

Sermon: **Birth Pangs**

Text: Mark 13:1-8

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Harpswell, Maine

Delivered: November 15, 2009

Birth pangs. Jesus, having described all kinds of trouble and turmoil to be endured, says, "This is but the beginning of birth pangs."

I might like to talk to you about birth pangs, you know, the pain involved in bearing a child and bringing new life into the world. But without looking I can feel the glare coming back to me from a sorority of motherhood shouting, "And just what do you know, Sir, about birth pains?" I yield! I know nothing by way of experience.

But I do know, intellectually at least, that birth pains are the beginning of something wonderful yet to be... something to be anticipated and welcomed and celebrated... the birth of new life... a new creation.

That said, I think I better go with a different approach. A few weeks ago while visiting my daughter's family, my grandson dumped a box of building blocks on the floor and invited me to play with him. Building blocks of all sizes and shapes were all over the floor. No batteries; no sounds; no movement; just blocks of wood doing nothing, waiting for something to happen.

So I got down on the floor with my grandson and we began to build. We weren't sure of what our building would become; we just started piling one block on another. After he added a block I would add another, trying to counter-balance what he had just added. (He's not quite three years old, so I'm still smarter than he is, and I figure I still have a couple years on him.)

Well, we built a pretty good building if I do say so myself. I said, "Look, what a big building we built! We did a good job, didn't we! He looked at it and at me and grinned, and then abruptly knocked the whole thing down. I had wanted to admire our building, and to show it to Mommy and Grandma and say "Look what we built!" But he just started building a new building. So I jumped in and helped. And once again, when this new building got to a certain point of grandeur, he knocked it down and we started building yet another.

After a while I began to get the idea. The building (noun) meant very little. It was more about the building (verb). After all, that's what playing with building blocks is all about, isn't it. To simply admire what we had built would have been to stop; to have ended our play; to have ended our creativity. We had to dismantle some things to be able to continue our work; to undo before we could continue to do. Our buildings weren't built for the express purpose of being torn down, but neither were they meant to be permanent.

After a while, at the insistence of Mommy and Grandma and the call to supper, we put the blocks back into the toy box for another day when we'll do it again... bigger and better.

I wonder if it might have been something like that, but multiplied to the 100th power, that Jesus' disciples were experiencing as they walked out of the temple in Jerusalem. "Look!" they say, "What large stones and what large buildings!" What buildings, indeed. What magnificence. The temple was one of the highlights of the Herodian period. It took three quarters of a century to build. Some of the stones measured as long as 37 feet. It must have been inspiring to look at. It was especially inspiring as the centerpiece of their religion. It was the focal point of their religious life and practice. It was the symbol and dwelling place of God's presence. Look at it!

And Jesus says, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." How, physically, could these stones be toppled? How, religiously, could God allow such a thing to happen?

Jesus goes on, speaking in language rooted in Jewish apocalyptic thought, and suggests that God holds and controls history. God moves it along. For these, God's people, false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines and the like were all expressive of national calamities, and the thought of the temple being destroyed must have been the worst.

Yet Jesus is saying that, in the midst of all these predictions of disaster and upheaval, are the seeds of God's saving grace, ushering in a new and living way. These things will not be the end but the beginning; the beginning of birth pains. Painful indeed, but leading to something greater and yet more glorious than any human architectural achievement. Something is yet to be born.

Birth is more than change. It's creation. God doesn't just change things. God keeps creating. His creative work is never done in this world, in the life of the Church, and in your life and mine.

It is a common human tendency to want to admire and cling to what we know; what we have; what we have achieved and built. As a result change can be extremely difficult. But we are not talking about change; change for change sake. Some changes are not good, and some are disastrous. We are talking about creation and creativity; newness of life; a new and living way. And sometimes things can't be made new until the old is dismantled.

"Look, teacher, what large stones! What establishment!" Large, established stones are hard to move.

My little grandson had no problem knocking down our buildings. In his innocence, he seemed to know something about creative play that I was having to relearn. Rather than conserving and clinging and holding on to what we know and what we have and what we have accomplished, Jesus keeps talking about dying and rising again to newness of life.

By the way, I like our stewardship campaign slogan; "Continuing the Journey." We're never quite there, are we. There is always something more and something new yet to discover around the next corner and over the horizon. There's always momentum and movement. In courage and faith we keep following and progressing step by step. I love the words of an old gospel song, "Heights I have not wings to fly to, step by step my feet can climb."

God keeps building us. We are the building of God, noun and verb. We are his workmanship. The apostle Paul wrote this to the Christian Church at Ephesus:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Paul speaks of the church as an established building, yet growing and being built spiritually into the dwelling place of the living God. Jesus does the same in speaking of the building tumbling in anticipation of the birth of newness and life.

Will Willimon, great preacher and teacher of preachers, tells of an interesting experience on a mission trip to a poor village in Honduras. One evening after a day's work the American team and some Honduran villagers were sitting together around a campfire singing and sharing stories of life. Someone suggested that each tell of a verse of Scripture that they had found to be comforting. Several cited John 3:16 and other phrases from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. A small Honduran woman, speaking through a translator, said that she loved the words of Jesus when he told of the destruction of the temple and how all the great stones would tumble down. Willimon wondered how in the world she found that comforting, until he learned that she had born four children, three of whom had died before the age of five due to malnutrition and hunger. This verse was good news to her, to realize that this world of hunger and pain and death was ultimately to be thrown down; that God was building something new; that God was still working to make all things new. This verse was the beginning of good news for her.

Are we ready to continue the journey? Let's anticipate God's building (verb). Let's look forward to God's creative working in us, not simply to make changes but to bring birth, new life, and growth. If we are ready, we must also be willing for God to dismantle some of our cherished stuff in order to create something brand new.

Amen.