

Birth Pangs©

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

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Do you remember the story of *Chicken Little*? An acorn fell on his head and he was sure the sky was falling. He ran to tell the lion, but on the way he met Henny Penny, who listened as he cried, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" and she went with him to find the lion.

But on the way they ran across Ducky Lucky who hears the same cry and they all run to find the lion, but then they come to Foxy Loxy who tells them to follow him and they did – all the way into the fox's den, where they went in but never came out again.

Chicken Little over reacted and convinced the others, as well, that doomsday was coming. Without being smart and thinking it through, they definitely did fall into their doom.

I thought of that story as I read Jesus' warning to beware of those who would lead us astray. We know that this Gospel, according to Mark's name, was written to the early church, soon after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE.

One of the bible commentators I read in *Feasting on the Word*, as I studied this passage, said that Mark is "reorienting the early Christian community. He is decentering the people in relation to the temple rituals" (the temple had been the focus of all things religious; a belief that the temple was where God was). Even for early Christians, their Jewish faith and training remained pretty strong.

"Mark is trying to recenter the early Christians in their relationship to Christ."

In other words, Mark is giving good news and hope to the people who were discouraged and devastated by the destruction of the temple. And those early Christians hoped and believed that Jesus was coming back at any moment.

It's interesting that Mark tells about this time with Jesus and the disciples, sitting on the Mount of Olives. As this story was being written down, Mark surely had in mind that right there in that place, there were probably people who were buried at the Mount of Olives, who died during that siege when the temple was destroyed. Surely there is good news even for those already in the grave! (Think:

1 Thessalonians 4:16: "*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*")

But let's look at what Jesus said. What did his words mean for the disciples who were there with him, as they looked over at this panoramic view of the temple.

Jesus had just told the anonymous disciple who was so impressed by the huge stones, stacked one on top of another that those stones would all fall down.

As they sit there, Peter, James, John and Andrew want to know more. When is this all going to happen? What will be the signs that this is about to happen?

It seems, by Jesus' answer, that they were expecting Jesus to answer when the end would come, meaning the end of time. Surely they could not fathom the fabulous, important falling of the temple for any other reason. God would never allow that to happen!

At first glance, we might think Jesus was giving signs as he talked about wars and rumors of wars, nations against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, famines and earthquakes.

And when we hear this, we immediately think of what's happening today, don't we? We hear of famines and earthquakes in the news. We see wars and rumors of wars all the time. When I wrote this sermon on Thursday, there had not yet been the newest, horrendous attacks on Paris that happened on Friday.

But, before we start predicting that the end is near, let's take another look at what Jesus is saying. Notice the first thing Jesus says when asked about a sign is this: "Beware that no one leads you astray!"

Jesus says there will be people who come to claim they are the Christ. There will be false prophets – people yelling in the streets like *Chicken Little* crying "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

In other words, many people will come along, trying to say they know when the end time will happen.

Well, I think we know there already have been some of those fear mongers – people predicting the end is near, don't we? I can think of at least 3 times in my lifetime when doomsday was predicted. And that is how it was viewed – a doomsday, instead of a glorious day.

But, we're still here. It hasn't happened yet. Jesus said when you see these things – wars and earthquakes (things that have been happening for a long, long time) -- this is just the beginning. It's like birth pangs.

Now, you may or may not have had the experience of giving birth, but usually, when a woman starts having the first birth pains (or pangs) she may think “we’d better get to the hospital fast!” Especially if it’s her first baby. But most of the time, there is still a long ways to go before that baby comes.

I know I felt very foolish when it happened to me. It was about midnight and I was sure I was in labor. I woke up my first husband, Dwayne, and we got in the car and headed for KI Sawyer Air Force base, up in the U.P. where my first son would be born.

It is an 8-mile drive from Guinn, MI, where we lived, to the base, and Dwayne was speeding – until the flashing lights indicated we needed to pull over.

He was frustrated and explained that we had to hurry and get to the base because I was in labor. The officer’s flashlight shined into the car to my stomach which definitely proved I was “with child.”

That kind officer escorted us to the base, calling in to the gate that we would be coming and I was in labor. They stopped us briefly and then waved us through. We arrived safely at the hospital, me having more pains and just sure he was coming soon!

Well, about an hour later we drove out through the other side of the gate and went back home after being told I still had a ways to go before the baby would arrive. And it was a ways off. About 3 more weeks!

Jesus is saying this is how it is with the Kingdom of God coming, with the coming of the Son of God on earth. There will be birth pangs, which let you know it’s going to happen – sooner or later – and you should be ready, but don’t over react, because you could still have a good bit of time to wait.

The commentator I was reading said: “The great danger for disciples is not that we will *under* read the signs of the times, but that we will *over* read them, or over react to them, and be led astray.

Jesus wants us, as his disciples, to participate in the reign of God as it is coming to be in our present time and space, yet without thinking that God’s reign would be confined by our time or space. If we completely ignore the birth pangs then we are resisting participation in the Kingdom.

We, as Jesus’ disciples, should not only have hope, but also give hope to others. We should have a firm hope that God’s promises are real. But we have no way of determining the time of Jesus’ coming. Jesus said even he doesn’t know.

We will soon be in the season of Advent – a time of focusing on the coming of Jesus – the baby born in a stable – God becoming flesh to live among us. Yet, Advent is also a time of preparing for the *second* coming of Jesus.

The point is, there is still much to gain from being here. It's that "God's not finished with me yet" kind of experience as God continues to transform us and teach and help us to be agents of his transforming love in a world full of fear and pain and suffering.

There is still much work to be done, there are many people who need our compassion, our care and love, our Christ-like example to help them through – to help them know the love and grace Jesus brings. And all the time we are doing that, we are also growing in his grace, as well.

As we work for love, instead of hate, for peace in place of violence and oppression, for courage in place of fear, we ARE participating in the reign of God. We are helping to establish his Kingdom on earth.

And so we wait. We wait with anticipation and eager expectation as we do what we can to be ready – by being faithful disciples and following Jesus' model for us.

We wait and watch – one foot already stepping into the Kingdom; but we also live a disciples' life, thankful for another day to serve here on earth, as we know it now.

Birth pangs are real, they remind us that something is coming, but they don't necessarily mean it's here now. Do not be led astray. Stay focused on Jesus and on living the life he calls us to.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I admit that I find myself in a real dilemma. I preach about discipleship being all about modeling our lives as Jesus taught. I believe Jesus' response to hatred and violence was the opposite of the world's typical response.

Yet, as we watch how hatred is turning to sheer terrorism of people, to violence and murder, how should our response be, as Jesus' disciples?

It's one thing to *talk* about peaceful responses, but when danger gets close to our own families and the life we enjoy – then the questions come. The dilemma is very real. How *do* we respond?

I don't know the answer. I am wrestling with the question. I want to know your thoughts. The challenge to you, and to *me*, this week is for us to think about what we know about the one we follow, and to get on our knees and pray fervently for that one – Jesus – to show us how we, as his faithful followers *should* respond. Is the answer war? Or something else?

I don't want this to be political. Seriously. I want it to be a thoughtful, theological exercise. I'm going to blog about this and will post it on Facebook, hoping for your response; but if you aren't on Facebook you can email me and share your thoughts there. But please don't write, until you do the other – reflecting on who Jesus is, and praying.

May God bless us and guide us as we try to be faithful disciples while we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ!

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