

Sermon - Birth Pangs
November 14, 2021
The United Churches of Olympia

Mark 13:1-8 (First Nations Version)

Have you birthed something?

Maybe the family dog had puppies? Maybe you planted a garden and watched as life grew first offering you sweet smelling blossoms and then ripe fruit and vegetables for your family? Maybe it was business? Maybe it was a community that grew out of a common value and passion?

One of the things that I have loved most about our little farm here in Olympia was the opportunity to have animals and mostly the opportunity to raise goats. We started by buying two does from a dairy farm outside of Portland when they were just 8 weeks old. We bottle fed them and raised them and eventually decided to breed them. They each got pregnant, and we started reading up on what to do. Gestation? Preparing? I remember coming home one night after youth group and going out behind the barn to feed everybody and suddenly being overwhelmed by this surreal realization that there were two baby goats lying there in the cold. I quickly ran back to the house and told the family that our first set of kids had been born. But because they came a little early and it was a cool evening and they weren't in the barn, they had gotten cold. When baby goats get cold, they don't nurse. We spent the next two days force feeding these little goats keeping them alive in our bathroom until their instinct to suckle kicked in and they were strong enough to be in their barn with their mother.

Then I realized we would be doing this again in a couple months with our other doe! This time I was committed not to miss it. We spent a lot more time checking on her, keeping the barn ready, determined that we would be better midwives this go around. And so, in July I noticed the Mama goat quite uncomfortable separating herself from the rest of the herd and so I moved her into the barn and sat with her watching and waiting as she started going into labor. It was a stressful, messy, beautiful event. She of course did most of the work. My wife Beth functioned as midwife while the kids and I watched with great anticipation.

These little goats were born without complication. They quickly snuggled up to Mama and started feeding as she cleaned them imprinting her scent on them and bonding as a family. After pains of birth, there was much new life on the farm that summer filling our days with joy and wonder.

It's hard to remember that we started 2021 with gospel readings from Mark and here as we come towards the end of our liturgical year, we're back in the gospel of Mark. In fact, next Sunday

November 21, 2021 is the last Sunday in our liturgical calendar where we celebrate the reign of Christ. And then on November 28, 2021 our liturgical calendar starts again with advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas in the coming of Christ anew in the world. It's helpful for us to put this passage in that context as we seek new understanding, new application, and new inspiration, from the scripture today.

In its original context, the gospel of mark is probably the earliest of the gospels to be written. It was most likely written around 70 CE right around the time or right after the literal destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. A bit of background, in 66 CE the Romans captured Jerusalem. Religious tension, excessive taxation and unwanted colonization sparked a Jewish revolt which lasted until early 70 CE around the time of Passover when the Romans allowed people to enter the city for the holiday but then closed the city gates and refused to let anyone leave. Food and water supplies were cut off. Six months later the Romans entered the city killing all who survived and destroyed the Temple. The Romans responded by building a monument in the Arch of Titus in Rome in honor of the general in charge. Our Jewish brothers and sisters still mourn this event and the Western Wall, all that remains of the Temple still stands as a holy site.

The writing in Mark is intentionally apocalyptic. The events of war, famine, earthquakes, these are all common motifs in apocalyptic writing and sadly common throughout history.

In a nutshell, apocalyptic literature stems from a worldview that believes that everything happening on earth represents and correlates with a larger, heavenly struggle between good and evil. It therefore reads into earthly events cosmic significance and anticipates future events on earth in light of the coming battle between the forces of [good] God and the [d]evil. it often tries to make sense of current events and experiences by casting them in a larger, cosmic framework and in this way give comfort to people who are currently suffering or being oppressed.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/apocalypse-now>

In this way, the writer of the gospel of Mark is seeking to give explanation for why the Temple was destroyed. It would seem natural for those experiencing this event to feel like an end. Indeed, in our own time, presently, the climate crisis, the racial divide, the economic divide, the Covid pandemic, all of these things can have an air of doomsday to them. We may find ourselves asking, is this the beginning of the end?

Jesus says these are birth pains. That even in the midst of all this, God is near, still creating, life is bursting forth all around us and something new is not only possible but on the horizon and we have been given the opportunity to build the kin_dom of God here on earth.

For these first-century revolutionaries, they would have looked at the Messianic era as a place when time begins again.

As we prepare for Advent, we prepare for the coming anew of a baby, the Christ-child who will flip upside down what we thought we knew about God and teach us how to be kin_dom builders.

But this doesn't mean there aren't stones that need to come tumbling down. In fact, Jesus was absolutely offering a socio-political critique of the corruption in the Temple system. Just one chapter before (and we mentioned it last Sunday) is the story of the widow's mite. In the preceding verses, Jesus casts judgement on the powerful scribes of the Temple for exploiting the widow's (and stealing their homes, it says) to line their pockets and elevate themselves. We are called to be more like the widow than the Temple builder who thought their grandeur and opulence is what pleases God. God is honored in the simple acts of love, humility and community.

The building of our systems of oppression, Jesus says, must fall down so something new can replace them. The same is true today. But it is easy for us to place ourselves in the position of our Jewish brothers and sisters, those who have lost our Temple, our seat of religion, culture, the very house of God. But I warn us to consider that we are rich and powerful in this story, seated in places of privilege, built on the exploitation of the poor, oppressed and marginalized.

In truth, white Europeans have been the tear-er-downers of others' houses of worship and centers of culture in the name of conversion, progress, capitalism, Christianity for centuries. We (white European Christians) are more like the Romans in this passage than we are like the early followers of Jesus. We have colonized much of the earth, are the largest landowners in the world, and have exploited many in the name of Christ.

Jesus says watch out! Pay attention to what is happening around us. Watch what we are doing. Ready ourselves. Today, we are called to be the dismantlers, to tear down the systems of oppression that we have created. We are called to uproot racism, called to dismantle institutionalized homophobia, sexism, ableism, and recalibrate God's economy with love and grace and abundance instead of greed, hoarding and projecting a scarcity mindset.

This will cause some uncomfortable moments, some awkward conversations, some pain. But it's a birthing pain that will allow new life to infuse us and emit from us into the community. The more we become builders of the promised kin_dom of God on earth as it is in heaven, the more we are fulfilling the purpose of Christ on this earth. And the more we will walk on the road that leads to life.

May the words of Jesus come to bring us comfort today as well. Jesus says this may be an end but it is not the end! These are birth pains of something new growing inside us that will come to fruition

in due time. So when we get discouraged (are tempted to think all is lost), Jesus says casts your eyes on me. And I will give you rest, and refuge and lead you in the way that leads to life and life abundantly. And in this promise may we find hope and comfort and joy in the days to come.

Amen.

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1 As they were walking away from the sacred lodge, one of his followers said to him, “Look, Wisdomkeeper, these buildings are made from such handsomely carved logs and great stones!” Creator Sets Free (Jesus) stopped walking, and as he looked around at all the buildings of the sacred ceremonial lodge, a look of sadness came over his face.

2 “Do you see all these great buildings?” he replied. “They will all fall to the ground! Not one log or stone will be left standing against another.”

3 Later that day Creator Sets Free (Jesus) was sitting on Olive Mountain across from the sacred lodge. From there he could look across the valley and see Village of Peace (Jerusalem) and the sacred lodge. While he was there, four of his followers—Stands on the Rock (Peter), He Takes Over (James), He Shows Goodwill (John), and Stands with Courage (Andrew)—came to him in private.

4 “Tell us when these things will happen,” they said with worried looks on their faces. “What sign should we be looking for?”

5 “Stay alert or you may be led down a false path!” he told them.

6 “Many will come representing me. ‘I am the Chosen One,’ they will claim, and many will listen to their lies.

7 “When you hear of wars and stories of war breaking out, do not fear, for all of this must happen before the end will come.

8 There will be tribal wars, and nations will make war against other nations. Food will be scarce, and the earth will shake in many places—but this is only the beginning of the time of sorrow, like a woman feeling the pains of birth.