“Watchful Hearts in a World of Uncertainty”

Mark 13:24–37

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August 1981 remains vivid in my memory. A powerful typhoon struck my home province of Aurora, on Luzon's northeastern coast in the Philippines. Our house and many nearby houses were flattened. The only building still standing was a cement house used as an evacuation centre. Its windows shattered, and its roof threatened to lift off. The wind roared, and rain stung like needles. Families crowded together as parents comforted crying children. As a high-school student, I found it terrifying. It made landfall at midnight and battered us for hours. Yet the following day, a rainbow appeared in the sky.

For Christians, a rainbow recalls God's covenant with Noah: a promise that the waters would never again destroy all living creatures.[1] After devastation, the sign seemed bewildering: the world was shaken, yet a promise appeared above it. That memory helps me hear today's Gospel. Jesus speaks of a world seemingly coming apart, yet calls his disciples not to panic but to remain watchful.

Mark 13:24–37 is often called the "little apocalypse."[2] Apocalypse does not simply mean catastrophe. The Greek word means an unveiling or revelation: a disclosure of God's purposes beyond the present crisis. Jewish apocalyptic writing used vivid images and cosmic upheaval to declare that oppressive powers would not have the final word. It did not calculate the end; it strengthened faith amid suffering.[3]

The historical setting matters. Mark, the earliest Gospel, is commonly dated around Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE. The Temple was more than a place of worship. It stood at the heart of Jewish religious, social, and national life: the centre of sacrifice and pilgrimage, and a symbol of covenant identity and God's presence. Its destruction by Rome was a profound religious, cultural, and communal trauma. For many, it could feel as though the foundations of the world had collapsed.

Scholars debate whether Jesus anticipated the destruction or Mark shaped the teaching in its aftermath. We need not settle that debate to hear the central message. Mark places words of upheaval alongside a promise: even when heaven and earth pass away, Christ's words will not pass away.

The darkened sun, dimmed moon, and falling stars echo prophetic passages in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Joel. This language depicts collapsing powers and a transformed order, not necessarily the universe's literal disintegration. Jesus also speaks of the Son of Man coming in clouds, an image associated with Daniel's vision of one who receives authority from God. That vision offered hope that violent earthly kingdoms would be judged and God's people vindicated. Jesus assures his disciples that suffering and imperial power do not determine the future. God does.

Then the image changes. Jesus points to a fig tree. When its branches soften and leaves appear, people recognize that summer is near.[1] The disciples must read their times without claiming God's knowledge. No one knows the day or hour.[11] The lesson is discernment without presumption, readiness without fear.

This distinction matters in our own time. Social media gives extraordinary reach to voices announcing imminent collapse, disaster, divine punishment, or the fulfilment of secret prophecies. Some claim prophetic authority; others present speculation as certainty.

Dramatic predictions spread quickly because fear attracts attention. The loudest voice is not always the truest; certainty is not Christian wisdom. A frightening headline or claim about the end can spread before anyone checks its truth.

Christians should not dismiss every warning or refuse to face genuine dangers. Our world faces war, displacement, environmental destruction, poverty, injustice, and division. Faith does not ask us to close our eyes. But it also does not ask us to surrender our minds to every alarming voice. Jesus does not tell his disciples to chase predictions, decode every headline, or live in anxiety. He tells them to watch.[12] Watchfulness requires prayer, patience, truthfulness, and wisdom to distinguish evidence from rumour, hope from manipulation. We should ask whether a message bears Christ's fruits - compassion, humility, justice, and peace - or instead feeds hatred, panic, and contempt.

The second part of the Gospel gives watchfulness a practical shape. Jesus tells of a householder who goes on a journey, leaves the servants in charge, gives each one work, and instructs the doorkeeper to stay alert.[13] The household is not meant to sit idle. Each servant has a responsibility. The doorkeeper's task matters, as does every servant's work. The whole household is entrusted with the master's affairs.

This is a picture of Christian discipleship. Through baptism, we belong to Christ and share responsibility for his household, the Church and the wider world.[1] Our calling is ordinary faithfulness: worshipping, praying, caring for children and elders, teaching the faith, welcoming newcomers, visiting the lonely, and serving neighbours. These acts may seem small beside predictions of the end. Yet they are precisely how we remain ready for Christ.

The family image reminds us that responsibility is shared. When a parent is away, household care cannot rest on one person alone. Each member contributes according to their ability. Likewise, the Church cannot leave watchfulness to the deacon, the priest, the bishop, or a few committed people. Every member has a ministry. We keep awake by strengthening one another and serving with love.[1]

Advent begins with this call to watchfulness. It is not a season for panic or a competition to identify the signs of the end. It is a season of preparation and hope. Christ came among us, meets us now, and will come in glory. We do not know the hour, but we know the One for whom we wait.[1]

A familiar Christmas song warns, "You better watch out." Its playful message is about Santa Claus coming to town. Perhaps we can borrow its refrain and give it a deeper meaning: Christ is coming. So let us watch - not with frightened eyes fixed on disaster, but with hearts awake to God's presence. Let us be faithful in the work entrusted to us, discerning in what we believe and share, and generous in the love we offer. The world may be shaken, but Christ's promise stands. Amen.

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1. Genesis 8:20–22; 9:8–17. The rainbow signifies God's everlasting covenant with Noah and all living creatures, affirming God's faithfulness to creation.
2. Mark 13 is commonly called the Synoptic or Little Apocalypse because of its apocalyptic imagery. See Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
3. Jewish apocalyptic literature used symbolic visions and cosmic imagery to express hope in God's ultimate victory over oppression. See John J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).
4. Mark is generally dated around 65–75 CE, close to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. See Joel Marcus, Mark 8–16, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
5. The Jerusalem Temple was central to Jewish worship, sacrifice, pilgrimage, and communal identity. Its destruction by Rome in 70 CE profoundly affected Jewish religious life. See Josephus, The Jewish War, Books 5–6.
6. Scholars debate the relationship between Jesus' historical teaching about the Temple and Mark's presentation of it following Jerusalem's destruction. See Marcus, Mark 8–16, commentary on Mark 13.
7. Mark 13:31 emphasizes the enduring authority of Christ's words despite the passing of heaven and earth. Compare Isaiah 40:8 and Matthew 24:35.
8. The cosmic imagery echoes Isaiah 13:9–10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7–8; and Joel 2:10, 30–31. These passages use celestial disturbances to portray divine judgment and the transformation of earthly powers.
9. Mark 13:26 draws upon Daniel 7:13–14, where the Son of Man receives authority and dominion from God. See also Mark 14:62.
10. Mark 13:28–29 uses the fig tree's emerging leaves as an ordinary seasonal sign that summer is approaching. Compare Matthew 24:32–33.
11. Mark 13:32 emphasizes that the precise time of the end is known only to the Father. Compare Matthew 24:36 and Acts 1:7.
12. The repeated command to watch in Mark 13:33–37 calls for spiritual attentiveness and readiness. The Greek verb gregoreō means to remain awake or alert. Compare 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8.
13. Mark 13:34–36 presents the household and its servants as an illustration of responsibility and readiness during the master's absence. Compare Matthew 24:45–51.
14. Baptism incorporates Christians into Christ's body and shares with them the responsibility for the Church's mission. See 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 and Ephesians 4:11–16.
15. The ministry of the Church belongs to the whole people of God, each serving according to their gifts. See Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; and 1 Peter 2:9–10.
16. Advent brings together the remembrance of Christ's first coming, his presence among us, and the expectation of his return. See Isaiah 9:2–7; Mark 13:33–37; and Romans 13:11–14.