



“Birth Pangs”

26th Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, November 17-18, 2018

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 13:1-8

I can't read our gospel for today without imagining the world we live in and the world we have been experiencing

recently. Fires devour California towns; where there was once homes and businesses, there are now charred remains. War rages on in Yemen and Syria bringing about famine and thousands upon thousands of displaced people. Hurricanes Michael and Florence destroyed Florida and the Carolinas with violent winds and rising floods. The earth shook, and a large wave demolished the island of Palu in Indonesia just over a month ago. 11 people were slaughtered as they entered what should have been a safe haven – their synagogue. Two more people were killed while they were doing the most mundane errand – going for groceries. And 12 more people, mostly young lost their lives when a gunman entered a bar a few weeks ago. When Jesus talks about birth pangs, these events are what he means. Events that cause great pain and suffering. Events that cause bloodshed and fear.

The world we live in is a scary place. In our gospel reading, Jesus talks of political unrest – check, we've got that; of natural disasters – check, we've seen that too; of violence and war – check, these seem to be regular occurrences these days.

We live in a scary world. In the words of my grandmother: “What is happening in our world?” When she asked me, I responded, “I don't know, Mom Mom, but it's awful. I'm scared.”

God, we are scared. God, we ask, “why?” God, our world is in pain.

But, Jesus says, “...the end is still to come.” From this story and others like it – most notably the book of Revelation and the book of Daniel, which you just heard – we have been taught to view these events as harbingers of the end of the world. We have been conditioned to view the end as a scary thing. Movies like 2012, Independence Day, War of the Worlds portray a violent end. Books like the Left Behind series portray a terrifying rapture-like event with the coming of Christ. But this isn't what Jesus is really talking about here!

The New Revised Standard Version's use of the phrase “the end” doesn't help matters either. This Greek word, *telos* - translated here as “the end - has a richer, more helpful meaning if translated as “the fulfillment,” “the aim,” “the goal” because that's what

Jesus is really talking about. Jesus is really talking about God's ultimate goal for the world. Because that is what is to come!

What is to come isn't MORE violence, more hunger, more pain, and more destruction. The world will not end with these things. Because that's not our God! Our God wants an end to violence, an end to hunger, an end to pain and an end to destruction because that is already happening right now.

Our God is peace. Our God is love. Our God is justice. God's telos – God's ultimate goal - for all of us and for this world is peace, love and justice. That is what is to come!

Every week we pray the Lord's Prayer. We pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." But do we really stop and think about what we are asking of God with these words. We say the Lord's Prayer so often. Many of us have these words memorized, but do we really understand what we are asking of God when we say, "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are begging God to bring God's kingdom of peace, love and justice into our world like it is in heaven! We are begging to have God's kingdom here and now!

Please God, come into our midst. Please God, be present among us in these times of pain and violence, of fear and sadness. Please God.

This reading about the coming of God into our world – the removing of our human pain, the bringing of solace and comfort – is beautifully placed a few weeks before we begin the season of Advent, the season in which we anticipate, we wait, and we prepare for the birth of the baby Jesus. But, even before Advent, we are asking God to come and be with us. Even before Advent, we are asking God's kingdom to enter this world that so desperately needs God's peace, God's love, and God's justice. Here and now!

Our world is in the middle of birth pangs so painful, so gut-wrenching that sometimes our world can hardly stand it anymore. Our world can't wait for Advent to ask God to come and dwell among us. These birth pangs are more than the world can bear. We wish God's kingdom would be born here and now.

And the good news for us, for the world, for the hopeless, the fearful, but the faithful is God's kingdom is already here. God's kingdom has already appeared. We have caught glimpses of God's telos – God's ultimate goal of peace, love and justice.

As I sat in traffic a few days after the shooting in Pittsburgh, I was listening to the radio, listening to another report about those who had died. But the newscaster decided to end his piece with some words from Fred Rogers: "Always look for the helpers," Mr. Rogers says. "There will always be helpers on the sidelines... Because if you look for the helpers, you will know there is hope." That hope points to the presence of God in our midst.

On Friday evening, a group of women gathered here to watch the movie Under the Tuscan Sun and share a meal. After the movie, we discussed the people in our lives who have helped us in difficult times. This conversation was a reminder that God's presence

is embodied in and through those who accompany us in hard times; those people bring us hope! That hope points to the presence of God in our midst.

In 2016, UNICEF, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund published a photo essay called, "Finding Hope," displaying images of children around the world showing that hope and resilience are possible, even in the middle of some of humanity's greatest tragedies.

One of the pictures has resonated with me ever since. The picture shows a group of people wearing lifejackets on a boat. A man stands holding a little boy with the biggest smile on his face. Perhaps you remember the refugee crisis caused by the war in Syria as thousands of Syrians fled their home for safety across the Mediterranean Sea, many of whom drowned during their journey. This little boy's smile brought hopes and smiles to those around him in the middle of a terrifying journey to safety. That hope points to the presence of God in our midst.

God hears humanity's cries. God hears our prayers. God's kingdom has come. On earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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