

*Come, Lord Jesus – make these words to be for us Your word of life. Amen.*

This is a one of those Sundays when it's hard to call the Gospel "Good News." When I work on a sermon, my first step is to read the lessons and see where the "huh?" is – what jumps out as confusing or counter-intuitive.

In today's Gospel it comes as Jesus is describing destruction of the most sacred place, the temple, and signs of the end of all things –

*...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;  
there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.*

It sounds like the end of the world. But rather than describe this as the end, or as death, he says, *"This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."* Huh?

Birth pangs. Contractions and convulsions that cause great pain to the woman experiencing them... and result, most of the time, in the most precious gift of all: new life. New hope. New possibilities. Jesus does not use the language of death, but of birth.

When I was training for the priesthood, I spent a summer as a hospital chaplain. One night in the ER, I ministered to a family who'd brought in their 16-year-old daughter with severe stomach pain. Came to find out she was in labor.

They hadn't even known she was pregnant; she'd hid it well with baggy clothes. And now this here was this baby, arriving amid trauma and secrecy and betrayal. All kinds of things died in that moment; all the plans and hopes they had, at least for the near future, all that lost. And yet here was life, new life, unanticipated, unprepared for, possibly unwanted, yet undeniably here.

Whatever else was going on, there was also this new little girl, with all her possibilities intact, all her promises of love open and available. It was very much the end of the world as that family knew it.

And the beginning of a new one.

As they left that hospital with one more person than they'd come with, they were making that hard transition from seeing the world the way it had appeared, to seeing how it was now, to seeing a new world.

New life rarely occurs without pain and struggle. So it is in this world.

There are deaths woven into every birth –

loss of freedom, changes in relationships, loss of control...

once a new life is in the world, we cannot fully protect it.

From the point of view of the baby in the womb, birth is very much a death –

the death of its protected life, as it is catapulted into a vast, cold, noisy world.

The inbreaking of the Kingdom of God has always been accompanied by turmoil –

John the Baptist called the religious leaders of his day a brood of vipers.

Jesus was executed for the trouble he caused to the order of this world.

His followers were executed for the challenge they made to the order of this world.

The ones who came after them were persecuted and tortured and killed

for continuing to proclaim the name of Jesus.

The coming of the Kingdom is as violent – and as gentle – as the birth of a baby.

Both/and. Paul writes in Romans,

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...*

The breaking through of the Realm of God into this world

is like the breaking through of a baby into this world. It hurts.

But, by the same token, every death also has in it birth pangs – from the

point of view of eternal life, death is our birth into that timeless place of love.

As with childbirth, there is something that comes with the pain and the mess:

New Life. From this perspective, we celebrate even as we mourn.

I once received an email from someone canceling an appointment because a

patient she works with in hospice had died.

She wrote, "She died today at 12:30pm. The astonishing thing is the on Monday

she said to our nurse that she was "going to a party on Wednesday at 12."

How amazing is that? She died on Wednesday at 12:30."

Going to a party. Every end is a beginning.

Every birth invites us to see in a new way, to see the Life of God.

Lately I've been looking to see what opportunities disasters can offer.

Not "look on the bright side," or "find the silver lining" – more than that.

Opportunities, when death hovers, to move in a way we might not otherwise.

Every loss or potential loss we face is an opportunity to be more creative,

more outgoing, more bold and collaborative.

I'm not trying to trivialize the end of the world... the end of the world comes

daily in Haiti right now, in Afghanistan, in Syria, in the Palestinian West Bank.

We face the end of our worlds, our hopes, our dreams all the time – Hannah in our Hebrew Bible is a testament to that, every month a kind of death as she remained childless. Until she just couldn't take it anymore, and she poured out her heart to the Lord in the temple, so passionate the old priest thought she was drunk. And then he told her God had heard her prayers. He made her a promise, in faith. And that promise was enough to stir new life in her – she went forth and put away the marks of mourning, even before she became pregnant. In faith. In death, new birth, new life.

I do think Jesus was speaking cosmically about the whole creation, universe, cosmos, groaning as in labor pains, as Paul writes. But what is true on the large scale is also true on the small, in our lives, where temples are ever crumbling, and ever being built up. More importantly we are being built up into a spiritual temple in the Lord, a place where God dwells, where God's presence can be felt.

So... when that relationship crumbles, when your child is in danger and out of your reach, when the job ends and you don't have another, when it feels like our country is coming apart, in those moments we can train ourselves to ask, "God, what are you birthing right now? What are you birthing into being? How are you using this to build me into that spiritual temple in which others might encounter you, in which your presence dwells?"

That is how live in the shadow of the cross, in the light from the empty tomb: expectant, but not grasping; grieving, but not giving up, living in the moment and yet focused on our future. "What are you birthing in me, Lord? What are you birthing through me?" It's a way hard way to walk, like African women who walk miles balancing heavy containers of water on their heads. We need to be in the moment to keep our balance, yet aware of what's ahead.

So we should think of ourselves as water-carriers – carrying the water of life to slake the thirst of the world, to refresh, renew the parched places – even the parched places in ourselves where our own dreams have died. In the midst of death, we carry life. We carry promise. The promise of birth. Amen.

## Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 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 birthpangs."

## 1 Samuel 1:4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."