

Signs



*Matthew 24:1-14; Mark
13:1-13; Luke 21:5-19*
*Year C Proper 28 ; Year B
Proper 28 (Revised)*

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

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▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲

Scene 1

James , Joanna , Judas , Matthew , Thomas

{Thomas, James, and Joanna enter.}

James *[arguing with Thomas]* We are *not* doomed! He didn't say we were doomed! There is no way we can be doomed!

Thomas I don't like the idea any more than you do, but -

James *[interrupting]* Yes you do! You love talking about how we're all going to die and how the rabbi is probably just a phony and -

Thomas *[with surprising heat]* He's no phony! I'm not sure if he's really the messiah, but the one thing I know beyond all doubt is that he is no phony!

Joanna *[with feeling]* We know you're as committed to him as any of us, Thomas. *That's* something you can be sure of, too.

James *[apologetic but still a little sarcastic]* All right, all right. I didn't mean to *offend* anybody.

Thomas I wish I could disbelieve him now, but it seemed quite clear. We're going to be arrested, tried, and executed.

{Just then, Judas and Matthew wander by.}

Judas *[urgently]* What's that?

Joanna We're trying to work out something the rabbi just told us. Thomas believes he was predicting that our mission would fail, but James thinks he was talking about the end of the world.

Judas *[urgently to Thomas]* What makes you think he was predicting defeat?

Thomas I didn't see any other way of taking it. He was talking about how we would be imprisoned and killed, and how we should try to die well and we'd gain eternal life.

James What about the earthquakes and wars and famine? You think all that is going to happen in the next few weeks? This was end of the world stuff!

Matthew How do you know that? The scriptures have next to nothing to say about the end of the world, and certainly nothing about natural and human disasters.

Judas Let's take it point by point. Tell us what he said.

Thomas He began by predicting that the Temple would be destroyed.

Judas By the Romans?

James He didn't say.

Thomas But who else would it be? And you have to admit, it doesn't sound like the nation winning its freedom.

Matthew That's not necessarily true. We could suffer its loss and still win. And its loss might not even be a real loss. It's not like the priests are the same as Israel, you know. Most of them support the

occupation.

- Judas** Either way, it does seem like a point for Thomas, or at least for the theory that he was talking about the revolution. Win or lose, for better or worse, the Temple will be destroyed.
- Joanna** I suppose you could say that the one thing that tells us for sure is that there'll be violence. There'll be warfare on a scale that can destroy structures.
- James** *Or:* it means that when the end of the world comes, nothing is going to remain standing, not even the Temple.
- Matthew** Hmm. I suppose that could be true as well. What did he say next?
- James** He said there'd be lots of fakes claiming to be him and saying the time is near. Which, I don't see how that could happen in the next few weeks.
- Thomas** But it's exactly what you worry about! Just the other day, you were saying we should be careful who we ally ourselves with, because they could try to take over the movement. And we certainly see dozens of other itinerate preachers and healers wandering around these days claiming to be the messiah. In that respect, there's actually nothing all that out of the ordinary about the rabbi.
- Joanna** Thomas! I know this is off topic, but I think I suddenly understand something about you! Given all these people claiming to be the messiah, why should we believe any of them? The odds are that anyone you commit yourself to will turn out to be a fake, even if there really is a real one out there somewhere.
- Thomas** But you have to try. You know?
- Joanna** You're a brave man.
- Judas** Getting back to the subject: it seems we still have a tie. These fakes could be people who'll try to hijack our movement, or they could be end-of-the-world false prophets. Though I must say, if the end of the world is nigh and you're prophesying that the end of the world is nigh, you're actually a true prophet.
- Matthew** But it's already apparent that the world is ending! It's already begun. And so these false prophets are false not because they're

wrong, but because they're just repeating the obvious. They're trying to jump on the bandwagon and pretend they knew it all along. This is something we'll have to be careful about in Jerusalem, too. People who'll join the movement only after it looks like it's going to succeed, trying to pretend they were supporters all along.

Joanna And there's yet another possibility: that these fake messiahs will be one of us! That one of us will decide that he or she can lead the group better than the rabbi, and try to supplant him, or undermine him, anyway. We need to be careful about that, too.

Judas Well, I don't think that's likely, but you make a valid point. What's the next prediction?

James Wars, earthquakes, famine. You know. *The end of the world.*

Matthew But these things have always been. There's probably never been a time when there were no wars, somewhere. And famines and earthquakes? There are some regions that experience earthquakes almost monthly, and some where famine is more the norm than the exception.

Judas I don't see how they fit into Thomas' interpretation, though.

Thomas I have to admit, that part puzzled me.

James See? And not only that, but the rabbi said specifically that these things were about the end times.

Judas Wait a minute. He said explicitly that he was talking about the end of the world? Then why are we debating this?

Joanna Actually, he didn't say that exactly. Let me try to remember his exact words. *[after some thought]* "When you hear about wars and revolts, don't be afraid. These things have to happen first, but the end won't come right away."

Matthew But that's the opposite of how James is taking it! "Wars and revolts" is us! He's telling us that the fight could go on longer than we think, but not to worry.

Joanna Not just longer, but bigger, I think. "Nation will rise up against nation," he said. Could he be saying that our little revolt will expand into a worldwide conflict?

Judas *[caught up in the vision]* Maybe every subject nation of the Romans will find its freedom. Maybe we'll be the match that ignites the great conflagration, a new Age of the world!

Thomas Too bad we won't live to see it.

James *[derisively]* And here we go.

Thomas He said we'd be killed. Or some of us, anyway.

James He said we'd win life!

Thomas That had to mean the afterlife. If we die well, we'll achieve Paradise.

James He said not a hair of our heads would perish!

Matthew If he was talking about the revolt, that certainly seems to promise victory. So I think whatever else is true, Thomas can't be right about us losing.

Judas How could he have said that some would die and yet not a hair of our heads would perish? Joanna, you seem to have the best memory for these things, and you're unbiased. What exactly did he say?

Joanna *[thinking]* He said we'd be persecuted and arrested, and imprisoned and tried. He said this would be our chance to testify about him in high places, and that we shouldn't try to compose our own defenses, but he would give us the words to say. He said we'd be betrayed by friends and family, and that...*some* of us would be killed. And then he said the thing about the hairs of our heads. And then he said, "Stand firm, and you will win life."

Matthew *Win* life?

Judas I'm stumped. Joanna, is there anything else you can remember that we haven't gone through? Any other hints? Did he really never say "the revolution" or "the end of the world" outright?

Joanna *[after some thought]* I'm sorry. That's all I remember.

Thomas Wait a minute! All through this, he was addressing *us*. "You" will be killed, and so forth. How can it be about the end of the world when it's about us?

- James** Well obviously he was speaking to future followers, future members of the movement.
- Matthew** Or maybe the end of the world will come sooner than we think. We always assume it will happen far in the future because, well, it's hard to imagine it happening to *you*. But what if the restoration of Israel itself will usher in the new age? Not the end of the world, but the end of one age and the beginning of another. There's scriptural support for this!
- Judas** Are you suggesting the world will end shortly after our victory?
- Matthew** I'm suggesting the world will *change*. "Behold! I make a new thing! Do you not perceive it? I will make a path in the desert; I will make rivers in the desert!"
- {They all pause to ponder the vision.}*
- James** *[happily]* Well, I'm willing to let go of the end of the world in favor of us winning, *and* kicking off a new age while we're at it!
- Thomas** And contrary to popular belief, I'm happy we're not all going to die!
- Judas** *[soberly]* We don't know anything for sure yet.
- James** Well, you can carry on the debate into the night if you like. I'm beat. I'll see you all in the morning.
- Thomas** Me, too. Goodnight, everyone.
- {James and Thomas exit.}*
- Judas** Joanna, one more thing. How did this all begin? I assume he didn't just start talking about the destruction of the temple on a whim.
- Joanna** We brought the subject of the temple up. We were talking about how beautiful it is, with the precious stones and gold and all. Then he said that the time would come when not one stone would be left standing on another.
- Judas** Wait a minute. That's not at all the same as saying the temple will be destroyed.

Matthew It sounds like it to me.

Judas Destroyed implies a destroyer, but this could just be decay. *[to Joanna]* Did he actually use the word, "destroy"?

Joanna Come to think of it, no. But he did say about the stones that, "every one of them will be thrown down."

Judas That's still not destroyed. Time could throw them down just as well. *[in distress after a long pause]* Dear God!

Matthew What's wrong?

Judas *[urgently]* Hold on, let me think this through...*[grimly after a long pause]* Okay. You're talking admiringly about the temple. How beautiful it is, how wonderful. You're talking about it as if it would last forever. But even I know that's silly. Nothing lasts forever. Time and the struggles of men tear all things down eventually. "You think the temple is so special?" says the rabbi. "You think *you're* so special? Well let me tell you: your precious temple is going to fall to pieces eventually like every other structure. You yourselves are insignificant dots in a world shaken all the time by wars, famine, and earthquake. And some day, you'll be persecuted. You'll be arrested and killed. But don't try to compose a defense when you go on trial; don't try to preserve your life on this earth. Instead, testify for me and you will win the only truly significant thing: a reward in the next life!"

Matthew I must admit, that's a pretty good read! But why are you so upset about it?

Judas Because to the extent that it might be about the revolution, he's telling us it's okay to lose! Because temporal things like temples and nations and lives don't matter. But even worse, it seems he's not even thinking about the revolution at all!

Joanna Judas, I don't think it could possibly be that bad. Why don't we take James' advice and go to bed, and ask the rabbi in the morning?

Judas *[worn out]* Yeah, sure. Good night.

{Judas exits.}

Matthew Joanna, there's one thing nobody asked. How did he seem when he was telling you all this? What was he feeling about it all?

Joanna *[after a long pause for thought]* Urgent...and sorrowful.

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