

B Lectionary 33 11.19.18

Mark 13:1-8

Focus Statement: Jesus is always with us, no matter what.

“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.” Now, let me preface this by reminding you all that I don’t have children. I have never experienced the “miracle of life.” But, I’ve had enough friends who have by this point to tell you; it doesn’t seem all that fun. It’s been described to me as starting with nausea, then your clothes don’t fit. Necessitating shopping, which hell for me might actually be having to spend eternity in clothing stores. Eventually you move on to being tired all the time, and this is all pre-delivery. Actually having to remove the alien that’s been growing in your body for nine months, yeah, I don’t really want to think about it. But then, it’s over, and you have a beautiful baby, whom you will love and worry about and take care of, for the rest of your life. My brother and I are thirty-two and thirty-five, and we still have stuff in my parents’ storage unit. All jokes aside, I’ve heard having children described as ripping your heart out of your body and letting it walk around free outside of you.

But, as hard as this whole labor and delivery thing is, and as scary as letting something you love, something that was once literally a part of you, walk around free, the fact of our continued existence as a species tells us that the joy outweighs the cost. What comes after the birth pangs, this tiny, perfect little person, who will keep you up at night and make a lot of noise, and eat all your food, and eventually grow up to be a fully-sized adult human being who will more than likely still keep you up and night, and come home and eat all your food, all that, I’m told, is worth it.

To understand our Gospel reading for today, and what Jesus was describing when he was talking about birth pangs, it's helpful to look back a few verses and remember where we came from. Last Sunday, we heard how Jesus was teaching in the Temple. And as he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." Then he went and sat by the treasury and watched people putting in their offering. A widow came and threw in two copper coins, worth a penny, and Jesus pointed her out, saying, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Then immediately after this, our reading this morning started, "As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Literally moments before, Jesus had told his disciples to beware those who take advantage of their role to puff up their own status, and now those same disciples are blown away by the opulence and grandeur of the Temple, built by the same gifts thrown into the treasury that Jesus had just spoken of. How quick we humans are to get caught up in appearances and lose sight of what really matters.

When Jesus heard his disciples marveling at the Temple, he immediately brought them back, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." It's hard to understand just how unthinkable Jesus' words would have been to his disciples. The Temple was a massive structure, built into the side of a

mountain out of immense stones. Those stones were marble overlaid with gold, so that the building was said to shine such that it was almost blinding in the sun. The effort, the violence and destruction it would have taken to dismantle such a structure, was beyond comprehension.

So later, sitting on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple, the disciples asked Jesus, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” What should we look for, what are the warning signs? How should we prepare for this time of darkness? And Jesus, you’ll notice, in his Jesus way, didn’t answer their question. He didn’t tell them what to look for, instead, he told them what not to look for. ““Beware that no one leads you astray... When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed... 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.” What Jesus was telling his disciples here was that what looks like the end is not the end. What looks like the end is not the end. This was important for Jesus’ disciples because at chapter thirteen we are two short days from what by all accounts is the end from which there is no return, we are two short days from Jesus’ death on a cross. And yet, the promise of our faith is that what looks like the end is not the end. Because three days after that death, the stone was rolled away, the tomb was found empty, and Jesus Christ lived again. Resurrection means the end is not the end, the end is never the end, there is always life after death.

If we read on in chapter thirteen, Jesus spoke of dire things that would happen to the disciples, “they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me... when they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” From the book of Acts, we know those things happened. Many of the disciples were handed over to councils, beaten, jailed, and handed over to stand trial. And yet, as promised, the end was not the end. The Holy Spirit did speak for them, they did find words, they did share the good news. And we gather here, two-thousand years later as proof of this central promise, that what looks like the end, dark and uncertain as it might seem, is not the end, it is only the beginning.

I started the sermon by talking about birth pangs. Giving birth is one of the most dangerous and fragile times in life for both the woman and the baby. It can also be the hardest time on a relationship, many marriages end within the first year after the first child is born, the strain on the relationship with all that transition is so great. Times of transition, times of upheaval, times when we do not know where we are going and how, or if, we will get there, those can be scary times. And in those times of uncertainty, we sometimes, like the disciples, find ourselves looking for the flashiest, biggest, strongest message, looking for someone who will promise to have the answers, to know the path, and to lead us through. What these words from Jesus reminded the disciples, and remind us, is that sometimes the road is just hard. Sometimes there is not short-cut, there is no clear path, and the only way though is through. Giving birth is hard work, it’s called labor for a

reason. There's no short-cut, no workaround. But you have to do the work, you have to push through, because if you don't, both your life and the life of your baby will be in danger.

At Trinity, we've been in this redevelopment process, this process of reforming ourselves as a congregation, for a while now. And it's hard work. We're starting to see the fruits of it, there are a lot of new faces in the room today that weren't here when I came four years ago, and that's so powerful to see, I am so glad to see who we are as a community and who we are becoming. But there is still a lot of work to be done; we are still just in the beginning of the birth pangs. And maybe after this reading you'll be comforted to know that I hold no delusions that "I am he," for maybe obvious reasons. I, first off, don't identify as "he." But, more importantly, I don't know either exactly where we're going or quite how to get there. I may well be leading us astray, but only because, as Thomas Merton prayed, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going..." And, like the disciples, I confess I too sometimes get caught up in metrics and numbers and how well we match up. But whoever we are, and whoever we become, the promise in this passage, the great hope of our faith, is that no matter what trials we face, no matter how scary life may feel, how uncertain things may be, God is, always has been, and always will be, with us. Guiding us, leading us, supporting us, and caring for us. Eons ago, God took God's own heart out of God's chest when God created us, granted us freedom, and permitted us to walk around outside of God's body. We are the children who make a lot of noise, and eat all God's food, and keep God up at night, because God loves us, like a parent loves a child, with a love that never ends. Amen.