

Labor Pains

Mark 13.1-8

November 15, 2015 (Pledge Sunday)

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The Destruction of the Temple Foretold

As he 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 the one!" 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 labor pains.

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The choir is giving us a preview this morning of their Christmas Concert, "Magnificat," the musical setting by J.S. Bach of Mary's song in Luke 1 after she hears from an angel that she is going to have a baby. This anthem references the end of that song in Luke 1:

God has lifted up the lowly

and filled the hungry with good things;

God has sent the rich away empty

and has helped God's servant, Israel,

in remembrance of God's mercy

according to the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah.

That original promise in Genesis 12 was that this unlikely elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, would have children like the number of stars in the sky and, through them, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And now, another unlikely person – an unmarried young woman – was about to step into that same promise that, because of her, all generations would call her blessed.

Lovely.

But what might be lost on us could not be lost on them.

The only way for Abraham and Sarah and for Mary to get to that promise was through labor pains.

Of course, I'm not going to claim to know a lot about labor pains. I was, however, a birth coach once which doesn't make me an expert but it does mean I have seen labor pains up close and personal. It means that I made an investment in the delivery of that new little life in the world. There were classes and a 'birthing plan' and even a certificate. I had to be ready at all times to drop everything and rush to the hospital, which seemed like a lot at the time until the labor pains actually began.

All I can say, from my experience, is that while that the outcome was a beautiful baby, the labor pains were not pretty. There was a lot of yelling. This nice person I had agreed to help with the father out of the picture became a whole other person. She swore at me. She about broke my hand when I tried to hold on to hers. Even though she made me swear that I would not let them give her any drugs – no matter what she said – at one point she told me that I had better get the doctor in there with an epidural right now or else. I knew better than to argue with her.

No class could have truly prepared me for all that. And it couldn't prepare me for the moment I held that new little life in my arms. It was incredible. It was one of the most profound moments of my life and I walked around that delivery room telling her that, no matter what, whatever anyone tried to tell her and no matter how difficult life might be, I wanted her always, always to know that she was loved.

Being a birth coach taught me that the promise of new life with all its potential to bless the world comes with some labor pain involved.

And that leads us to the text this morning from the beginning of Mark 13:
“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 torn down.’”

Now before we go on, I want to remind you of Pastor Patricia’s sermon last week about the poor widow and her gift. It’s the story that immediately precedes this one and I’ve never given much thought, until now, about these two stories together.

In that previous story, Jesus is ‘people watching’ in the Temple and he sees this poor widow, in the presence of people with a lot more money than she has, put all that she has in the Temple treasury.

As Pastor Patricia said last week, Jesus points her out both as an indictment on the economic system that is specifically supposed to take care of widows and has left her instead with nothing and her gift is an act of faithful defiance that in effect says, this failed system is not going to define me as someone who has nothing to give, someone who has nothing to offer, someone who is not worthy of participating in this fundamental promise that through me, a daughter of Abraham and Sarah, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

But here’s my question reading this first part of the text for this morning: If Jesus knows that the Temple is going to be destroyed and that the whole religious system is coming down anyway, why didn’t he stop her? Why didn’t he run over just before those coins dropped into the offering plate and say, “Wait! Don’t do it. Don’t waste this sacrifice on something that’s not going to last?”

Why didn’t Jesus save her from investing in something he knew was just going to be destroyed?

But maybe that’s not the point. Maybe there is something about this widow’s gift that has very little to do with the institution itself and has everything to do with the promise that place and her giving represents.

Jesus doesn’t stop her. Instead he points her out as yet another of those unlikely people with something to show us about how this new life gets born in the world.

This story makes me think of my friends at Grace Baptist Church in Chicago. Several years ago, a call went out from the American Baptist camp outside Chicago for volunteers to spend a weekend working on the property. And, because the budget for camp was tight, they were also asked to pay for the expenses of their time at camp.

So, a group from Grace signed up and raised the money to go.

But, when the camp director saw that a group from a Welcoming & Affirming church was coming – potentially with lesbian and gay people in the group – he called and asked them not to come. It would just be too controversial to have them there.

The group from Grace got together and decided that, while they were disappointed to be dis-invited, they were going to send the money they raised anyway. They were not going to let a short-sighted institution stop them from making good on their promise.

So, they sent the money.

And it wasn't long before the camp director was looking for a new job.

I take no joy in the fact that this person lost his job. But I do think that there was something of that poor widow in my friends from Grace – that their refusal to be stopped from living the promise they had made, brought on the labor pains of a new day at camp.

So, even with what Jesus knew of that institution, he didn't stop the poor widow from making her gift because it was just another contraction on the way to those labor pains that would bring about a new day.

And the story in Mark continues as the disciples leave the Temple.

“When Jesus 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 the one!” 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 labor pains.”

If wars and rumors of wars, nations fighting each other, natural disasters and famines are labor pains, you have to wonder what it is we are giving birth to.

I was thinking about this as I was watching the coverage of the attacks on Paris Friday night and thinking about all the places in the world where this kind of violence happens every day.

If these are labor pains, what kind of new world is being born?

Janet Horman visited Iraq after the war and saw the ongoing devastation there. In Basrah, a woman was trying to find help for her baby. Janet’s Iraqi taxi driver said the baby needed blood but there wasn’t any at the hospital. He volunteered his own but it was probably too late. Janet found herself thinking about this text in Mark 13 and writes:

I think the days of suffering have been too long, and the labor pains have been too intense. Whatever life there may be beyond the labor is not a certainty. If we are giving birth to anything, it often appears to be a monster.

But then a baby cries, or a taxi driver gives his blood. A poor family offers me tea ... and for the moment, it is enough ... to keep me in labor, hoping that the new birth will come quickly, that the signs of new life on the way can be seen even in the present age.

All I can say is that if these are labor pains all around us and there are labor pains within us, we had better get some good birth coach training – the kind that reminds us of what is important and teaches how to invest in it; the kind that grounds us in a promise of new life larger than our own; the kind that has the power to imagine.

I was moved yesterday by the story of an unidentified man in Paris who rolled a piano out on the street in front of the concert hall where 118 people were killed and just started playing John Lennon’s “Imagine.” “Imagine all the people living life in peace.”

In the labor pains of Paris, I think that guy is a birth coach.

When wars and rumors of war seem to be giving birth to fear and revenge, let me be a birth coach for the promise of peace.

When yet another disaster seems to be giving birth to ‘compassion fatigue,’ let me be a birth coach for that longing to find some way to help.

When one more child is born into the millions around the world who have little or nothing to eat, let me be a birth coach for the promise that we can – we really can – feed them all.

When the failure of yet another great institution gives birth to disappointment and despair, let me be a birth coach for imagination and the promise that there is a power already at work within you to accomplish far more than you can ask or imagine – that through you, no matter how unlikely you think you are and how unrealistic it may seem, through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

That’s the promise Abraham and Sarah and Mary and that poor widow woman is passing on to us this morning. The labor pains have already started. The contractions are getting stronger. The potential for new life is already pushing its way past all the distractions and disappointments and doubts into the light of our imaginations.

All we need now are some good birth coaches that can withstand the yelling and the bargaining and the resistance and can hold our hands all the way through to the promise that new life is being born in us.

Together, let’s be those people.

And today, if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The story by Janet Horman is told in Jan Richardson’s, *Sacred Journeys: A Woman’s Book of Daily Prayer* (Upper Room Books, 1995), p.292-293. Mike Raschko at Seattle University says of this text: “... every word of forgiveness, every life made whole is pregnant with the possibilities of life in its fullness. Disciples abandon their boats and livelihoods to follow Jesus; widows give their last pennies; Simon the Cyrene is ready to take up the cross.” *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), p.135.