooting happened in the Charlotte area. And then a historically Black church near where I lived had to be evacuated for a bomb threat. Soon after that, a shooting in Thousand Oaks, California, left 13 people dead, including one who had escaped another mass shooting in Las Vegas the year before.

Then a billboard went up in Missouri with a picture of the occupant of the White House at the time and an inscription that read, “And the word became flesh . . . ”—the same candidate who ran in this year’s presidential contest, having since earned an unprecedented two impeachments and 34 felony convictions.

But even as everything seemed out of sorts, for the first time in our history we sent 100 women to Congress. For the first time, Texas sent Latinas there. For the first time, Muslimas and Native women were there. For the first time, an openly gay and partnered man was elected to govern a state (Colorado). We were on the cusp of something, but it wasn’t entirely clear what that something was. Nothing seemed to be in the expected order then, and perhaps it still does not. I imagine life remains filled with “And then . . . ” moments.

So what do you do in a liminal space like this?

Having just talked about how the religious establishment was devouring the houses of widows and using a widow with two copper coins in a lesson on generosity and exploitation, Jesus’ disciples—as if they haven’t heard a word he’s just said—go on to gush over the magnificence of the temple. Jesus has to tell them the hard truth: nothing you see here is going to last. That throws everything into uncertainty for them. But Jesus encourages them to hold on.

Clearly, everything is ephemeral. The things we take comfort in and take for granted can be threatened. Jesus’ disciples spend a lot of energy being impressed by a building—a building that will one day be reduced to rubble. The temptation will always be to uphold systems and institutions, but were we called to uphold something that can only ever be temporary? Institutions will wax and wane. Buildings will need some repairs (as many church councils and leaders can attest), but do we fix buildings because they are tools for ministry or because they are familiar homes for what we’ve always known? Our motivations and what we claim as our core values determine how, why, and even if we do what Jesus tells his disciples to do in uncertain times: hold on.

By the time you read this, I hope something promising and transformational has taken place in our nation and our world. And even if it has, I know more work will still be needed. How we hold on in liminal spaces has everything to do with what we hope will greet us on the other side of the threshold. Are we willing to continue working for a world where justice rolls down like waters? Because one thing I know about our current time is that something will always have to replace what is.

Thankfully, we have a say in what the new thing will be.