

November 14, 2021  
Mark 13:1-8

Pentecost 25  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “The Real Deal”

“Beware that no one leads you astray.”

*“Well we’ve got trouble, right here in River City, with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool!”*

The classic musical *The Music Man* tells the story of a con artist who presents himself to the naïve citizens of River City, Iowa as “Professor Harold Hill,” a musician who has come to town to organize a boy’s band to keep the local children out of the local billiards hall that he warns will become a den of iniquity. Harold Hill is a very charming swindler, and soon has duped many of the parents of the community into handing over their hard-earned money for uniforms and musical instruments that the “professor” promises will be taught using his so-called “think method.” While the people of River City eventually catch onto his scheme, the musical has a happy ending when the local librarian falls in love with this con man, and the ragtag band is transformed into a well-rehearsed musical juggernaut. Unlike most people who are taken in by fraudsters, *The Music Man* ends in classic fashion as everyone in River City lives happily ever after.

Con artists have been around as long as human civilization, passing themselves off as legitimate experts while in truth they know nothing about what they are presenting and are only interested in stealing from their unsuspecting “marks.” At the era when *The Music Man* is set, con artists would be like Harold Hill, fraudsters who would travel from town to town and skip out before their deceptions were discovered. Today, con artists use the internet and all sorts of deceptive schemes to present themselves as legitimate sources of great wealth, miraculous cures, and keys to happiness. We need to become suspicious of anyone who presents themselves as an expert in their field, because far too often they turn out to be nothing more than “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

The presence of con artists presenting themselves as saviours of the people was a real danger in the ancient world, the reason Jesus warns his disciples to “*beware that no one leads your astray.*” (Mark 13:5). Today’s Gospel lesson is from the chapter in Mark’s Gospel that many refer to as the “little apocalypse,” since it uses the apocalyptic language that is common in such biblical books as Daniel and Revelation.

It occurs in this Gospel during Holy Week, after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and before his Last Supper with his disciples and his death on the Cross on Good Friday. The text begins as Jesus and his disciples are coming out of the Jerusalem Temple, whose impressive size causes the disciples to declare to Jesus *“look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”* (13:1). Despite Jesus’ warnings not to be taken in by appearances of wealth, the disciples are awed by the massive masonry of Herod’s Temple and the extensive buildings that were a part of the Temple complex. But Jesus does not share the disciples’ awe at the size or grandeur of the Temple; instead, he predicts that the whole complex will be completely destroyed: *“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”* (13:2). Jesus’ prediction echoes the words of the prophets who made similar predictions about the first temple:

- *“Thus says the LORD of hosts, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”* – Jeremiah 26:18.
- *“Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”* – Micah 3:12.

The scene shifts to the Mount of Olives, which is most appropriate given the role this site on the outskirts of Jerusalem plays in the prophecy of Zechariah:

- *“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that half of the Mount shall withdraw northwards, and the other half southwards.”* – Zechariah 14:4.

It is while Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives that the four disciples who were the first to be called by Jesus – Peter, James, John, and Andrew (1:16-20) – ask Jesus to *“tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”* (13:4). Jesus’ response does not provide the disciples with the sign they seek (as he will not directly answer their question in the moments before his ascension in Acts: *“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”* responding instead that *“it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”* – Acts 1:6-7). Instead, Jesus begins a teaching that instructs them how to conduct themselves amid turmoil and persecution. Once again, Jesus’ private instruction involves discipleship; disciples must be willing to testify to the gospel, even though they will be persecuted. Jesus counsels both

hope and patience; Christians should not engage in the rash apocalyptic fervor they see around them. The overall message of Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives is one of patient endurance in the face of cosmic upheavals and persecutions.

Jesus begins his teaching by warning his disciples to "*beware that no one leads you astray.*" (13:5). Jesus warns his followers about false prophets who "*will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.*" (13:6), which implies acting with authority derived from Jesus. The authority with which such false prophets interpret current events as evidence that the end is near is undermined by the catalogue of evils that are at best the prelude to the end times. Contrary to popular expectations in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic circles, war and catastrophe were not sure signs of the end of the world. Even though these things may be occurring, one is not to assume that this means that the end is near:

- "When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." – 13:7-8.

Jesus' teaching to his disciples is aimed at cooling off eschatological enthusiasm and instilling a curious wait-and-see attitude toward the coming of God's Kingdom. The end of history will not be associated with wars and catastrophes but with the coming of the Son of Man in glory. From now on, for Christians the coming of the Son of Man in glory replaces the Temple as the location of hope for the full realization of the Kingdom of God. Christians must focus on the coming of the true Son of Man and not be fooled by messianic pretenders like those described in the book of Acts:

- "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him, but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered." – Acts 5:36-37.

False healers and teachers may have claimed to be reincarnations of Jesus, claiming to be Jesus come back from the right hand of God ("*... you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.*" – 14:62). Jesus warns of false messiahs later in this teaching on the Mount of Olives:

- “And if anyone says to you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look! There he is!’ – do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.” – 13:21-23.

Predictions of wars and rumours of wars, uprisings, earthquakes, and famines are presented as part of the divine plan for the coming kingdom. These tribulations are described by analogy with the first stages of giving birth. However serious they may be, they are not to be mistaken for the end of time; instead, “*whenever we hear reports of disaster, Mark 13 reminds us to not be led astray by messianic claimants that cannot save; rather, we look to Jesus.*” (Amanda Brobst-Renaud). Jesus announces an electrifying message in this text: the good news of the end of the world, when our Lord “*will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*” (Nicene Creed). The one who comes as a humble servant will come again in great power and glory. In the meantime, his teaching to his followers is clear: “*And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake.*” (13:37).

- “The vision of Mark 13 serves to strengthen discipleship in the present. It arms us against the wiles of deceivers. It sustains us in whatever suffering or persecution we must endure. It instructs us to get on with preaching the gospel to all nations. It both enables and relativizes the common round of daily life by making every moment subject to the invasion of the Son of Man, who comes to judge and to save.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

The question of how we are to recognize Jesus as the true Messiah, the son of the living God is posed by none other than John the Baptist in the Gospel according to Matthew. As he baptized multitudes in the Jordan River, he also taught that “*one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*” (Matthew 3:11-12). The “coming one” is a generic term for the expected eschatological saviour figure, widely used in early Christianity (“*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*” – Revelation 1:8). However, since the “deeds of the Christ” described in Matthew 8-10 are acts of compassion rather than the fiery judgment of the “coming one” of whom John spoke, John backs off from his previous confidence and questions whether Jesus is indeed the expected one, or whether we should wait for another. Languishing in Herod’s prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him “*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for*

*another?*” (Matthew 11:2). Jesus’ response is indirect; he does not answer John with a simple “yes or no” answer. Instead, he points to his words and deeds as proof that he is the fulfillment of the messianic age promised in Isaiah: “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*” (Isaiah 35:5-6). Jesus offers proof of the authenticity of his identity as “*the Messiah, the son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16) when he tells John’s disciples to “*go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*” (Matthew 11:4-6). The key theme of “take offense, fall away” (*skandalizein*, literally “stumble over”) refers to Jesus’ failure to conform to popular messianic expectations. Jesus is not the Messiah of people’s expectations and desires; Jesus the Messiah of God, the God who declares that “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

- “Jesus is indeed the ‘coming one,’ but he has reversed the valences of the expectation. As the promised coming one, he is at the same time the stumbling block. He transforms the expectation in the act of fulfilling it. To say that *Jesus* is the Christ is not only to say something about Jesus, but to transform the meaning of *Christ* as well. Faith does not grow from our testing Jesus against our criteria to see if he measures up; Jesus is not the best example of values we already have, validated on some other basis. One must overcome a certain ‘stumbling block’ in order to come to faith and continue as a disciple.”  
– M. Eugene Boring.

Harold Hill may be a fictional character, but con artists and fraudsters are very real and can inflict significant damage on persons, communities, and even churches. Every generation of God’s people is cursed by false prophets and messiahs who claim to be God’s messengers or to have a teaching that is the only one that is to be believed and followed. But as Jesus warned his first disciples to “*beware that no one leads you astray,*” we need to be “*wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (Matthew 10:16). We need to heed the message of the First Letter of John which warns us to “*do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*” (1 John 4:1). The test of the truth or falsehood of a person or their teaching is clear: “*every spirit that teaches that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.*” (4:2-3). Because our faith is built on the firm foundation of

the good news of Jesus Christ, we know that *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is not other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12).

- “Thus the Christian church has held her own from the beginning until now among innumerable false spirits that have been from the beginning and may still come. Yet she goes on standing firmly by her baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the gospel, Christ, the Ten Commandments, and true and pure prayer, and thus she judges and separates from herself all false teaching that is opposed to her – yes, even though the devil should become an angel of light and as a beautiful and radiant figure should present himself as God.” – Martin Luther.

We will continue to be challenges by con artists, false teachers, and purveyors of all varieties of frauds that seek to deceive us, infect us, rob us of our wealth and security, and lead us astray from following the path of the true Christ who calls followers in every generation to “follow me.” The first letter of Peter warns us to *“discipline yourselves; keep alert”* because *“like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8). The way to resist the deception and temptations of the “devil and his empty promises” is to remain *“steadfast in your faith”* in Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, who *“will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”* (5:10-11). It is by abiding in the true Word of God, the good news that is ours in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we will truly be disciples of the true Messiah who *“will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (John 8:32); *“for where God through his Word and faith has gathered together a church, the devil cannot be at peace.”* (Luther).

Christian faith is rooted in the sure and confident affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that there is no one other than him who we are to trust and to follow. When we answer the call to discipleship, we follow in the footsteps of the first disciple left everything behind to follow the true source of Light and Life. We know that there is no one else to whom we shall go, for only Christ has *“the words of eternal life.”* (John 6:68). We know that Jesus Christ is “the real deal,” the true Messiah, the only one who fulfills God’s promises and offers us the blessings of *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”* We can resist the Harold Hills, the hucksters, the con artists of this world because we have decided to follow Jesus and to serve him alone. It is on *“Christ the solid rock”* that we stand; *“all other ground is sinking sand.”* Amen.