

Midwives on Call for the Kingdom

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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!” **2** Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, **4** “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” **5** Then Jesus began to say to them,

“Beware that no one leads you astray. **6** Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. **7** When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

8 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.

WARS AND RUMORS OF WAR

What’s this world coming to?

The news been particularly gruesome recently?

Natural and man-made disasters fill the airwaves.

Wars and rumors of war.

Terrorists everywhere.

I wrote these words before Paris became the latest victim of a vicious terrorist attack.

That only serves to underline the question.

What is this world coming to?

No wonder some say that the end is near.
These terrible events seem to be a forewarning of the apocalypse.

You may even think this viewpoint is reinforced by what Jesus has to say in our lesson for today. Jesus himself talks about wars and rumors of war. Earthquakes and natural disasters all over the world.

Signs of the end. Right?

But, if these disasters are signs of the end, the end has been “near” for a long time.

Our age doesn't have a monopoly on tragedy.
For example, Google the Black Death or the Atlantic Slave Trade or the Crusades and you'll soon be reminded that the signs of the end time have been present in every age.

There have been wars and rumors of wars throughout history.
Natural disasters are not a recent phenomena.
Man's inhumanity to man is a historical fact.

The only difference today is that our ability to create mayhem and disaster has been enhanced by technology.

The industrial revolution has warmed the earth and contributed to potentially disastrous climate change. We now are able to fight wars by remote control with drones and insulate ourselves from the horror of what is happening, ... at least until the terrorists strike home.

At the end of the day we watch it in high definition, shake our heads and ask,
What is this world coming to?

We might be tempted to say that our world is headed for destruction.
But, this is not what the Bible teaches.
The Bible teaches that God's ability to save is greater than our ability to destroy.

Even our amped up ability to wage war and create terror and abuse the earth is not a sign of the end. It is a sign of something new being born.

BIRTH PANGS

Look again at what Jesus said in our lesson for today.
 Jesus didn't say that these terrible events are signs of the end.
 These terrible events are signs of the beginning.

They are the birth pangs of a new creation. (Mark 13:8)

Jesus is giving his disciples a promise.
 The world will not end as a result of human folly or natural disaster.
 There's a new world, a new birth coming.
 And nothing will be able to stop it.

The disasters of this present age are but a precursor of the age to come.

The apostle Paul expressed a similar idea in his letter to the Romans.
 He wrote that the whole creation has been "groaning in labor pains" in anticipation of God's kingdom. (Romans 8:22-23) To say it another way, there's a longing in the world and in our lives for something new. What we're doing now isn't working, and we desperately want something else.

According to the Bible, what we long for is the coming of the Kingdom of God, the new creation.

The troubles of this world are the birth pangs.
 And just as birth pangs are followed by the birth of a child; so the struggles of this world will be followed by the coming of God's kingdom.

The coming of this kingdom is sure.
 Indeed, this promise is a part of the Lord's prayer that we repeat each week.
 "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done.
 On earth as it is in heaven."

When we pray that prayer, we acknowledge that things on earth are not as they should be. But, we also express our faith in the promise that things can change, that the kingdom of God can come to earth. His will can be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Christians are an optimistic people, not because of what we can do but because of what God has promised.

TEMPLE DESTROYED

The Christians who first read Mark's gospel more than most longed for this new birth, this new world. Why? Because their old world had collapsed.

As we mentioned last week, when the gospel of Mark was written, the temple had been totally destroyed by the Romans. God's people had been scattered all over the ancient world.

Remember that in the early church Christians considered themselves to be a sect of Judaism. They didn't want Jews to stop being Jews. They just wanted Jews to start following Jesus.

And so the calamity of Jerusalem and the temple being destroyed and the scattering of the Jews presented a theological problem for the Christian community as well.

These early Christians were among those who had lost everything.

They too asked, "What's this world coming to?" Where is God in all this destruction?

This crisis prompted the need for an answer to those burning questions.

But, then they remembered what Jesus said to his disciples outside the Temple.

And in those words they found a reason to have hope even during this dark time.

This time of destruction and dislocation was not unexpected.

It was predicted by Jesus.

In our lesson for today, the disciples were enamored by the the temple and the surrounding buildings. It was impressive. They exclaimed, "What big stones!"

But, Jesus was not impressed. Jesus said that this impressive building would soon be destroyed. Those large stones would be flipped on their side.

The people should not put their hope in the grandeur of the Temple. It's glory was fleeting. The people should put their hope in God.

We too often put our hope in things that are not permanent.

Like those first disciples we are impressed by big buildings and powerful nations.

Perhaps we have a need to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

But, Jesus tells us that big buildings are not the answer.

We cannot gain a hope that is eternal by trusting in things that are temporary.

As we found out much to our sorrow in this country, even the grandest building can fall in an instant. Our needs won't be filled by completing another building project nor will our needs be filled by electing the right leader.

FALSE MESSIAHS

Jesus not only predicted that the Temple would be destroyed; he also predicted the reason it would be destroyed.

False messiahs would lead God's people astray.

That also happened as He said.

False messiahs advocated rebellion against Rome.

And the results were disastrous.

There's a word of warning here for us as well.

We too are subject to the danger of false Messiahs.

Even today there are those who lead us astray by who falsely claiming the authority of Jesus.

Not everyone who uses the name of Jesus is with him.

The Bible speaks of wolves in sheep clothing, people who pretend to be people of faith and yet promote something quite different.

And how do you detect these wolves in sheep clothing?

They say and do things that contradict the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus clearly said that God's kingdom was not of this world. It would not be a kingdom based on power and military might. It would not be a kingdom based upon lording it over others.

False messiahs will always claim otherwise.

Be warned. The destruction of the temple and the Jewish nation was due to putting trust in the message of a false messiah.

And we face the same danger.

THE KINGDOM THAT COMES

False Messiahs today preach that really big buildings and raw power are the key to our future. According to Jesus, that's just not true.

The key to our future lies in embracing God's kingdom instead of the kingdoms of this world. God's kingdom is different. It is based upon justice and mercy and forgiveness.

In the gospels we get a glimpse of what that kingdom might look like.

It is like the sacrifice of a poor widow who gives all she has out of love. It is like a blind man having his sight restored, and following Jesus down the road.

It is like a Savior praying as he is crucified, "Father, forgive them."

And sometimes we even catch a glimpse of that kingdom today.

It is like heartbroken family members in Charleston, S.C. telling a young racist who gunned down their loved ones in a Bible study,

"We forgive you.

And we are praying for your soul."

For those who have eyes to see ... the kingdom still comes even in the middle of heartbreak, disaster, and acts of pure evil.

The kingdom comes even when the Savior is crucified.

Through the eyes of faith, we look at these times of struggle not as a time to despair but as the birth pangs of a new era. In the middle of all this death and destruction we believe new life is going to emerge.

Like refugee women giving birth on boats and beaches, even in the worst of circumstances new life is going to emerge. The baby's arrival will not wait.

And neither will God's kingdom wait.

God's new life can come at any moment.

MIDWIVES ON CALL FOR THE KINGDOM

So do we have a role in the kingdom that comes?
You bet we do.

As my sermon title suggests, we are called to be midwives on call for the kingdom of God!

I bet there a lot of you who never thought of yourself as a midwife! What do I mean by this?

As a midwife aids in the birth of a baby, so, when we see signs of the kingdom that comes, we offer our support and assistance. This requires us to pay attention.

We live life on tiptoe.

We believe that the grace and mercy of God in Christ still lives among us.

The incarnation did not end with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God is still with us through the power of His Spirit and the actions of His people.

I've always thought that our role as disciples of Jesus Christ is best described by an old commercial. They were selling a product called Shake and Bake.

For those of you who haven't heard of it, Shake and Bake was a seasoning packet. You dumped the seasoning into the provided plastic bag, add meat and shake it all up.

It was a wonderfully simple way to add a little flavor to a meal for those of us who are cooking challenged.

And to emphasize that this product was fool proof, this commercial showed a little girl helping prepare the meal. And when everyone raved about it she would say in a delightful southern accent, "Shake and Bake, and I helped."

God in Christ has done the heavy lifting when it comes to the kingdom. But, we get to help.

God gives us the opportunity to participate in something much greater than we can imagine.

God encourages us to believe in the power of salvation and new life even when there is much evidence to the contrary.

HANNAH

The Old Testament lesson for today is the story of Hannah. To make a long story short Hannah couldn't have children.

Heaven knows she tried, but she was (as they put it in those days) barren.

Not being able to have children was a big deal in the ancient world. People thought she wasn't right with God, that somehow she was less of a woman.

So Hannah prayed in desperation and then waited in hope for the gift of a child. If her past was any indication of the future, her hope for new life bordered on the foolish.

But, she prayed anyway, and her miracle child, Samuel, became a part of God's salvation story.

Maybe this was Jesus' point as well.

Barrenness and death fill our world.

But, we are called to pray. We are called to wait for and be alert to the glory of the kingdom that comes.

We don't believe that our past determines our future.

We are midwives on call for the kingdom of God.

And waiting with anticipation is what midwives are called to do.

THE INVASION OF NEW LIFE

I have a friend who is a midwife and a nurse practitioner.

She runs New Life Birth Center, an organization into which she has put considerable time and resources.

I think I know why she does this.

She believes that every child is a gift from God, and she wants to participate in the joy of bringing that new life into the world.

Doing this requires her to keep a crazy schedule.

She doesn't have much help, and babies don't come into the world on any set timetable.

Some might think this job is too hard.

But, I think that for her the joy of birth is worth the wait and the crazy schedule. For her each moment is subject to the invasion of new life. And she likes it that way.

I think we can take a lesson from my friend.

We may be tempted to think that life is just one thing after another.

But, that's not true.

Each moment is subject to the invasion of new life.

Each moment is subject to the invasion of the Son of God who comes to judge and to save.

To some our anticipation of the kingdom of God in a world filled with evil may indeed seem foolish. But, for those of us who follow Jesus, it is the core of our what we believe.

The "foolishness" of God's promises still trump the so-called wisdom of the world. (1 Corinthians 1:25)

And so every week we pray in faith,

"Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We are waiting for a new birth, a new creation.

This promise makes each moment full of possibility.

Each moment can be that time when judgment and salvation meet.

Living this way puts things into perspective.

We begin to realize that some of the things that we worry about are not that important, and some things that we ignore should be taken more seriously.

Jesus' ministry occurred right in the middle of pain and suffering. He came to judge a political and religious system that exploited the poor and did not value mercy.

But, the judge was also a savior.

He healed the sick, gave comfort to the brokenhearted, and preached good news to the poor.

He forgave sinners and called upon all to repent and believe the good news of God's love.

Later the apostle Paul would ask a rhetorical question,
“Who can condemn?”
The answer? Only Christ.

And it is Christ who brings salvation to His people, his elect. It is Christ who intercedes for us at the right hand of God. (Romans 8:31-34)

This is the role of Christ not only back then but also here and now and into the future.

Jesus wants to remind his disciples that the struggles in this world are always tempered by the promise of the King who comes (as we say in the Apostle’s Creed) “to judge the quick (that is the living) and the dead.”

God in Christ comes to set things right in this world.
God in Christ comes to set things right for us.

And it is this promise that gives us strength for today and hope for the future.

Take heart friends.
New birth is on the way.

Amen.