

Mark 13:1-8 – Birthing Pangs – November 15th, 2009

This was not an easy sermon text to choose for many reasons.

⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 birthpangs.

Wars and rumors of War. Famines and Earthquakes. Awful painful things. Death and destruction. Lost hope, and anger. And these are the things that Jesus is telling his disciples that THEY have to look forward to. These are the things that Jesus is telling US that WE have to look forward to. And not only that, but that these awful things, these wars and famine and destruction...they are only the beginning of the pain!

This isn't an easy scripture to choose. There is almost nothing of hope here. Especially when read within the context of the writer, an early Christian who would have seen the destruction of the temple that Jesus had prophesied. They would have seen the despair brought about by the destruction of the house of God. They would have heard of the wars in Rome, of battles with rebels. Would have seen widows and orphans and

beggars and **known** that there was no way they could end that dynamic. For Jesus had said that the poor will be with you always, and that all of this is just the beginning of the pain!

As I said, it is a hard scripture, but in our church we use the lectionary, a three year schedule used by most denominations and churches that covers the main parts of the Bible every three years. The Lectionary keeps us honest. It keeps us from picking and choosing only the stories and passages we want to hear. It keeps us from picking only those scriptures that make us happy and comfortable.

But Jesus was not always about comfort, and the old saying about preachers is that we are here to comfort the afflicted...and afflict the comfortable. This is one of those stories; a story of darkness and pain, of destruction, of dark nights and sorrow. Definitely a story to afflict the comfortable.

When I was at seminary, the professor of my preaching class gave us many tips and strategies for writing a sermon. One of the most important tips he shared though was that no matter what your sermon topic was, no matter how much you were berating your congregation or driving a point home, you ALWAYS had to include the Good News. You can tell them that they are living their lives the wrong way as long as you remind them

that Jesus forgives them and loves them anyway. But where is the Good News here? Where is the Love in a scripture so filled with pain?

So I go back to the scripture and look at it more closely, and as I read, I notice something. Jesus is once again telling us things in reverse order. Jesus was all about switching things around, the last shall be first, the meek shall inherit the earth, and here Jesus is telling his disciples the effect after the cause. The reading begins with Jesus warning about false preachers and ends with Jesus telling us of the pain of the world; of the pain of birth; of the pain...of life. Because this is what birth pangs really are; they are the natural pain that heralds new life. So really, what Jesus is telling us is that while we are going through the natural pain of life, we are going to be tempted to listen to these false preachers. Jesus is saying to us that when we are feeling small, when we are feeling sad, when the tears fall...there are going to be those people who have the quick fix, the easy answers.

In this passage, Jesus isn't warning his disciples that life is hard, he is warning them that **WHEN** life is hard, they will be tempted to stray, to follow what seems to be an easier path. These days it is all too easy to slip into that easier path, isn't it? We are constantly bombarded by messages telling us that if we just buy these products, if we just elect this candidate, if we just lose a little more weight, if we just worship in this way, then

everything will be all right. And all the pain will go away.

There has been lots of controversy over one of the new trends in churches; one of the new theologies being preached from some of the mega churches in this country. They called it the Ministry of Money, or Profit Theology, and the premise is “Why wouldn’t God want us to be rich and successful and make a lot of money? Why would God want us to wait for heaven, when we can have happiness right here and now?” They preach that if your faith is strong enough you’ll get that promotion you were looking for. They write books and teach their members to pray for God to shower them with the riches of heaven today so that they can buy that new car or that bigger house, and like the prodigal son, enjoy the good life now. “Many will come in my name,” Jesus said, “and they will lead many astray...”

So, like the movie Princess Bride, Jesus is telling us that “Life is Pain, and anyone who tells you different is selling something.” So, Where is the Good News in this passage? Where is the hope? Where is the light of God? And after struggling with this passage, I think I have found the answer. Where is the hope from this passage? It is in each of us!

Even though we are nowhere near the biggest church in this area, we still raise more money and supply more volunteers for the Salvation Army

bell ringing than anyone else in the area. And this church has for over 25 years! Our confirmation class each year packs boxes of gifts and writes letters to send to American soldiers stationed overseas who might be feeling lonely and disconnected to let them know that people back home are thinking of them and praying for them. We send youth and adults on mission trips! This year, we have opportunities for college students and adults to go to New Orleans to work with Habitat for Humanity and we have a trip for the Sr. High Youth to go to Nashville, Tennessee. We have people right here in our congregation who have given of their time to be trained as Stephen Ministers and meet with people who are lost and in sorrow. We have an amazingly strong ministry with the K'ren community, helping with housing, tutoring and providing space for them to worship on Sunday afternoons. We've raised money for Nothing but Nets, and we help support missionaries around the world! We are a church that has seen the pain of the world, of our community, and within our own congregation and has held out its hand in compassion.

There is a quote from a book called "The Spiral Staircase" by Karen Armstrong. Armstrong began training to be a nun at age seventeen and found that it wasn't for her. After leaving that life she began to make a career out of critically studying the religions of the world. She looked into

their beliefs and practices and in her book she wrote...

The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience or devotional practice is that it must lead directly to practical compassion. If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express that sympathy in concrete acts of loving kindness, then it was a good theology.

Jesus did say to his disciples that the poor would be with them always, but he also said that when you feed the hungry or clothe the naked, heal the sick and visit the imprisoned that you will be blessed as if you had done it for Jesus himself!

Jesus was saying to his disciples, and to us today that even though there are going to be wars and disasters and famines, even though there is going to be pain, we cannot go and look for some quick fix, some miracle cure. Instead we must stay the course. We must continue to follow the teachings of Jesus and be a Marvelous light in the darkness of the world.

This church has been a light. You all have seen people using their talents in the church with all its different ministries, and you've seen all the different charities and mission initiatives that this church supports. Not a month goes by that this church doesn't have a major mission project in the works, and those of you looking to help in new ways have only to look at the nearest bulletin board to sign up to help with Lazarus house, a shelter

for the homeless right here in St. Charles, or pick up a coin bank for UNICEF, an organization dedicated to helping children all over the world, or take a tag from the Angel Tree and buy a Christmas present for a child through Salvation Army. There are so many ways to help, and so many who need our help.

This is a hard scripture to read. We want to hear that there are easy solutions! We want to hear that if we just do a certain thing then we can end all wars. We want to hear that if we follow certain guidelines than all poverty and hunger will vanish from the face of the world. But it won't happen that way. We can't eliminate all problems instantly, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try. We can change things one person at a time...one war at a time. We can strive to bring the light of God into the world. To BE the light of God FOR the world.

Jesus says to his disciples that there will be wars and destruction and famine in the world, and that this is just the beginning of the birthpangs. Well, it has been an awfully long labor. We are still in the birthpangs, and no one knows when it is going to end. But as with a birth, we can only do things one push at a time; one change at a time. And we have to know that every push we make, every time we help someone else and reach out with compassion, we are bringing a little more of Christ into the world.

Jesus is saying that while there is pain in the world, it is not eternal!
For while there is pain during the birth at the end there is a glorious gift.
Jesus is saying that if we stay the course and follow his teachings, if we
reach out through the pain in the world and offer our hand in compassion,
even if we ourselves are in pain, then our reward in heaven will be glorious
indeed.

Amen.