

## DO NOT BE ALARMED

*Pentecost 26-B*

November 18, 2018

Daniel 12:1-3, Psalm 16  
Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8

“KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON” was one of a set of motivational posters developed by the British government in 1939, as World War II was threatening attacks on British soil. The “Keep Calm” poster surprisingly saw almost no distribution; yet was rediscovered in a British bookstore in 2000 and has been copied and parodied everywhere, especially on the Internet.



Somehow that theme of keeping calm seems to apply to the apocryphal readings for this next-to-the-last Sunday of the church year. The prophet Daniel speaks of “a time of anguish,” the psalmist prays for protection: “...because God is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken,” and The Letter to the Hebrews urges us to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering” because “the Day [is] approaching.” In Mark’s gospel we hear Jesus speaking of “wars and rumors of wars” for which we should “not be alarmed” because these things “must take place.” They are “the beginning of the birth pangs” marking the reign of God over all things, the fulfillment of God’s relationship with God’s creation.

“Birth pangs” sounds almost harmless to our 21<sup>st</sup> century western ears; given that there is far less pain and danger in childbirth, both for mothers and children, thanks to modern medical advances in our culture. But in Jesus’ day as today, birth pangs (labor pains) point us to hope and new life.

Jesus’ disciples and the crowds who followed him saw plenty of evidence of their world crumbling around them; and that seems to hold for every generation that has followed since. The world never seems to be at peace. False prophets abound. Earthquakes, famines, flooding and forest fires are a constant threat. For many, it certainly feels like the end time is upon us. So even birth pangs of hope do not come without some pain and struggle.

Yet Jesus doesn’t bid us to look up to the sky in anticipation of being swept up in some moment of “rapture,” but rather tells us to beware that no one leads us astray. See the “big stones” that try to impress us but really obsess us? Don’t be fooled. Don’t be controlled. Jesus urges cautious hope, expectation, and trust.

The apostle writing to the second-generation Christian community in Hebrews urges them (and us, by extension) to hold fast to what they/we believe (“the confession of our hope”) and “consider how to provoke one another to good deeds.”

Nobody suggests panic. The last thing Jesus tells us in Mark’s chapter 13 is: “Keep awake.” And that underscores the general advice of these apocalyptic passages that bid us: Hold fast. Look around. Pay attention. Don’t be fooled. Remain faithful. Keep calm and carry on.

That sounds fine while most things in our lives feel like they’re under control. But we know that is not always the case. For people in California who witnessed a mass shooting a little more than a week ago, and now are seeing at least 71 dead, hundreds missing, and thousands of homes destroyed in the fires still burning there, it’s pretty hard to remain calm. There are times that will try us; and we will feel that things are beyond our ability to cope.

God helps us cope by reminding us that we are not alone. As we’ve witnessed here after storms, and across our nation after horrific events, God’s goodness makes itself known through words,

deeds, and kindness of the many of God's children who reach out in love, and walk with the afflicted to help them back on the road to wholeness. The bottom line at each seemingly hopeless scene is that God does not abandon God's people. As evidence, Jesus tells us to look around: to notice how and where we will encounter God in our midst.

In last week's gospel, Jesus wanted us to notice what no one else was paying attention to: a poor widow giving everything she had, because it was a metaphor for the greater sacrifice that was to come.

As the chapter continues this week, the big stones and beautiful buildings are impressive; but their importance is short-lived. Jesus tells his friends that it's better to look, and notice what really matters.

As the Good News reminds us, soon it will be Jesus who makes his offering. Most of the world won't notice. Yet things will never be the same. The One who is jeered as he stumbles carrying his own cross will forgive those who spat on him and even offer pardon to the criminals who hung beside him.

Even in his being raised from the dead, it will take a while for the word to get around. Many will believe. And many will doubt. But the One who overcomes death and the grave will notice them. And love them.

Lives will be changed. People who have the guilt of their sin washed away will be freed from being frozen in fear to look beyond themselves, embody the Good News, and carry on. Amen.