

"Birth Pangs"

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to know the signs of Jesus coming in our daily living. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." That's the beginning of *Genesis*, the first book of the Old Testament that describes the beginning of the birth pangs of a new creation. The subsequent stories in *Genesis* describe how the people of ancient Israel envisioned God creating the heavens and the earth, and God creating the many creatures, including human beings.

Contemporary physicists still ponder how the universe was born and similarly describe a dark void that existed prior to the Big Bang which erupted from a single, infinitesimally small point to give birth to the entire universe. We see the incredible result of this Big Bang in the infinite wonder of nighttime starry skies. The beginning of everything is hard to fathom, isn't it? In many ways it's similar to the wonder and mystery of the beginning of each new life, like little Carter born last Thursday morning. Creation is still as difficult to fathom as it was for the ancient Israelites.

In our scripture reading from Mark this morning, Jesus describes the beginning of a new creation that he likens to birth pangs. It's a passage that has come to be called the *Little Apocalypse*, because it's very similar to the apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament book of *Daniel* and in the last book in the New Testament, *Revelation*.

An apocalypse, translated literally from the Greek, is a disclosure of hidden knowledge, as in the lifting of a veil, or a revelation. Every time Sherlock Holmes solves a mystery – the revelation of his discovery is an *apocalypse*. In *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy finally meets the little old man behind the curtain – it's an *apocalypse*. The New Testament book of *Revelation* is actually called *The*

Apocalypse of John. John receives the hidden knowledge of the ultimate victory of good over evil at the end of the present age. Today, *apocalypse* is commonly used to refer to prophetic revelations of so-called end-times or to the end of the world in general.

In Mark's *Little Apocalypse*, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was a magnificent structure built by Herod the Great to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day. The Temple was made of huge stones and there was gold everywhere. It was supposed to be God's Temple: the place believed to be the closest point of contact between God and God's people. The people believed that God would not allow the destruction of God's magnificent Temple. As it turns out, the Temple was destroyed in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD, not long after the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Temple was never rebuilt.

Jesus foretells the persecution of the disciples, great suffering, and at some unknown time, the return of the Son of Man "coming in clouds with great power and glory." Many Christians have become obsessed with predictions of Jesus' second coming. Ignatius in the year 110 said, "The last days are upon us. Weigh carefully the times. Look for him who is above all time, eternal and invisible." In the year 236 the church leader, Hippolytus predicted that Christ was sure to return by the year 500. The years between 999 and 1030 were characterized by considerable speculation about Christ's second coming, so much so that it led to social chaos as farmers didn't plant crops for the next year, buildings weren't repaired, and the details of daily life were neglected because they thought Christ would return in their lifetime. In the 1500's the Protestant reformer Martin Luther said, "We have reached the time of the white horse of the Apocalypse. This world will not last any longer ... than another hundred years." Christopher Columbus said he was sure the world would end by 1656. Ten years later, the year 1666 saw an explosion of end time speculation, so much so that one pastor wrote in his journal that every time a storm hit, people would go to church to await Christ's second coming.

In our own generation, some modern-day prophets predicted that 1981 would mark the rapture of the church and the beginning of the terrible seven-year tribulation period that would culminate in the battle of Armageddon. There were similar predictions about the year 2000 and then again for 2012. Today, the news is full of worldwide social and political unrest, wars and the threat of wars, and widespread natural disasters and man-made disasters like global warming. It sounds like the birth pangs of an apocalypse – but the pangs never seem to end.

Peter, James, John and Andrew, the first four disciples called by Jesus, ask for signs relating to the destruction of the Temple, but Jesus doesn't provide the information they seek. Instead, Jesus redirects their attention to a way of living that doesn't focus on the destruction of the Temple or on the end-times. Jesus teaches them about discipleship and how they should beware of false prophets and not be alarmed about the many terrible things that will come to pass. Jesus preaches hope, peace, joy and love. The disciples are called to have faith and to preach the gospel; the good news of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will provide the words for them to use. The challenges ahead that they, and we, face are the beginning of the birth pangs, in a process that leads to new life.

This past week, the Bacon family celebrated new life on the same day that we bowed our heads to remember the hard-won freedoms of those who fought and died, or were forever damaged for our benefit. We remember so many who have worked so hard and sacrificed so much for us. Christianity is a call for us to have faith in a world with many difficulties. Wars, terrorism, natural disasters, environmental destruction, false prophets and scams abound. Sometimes it can feel like they're signs of the end-times. And yet, Jesus begins by warning us not to be led astray. And then he describes all these signs as "but the beginning of the birth pangs." It's the beginning of the re-birth of the kingdom of God because ordinary people like us are not led astray, and in faith, we proclaim the good news of hope and peace and joy and love.

In one of her memoirs, American non-fiction writer, Anne Lamott shares the joy of birth, rebirth and the birth pangs of a new creation. Anne writes:

“When [my son] Sam was six days old, I took him to my little church in Marin City, the church where I’d been hanging out for four years now ... I got in the habit of stopping by the church on Sundays by staying in the back, in this tense, lurky way, and leaving before the service was over because I didn’t want people to touch me, or hug me, or try to make me feel better about myself. After I got sober and started to feel okay about myself, I could stay to the end and get hugged ... Anyway, the first Sunday after Sam’s birth, I kind of limped in ... and everyone was staring joyfully and almost brokenheartedly at us because they loved us so much. I walked, like a ship about to go down, to a seat in the back. But the pastor said, ‘Whoa, whoa, not so fast - you come up here and introduce him to his new family.’ So I limped up to the little communion table in the front of the half circle of folding chairs where we sit, and I turned to face everyone. The pain and joy were just overwhelming. I tried to stammer, ‘This is my son,’ but my lip was trembling, my whole face was trembling, and everyone was crying. When I’d first started coming to the church, I couldn’t even stand up for half the songs because I was so sick from cocaine and alcohol that my head would be spinning, but these people were so confused that they’d thought I was a child of God. Now they’ve seen me sober for three years, and they saw me through my pregnancy ... Toward the end of my pregnancy, people were stuffing money into my pockets, even though a lot of them live on welfare and tiny pensions. They’d sidle up to me, slip a twenty into the pocket of my sweater, and dart away.”

Anne shares with us, a new birth, a woman born again, and the beginning of the birth pangs of a new creation. Everything will be revealed in due course. Have faith, because Jesus is here right now and is revealed through ordinary people like us, as we live our faith and gather in churches like this all over the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.