

## **Giving Birth To Change**

### **Mark 13:1-8**

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 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 birth pangs.

# Giving Birth To Change

Mark 13:1-8

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## I.

It seems there is no putting this off, especially since Leia said she wouldn't preach for me again this week, and that I needed to put on my big boy pants and get on with it; or words to that effect. However, if we are going to do this, you and I, we had better start from the beginning. Which, for those of us in the church, means scripture, the Bible, the B-I-B-L-E. Yes, *that* is the book for you and me.

While it might be tempting for us, not to mention cathartic, to use the pulpit to simply orate and opine, or even rant and rage, that is not the purpose of preaching and the homiletical arts. Be it in-person, via the live stream, or by reading the emailed sermon manuscript, we gather with ourselves each week not to talk but, rather, to *listen*. Not to the preacher, but to listen to the Word of God as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. If we make scripture our starting point always, we will be okay...always. That is the Good News, if we will allow it to be so.

## II.

Which is not to say that we will always *like* what scripture has to say to us. Truth is truth, though, regardless of whether we like it or not. The question becomes we will open ourselves to *hear* the truth scripture speaks to us, have the courage to *accept* what such a truth will *demand* of us, move forward in our lives sustained and emboldened by the *hope* the truth of scripture imparts, and keep a *vigilant* faith in defense of the truth scripture has revealed.

Make no mistake about it, faith in the truth of scripture is a tricky business and an arduous task. Some days more than others, and in certain historical moments as compared to most. Suffice to say, today *is* one of those days and one of those historical moments. I have been doing a fair amount of listening since the election, and I've heard a lot of talk about the end of the world. Let us hit that particular nail right on the head. To be clear, this is *not* the end of the world. That said, it is certainly the case that the *ending* of the world *is* always unfolding.

### III.

Today's scripture passage from Mark 13:1-8, the pre-selected lectionary reading, is understood to be apocalyptic in nature. That is to say, it speaks to the ending of the world. As Jesus was emerging from the temple one of the disciples (surely something of a rube) says, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Seizing the opportunity to broach what surely must have always been the elephant in the room, Jesus speaks to the future of where all this was going (and for our purposes, going still). Dispensing with any notion of nuance or subtlety, Jesus says, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

The provocativeness of the statement notwithstanding, Jesus was apparently satisfied just to allow the statement to hang there hovering in the air, clearly not wanting to get into *all that*. With the result being the disciples saying to themselves, "Wait!?! What was that!?!"

### IV.

No more than you or I would have, some of the disciples simply could not let such a statement go by. Later, we are told, when he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew came to Jesus in private asking for clarification if not also explanation, "Tell us, *when* will this be, and *what* will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Jesus replies:

*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 birth pangs.*

Talk about asking being sorry you asked! We can be sure this is *not* the kind of answer that they expected or hoped to hear: that the future *would* be hard, and *will* be hard. So it was, and so it is. Welcome to the future.

## V.

Though we are intellectually aware of what our experience serves to confirm, we tend to lose sight of the fact that life is a linearity of change which is moving in a direction, and we along with it. While this is irrefutably the case, we tend to ignore the inevitability of change or we allow change to be obfuscated by the relentless minutia of life which serves to give the *illusion* of constancy. That is, until circumstances conspire so as to disabuse us of our self-deception; sometime rudely, shockingly, or mournfully so.

In simplest terms, today's scripture reading is about Jesus informing his followers that change is coming, and that they (and we as well) must both *abide* these changes and *prepare* ourselves for them. When we hear the word "change" we almost always assume the worst. Otherwise, we would employ the word "progress" instead. Change, though, is what we make of it. What matters most about change is how we respond to it.

## VI.

Change arrives to us in a variety of ways: change that we know is coming; change that we wish or hope would come; change that is welcome or unwelcome; change that is avoidable or unavoidable; change we do not expect or cannot foresee; and, change for which we are woefully unprepared. Given the events of the past few weeks we cannot ignore that great change is on its way to our nation and to this world. While some may be glad, relieved, or even excited for such change, others brace for it with a deep sense of anxiety, worry, and fear.

Now, before we go any further I want to be clear that the intent of today's sermon is not to be political but, rather, to respond *pastorally* to politics; and, hopefully, to offer us some perspective. Specifically, the perspective that only scripture can afford which, ultimately, is the only perspective which really matters. To do so, I am going to ask us to begin with an unapologetically extreme theological and scriptural perspective. Buckle up.

## VII.

It seems that we, as a moderate to progressive leaning, scripturally literate congregation which is informed by both hope and reason, need to entertain

the possibility that we are living at the “End of Days” and that, right now, we have arrived at the “End Times.”

There, I’ve said it. Not just because it is the elephant in the room nearly all of us have considered at some level and to whatever degree, but because it is something which *needs* to be said and we should have *no* fear in saying it; *especially*, here in the church. After all, isn’t such an end the place to which our faith has been ever leading us; even longingly so? Hasn’t the story of the church always been about awaiting Christ’s return, and the ushering in of God’s Kingdom here on earth? Is it *that* much of a stretch for us to understand current events in Apocalyptic terms, with notions of a Messiah, false prophet, and Anti-Christ plainly evidenced? *Not* to give these things serious consideration would be foolish, if not outright delusional.

## **VIII.**

Assuming for the moment, then, that this *is* the case, the questions becomes how do *we* move forward into such a future filled with so much uncertainty? What changes will *we* make in our *own* lives to both abide such changes in the world and prepare ourselves for them? The wise play for us, right now, is to follow the lead of the ant in Aesop’s fable, rather than that of the grasshopper.

While the times in which we currently find ourselves living may turn out to be just another storm, or merely a passing shower, I think we can all agree that whatever the outcome the rain has begun to fall. To quote Robert Redford’s character in the 2001 movie *Spy Game*, “When did Noah start building the Ark? *Before* the rain.” This is *exactly* what we have been doing here on the Park these past decades, and for the past 217 years: building an Ark. A place of refuge, safety, and community strong enough to survive *whatever* deluge is to come.

## **IX.**

While “church as sanctuary” is a concept to which all of us can probably easily relate, the church is *much* more than just mere shelter or safe harbor from the storm. As was the case with Noah’s Ark, we are a repository of hope for the future wonderfully and gloriously expressed in a myriad of forms and functions each with the unifying purpose of preserving the whole.

*Whatever* the future brings, over the span of the next four years and for all the years to come, we will ride it out *together* with each other here in this church. Just like we did with COVID, and just like the generations of church folk on the Park before us have done through the Civil War, the Great Depression, each World War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the turmoil which has always come without exception in every era. While this is an admittedly a low bar, it is crucial we get over it such that each of us will at least *begin* to truly believe that we will endure, persist, and be sustained by each other.

## **X.**

Whether or not this is the end of the world, we cannot know. What we *do* know, however, is that Jesus tells us, “Do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.” Here, now, is where we start to raise the bar.

Dooming and glooming has always been an inherent aspect of the human condition from which no one is immune. We *like* to think in terms which are apocalyptic. Doing so serves as both a carrot and a stick as we make our way through our lives. At the heart of apocalyptic thinking, though, is the recognition and acceptance of change, and the desire to maintain one’s hope in the midst of these changes. Which, when it is all said and done, comes down to perspective, and the ability to *shift* that perspective. Let me try to shift ours.

## **XI.**

On a hunch, I looked at the Greek word used for the word “end” which is to come in the verse I just read. While that word, *télos*, is defined as “end,” it can also mean “goal”; and to carry out, to complete, to fulfill, to perfect, to bring to fruition. This, to me, is a *much* more hopeful understanding of what the scriptural and theological notion of the apocalypse is meant to convey.

This is not the *End* of the world, it is the *Ending* of the world that has *always* been taking place such that the world is changed and brought to completion; however hard the road for us to get there. This is the goal that God intends, and has *always* intended for the creation. This has been the plan (Stan) from the very beginning, when God created the heaven and the earth. When the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face

of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, bringing order out of chaos. This is what is being made possible through the cross of Christ. Though foolishness to those who are perishing, to us who are being saved it is the power of God. This is what redemption and salvation is all about.

## **XII.**

At the conclusion of today's text Jesus says, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." What an astoundingly vibrant and accurate way to understand the apocalypse, likening it to a woman in childbirth. At something of a disadvantage to *fully* appreciate such an experience, I asked Linda to describe the birth pangs. She said it is a searing, unrelenting, deep, and intense pain. Then she added, but it is pain with a *purpose*. With that purpose being bringing new life to the world, providing a fullness and completeness to one's existence as the fruition and perfection of love.

Linda also said there is a lot of grunting, growling, and screaming involved, with some bearing it better than others (sounds vaguely familiar). Regardless of how well *you* are bearing up these days, always remember the purpose in the pain, and the joy to be found in the newness the pain of birth, and the pain of change will always bring.

## **XIII.**

As stated earlier in the sermon, life is a linearity of change which is moving in a direction, and we along with it. All that remains for us to discover and to determine, is if we will get swept up or swept away in such change, or if we will be the means *through* which God is giving birth *to* that change in accordance with the direction God intends.

It is a matter of our perspective. It is a matter of the power and profundity of our hope. It is a matter of the resilience and resoluteness of the faith we have in the future God intends for us. And, it is a matter of the depth and determination of our love for each other. How we vote on *these* matters, is the only election result with which we should ultimately be concerned. Amen.