

“Like and Follow” based on Mark 13:5-22

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on November 24, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

When reading a text like this, it's easy to immediately jump to thinking about the end times. We might do this either to dismiss it as apocalyptic prediction or to take it very seriously in that regard and think that we can predict what is going to happen in that regard.

But what we have here is something to which we can apply St. Augustine of Hippo's principle of the three-fold interpretation. First, it applies to the destruction of Jerusalem shortly after or around the same time Mark's gospel was written in 69AD. It can also apply to the life of the church in every age, and yes, it can apply also to the coming end times.

Here on this Christ the King Sunday, I want focus primarily on the how it applies to the church throughout its history and in the present day. Jesus says we know not the hour, so I'm not going to focus on the end times. Likewise, the destruction of Jerusalem, as much as a nerd like me might enjoy it, I'll spare you that.

In doing this, we also have a new members Sunday today, and I want to commend the new members for deciding to join the church and committing themselves to being a part of this congregation. I also want to commend all of you who read these sermons each week,, or show up in person or online every Sunday or most Sundays of each month.

I commend you because we live in a very busy world. It's hard to commit ourselves to things. It's hard when so many things pull at us for our time and our allegiance. More than 40 years ago, Lesslie Newbigin commented on this struggle, saying it was easier to evangelize in the poorest parts of the world where people are persecuted for their faith, than it was to go throughout his nominally Christian country and talk about Jesus. Newbigin was a British pastor, theologian and writer who spent most of his time as a missionary in India and when he came back to India he found the churches empty, even when people claimed to be Christian.

I sometimes wonder what Newbigin, who died in 1998, might think if he were alive today. He died 10 years before smartphones and 1998 to me, doesn't seem like it should be that long ago. Netflix had just begun mailing DVDs, and was still far from streaming. Public access to the internet was less than 10 years old and most people accessed the internet through something called a phone line, which our young people may not know about. Cell phones were not the norm. We got the internet from this phone line.

We had to wait for news. Fox News had just started to compete with CNN and its sister station, Headline News, which had been the only 24-hour-news broadcasters. We had to wait for the newspaper to show up, but I won't make a joke about newspapers. I used to work for one. Regular TV broadcasts at night were what we depended on for news access.

Likewise, there was no “on-demand” access for television shows – you had to wait for stations to broadcast. This may sound like the dark ages to some young people. Even I wonder how we did certain things before the ways in which we do them now. I almost get a feeling of being unsafe if I leave my house without my phone.

Right now, just 46 percent of Americans say they are a member of a church, mosque, or synagogue. Just 44 percent of Americans say they attend or participate in church, mosque, or synagogue at

least once a month. At the same time, 66 percent of Americans say they are Christian. In Europe, the numbers are even lower with most countries reporting less than 20 percent attend services regularly. Even in Israel, a country we associate with religious identity, just 36 percent say their religion is important to them. Just 30 percent in Israel attend a synagogue or church.

As a pastor, I am still in the real world so I get it. I understand how many things vie for our time and compete for every moment in our lives. Many of us have jobs and if you're retired, God bless you because that's the dream. However, we spend so much time in our work. Then there's kid's sports and activities. I had no idea how much time these take up. Oh my goodness. When I was a kid, my parents didn't go to all my games, let alone my practices. If I did that now, I'd be shunned.

In the same vein, how much time do we spend keeping our houses maintained? We have laundry, house cleaning, dishes, repairs, and improvement projects – so many things that feel critically necessary. Then of course, we have to get sleep and even if we do as little of that as possible.

Now, consider how much time we spend at church, or in prayer or study. Now my point here is not to make anyone feel guilty – notice I didn't mention doomscrolling on our cell phones. My point is that there is so much in our lives we have to do that is expected and pulls us, it's hard to make time for church, for friendships, and for family relationships.

This is a very different world than the one into which Jesus first spoke the words we heard today. Religious devotion then was, I think, a little easier. This devotion was central to their lives. Raising children was a community affair. There were household chores, but there were not the expectations that everything had to be spotless.

When the washing machine was invented, it was supposed to reduce the work done in the home, but what happened is we started judging each other for the stains on our clothes. Now we expect even cleaner clothes so there is even more work. We weren't judged 75 years ago for the wearing clothes multiple days in a row, but now if you do that it will be noticed.

In Jesus's time, you might wear something for weeks before you washed it. No one judged you for having dirt on your floor. You probably had a dirt floor. Recreation centered on the religious community. Whether you were Jewish or Roman pagans, synagogues and temples were community centers where you ate together and did activities together. Few could read and there was no media. People didn't own books at home so you had to go someplace. Storytelling and conversation were central to life.

Why do I bring all this up? It's because Jesus says, "Look out, do not let anyone lead you astray." I'm going to focus on three part of this reading. The first is when Jesus says many will come in my name saying "I am." The second part I want to highlight is when Jesus says you will give testimony before governors and kings. The third part is that some will claim to be the Christ.

The first and the third are related because when Jesus says many will come in my name saying, "I am," is literally, many will come "upon" or "on the basis" of my name, "I am." Now that could be translated as "I am he" referring back to Jesus, but it is also the way to render the name of God in Greek – "I am who I am" – which is "ego emi." When Jesus says they will come in his name, it is when they use the Lord's name in vain saying they speak for God.

Notice he immediately warns them not to be disturbed by the wars and rumors of wars, the earthquakes and the famines. How many people do we hear in our world claiming that these things are signs of God's judgement and punishment coming upon us, as if they speak for God. How? Many will come saying, "I am." Jesus said you don't know the time or the hour. Anyone who is predicting the end of the world is selling you something, while claiming, "I am."

Jesus also says to look out for yourselves. This is sensible. We are not to run into calamity, but we can control our reaction to them. This is where we give our testimony – when we control our reactions by remembering what the gospel is. The gospel is centered on the Kingship of Jesus.

The gospel is that God the Son, fully one with the Father and the Spirit, came down and lived within our humanity, and all of its limits, to die for us. He rose again for us, to fulfill the story of scripture by inaugurating the Kingdom of God so we can be filled with the Holy Spirit as God's temples, individually and communally, sharing God's love in the world around us. We are changing the world, yes, but not necessarily through grand schemes, but how we approach one another with love, justice, and compassion, just as Jesus did.

These things that pull on our time – how do we enter them reflecting this good news? How do we show the kingship of Jesus is what we stand under? GK Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It's been found difficult and left untried." You see, when Jesus says we will stand before governors, I think it's interesting that the word we translate as governors is "hegemon" which is where we get the word hegemony. A hegemony is a group of people that have control over cultural thoughts, ideas, and power. There are lots of hegemonies that are vying for our attention and to control us.

There are presidents and presidential candidates, other politicians, pop stars and actors, industries and institutions, sports teams, kids' sports programs – all these things vie for control over our lives. All these things can be good in and of themselves, but when they cause us to not love God and love neighbor, pulling us away from the gospel, they become evil. It is a problem when some claim they are anointed, and that's what Christ means, telling us things that are contrary to Jesus's summation of the law – to love the Lord our God with all our strength, with all our mind, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Those who do this are the false teachers and false Christs that Jesus speaks about here. We may think it is innocent, like a television commercial we think is funny, a pop song, some internet trolling, or a reel that we watch on Facebook. However, if it is drawing us away from loving God and loving neighbor, we need to be cognizant of that to recognize the pull these things have on us.

It's not easy. Nothing Jesus asks us to do is easy. I wish it was. But that challenge is what it takes to be part of his ministry of reconciliation. Being a part of that ministry of reconciliation is done by helping people to love God and love neighbor, and this is fed by being part of a church community. It is in community, that we can practice sharing that love with each other across our differences and bring that into the world around us.

Yes, Jesus speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end times, but it also speaks to the here and now, namely what we do right now to not be controlled by the hegemonies of this world, so we might recognize the true King who reigns over us and pursues us in love every day. In a world that encourages us to like and follow, let us love and follow Jesus first. Amen.