

“Labor Pains”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

November 17, 2024

1 Samuel 1:4-20

Mark 13:1-8

The world is ending.

The world is just about to begin.

Our scriptures today pull us in both directions. The ending of the life we know in Mark’s gospel, where we have an apocalyptic passage, speaking of the destruction of the Temple, and coming wars, earthquakes, and famine. The beginnings of new life and new hope, stirring in Hannah’s womb, coaxed forward by lips in silent, urgent prayer.

Let me start with the world ending. *Apocalyptic* speaks to a revealing of the end times. For modern day Christians, I have to say talk of the apocalypse has been a niche that I have relegated to Evangelicals, who love to talk about the end times with some fear, but even more eagerness, for they have the sense that God has something even better in store for us than this world. But have you been smelling smoke from wildfires in New Jersey all week, anyone? Have you seen the appointments announced in the past week to the most impactful positions of government? In my mind, I have floated the possibility of becoming an apocalyptic Christian once or twice, I admit.

My best seminary friend Erik and I were talking right after the election about the 1990’s song, “It’s the End of the World As We Know It” by REM. As we lamented all that is topsy-turvy in the world, plus the recent death of my stepfather, and the expected death of Erik’s father-in-law any day now, this anthem of our Gen X youth seemed especially appropriate today. But at the same time, when I was talking to Erik late last week, he was about to start a new call to a Lutheran church where he was beginning as a senior pastor, after being out of parish ministry for 6 years. Last Sunday was his first sermon with them, and a rebirth of his sense of calling to ministry in these strange times. God is always calling forth new life, even where there is death, loss, and regret.

The announcement of death is often followed with the blessing of new life in the bible. And so, we can regard Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple with curiosity, even if on the surface it seems quite fearful.

In Jewish practice during Jesus' time, the Second Jerusalem Temple was the center of life as they knew it. It was there where the flames of the covenant the Israelites had brokered with God were stoked. The Temple was where the people were reminded of who they were, and *whose* they were. Their collective memory as a people could recall a time when they did *not* have the Temple— in 587 BCE, the Babylonian conquest and exile included the destruction of the first Jerusalem Temple, and scriptures that remain from that time created a lasting and mournful echo of sadness within the people. But decades later King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. Hundreds of years later, Herod the Great supported an enhancement of the Temple. This is the same Herod which Matthew reports tried to kill the baby Jesus, out of fear that this predicted Messiah would upend his plans to Make Jerusalem Great Again.

But it must have been a lovely Temple. Even the secular historian of the time, Josephus, testified to its magnificence. The people were proud of the great, strong stones— I can easily imagine it, because just a few weeks ago on a bright sunny fall day, we stood outside and admired and blessed the new cedar shingles adorning our church wall, given from a very generous benefactor.

As for the Jerusalem Temple, the vastness of its grandeur reminded them of the vastness of who God is. A palace for God, just as King David long before had imagined. But Jesus predicted the end of it all: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

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A secret you may not know is that Mark's gospel was written after the Temple had been already been destroyed for the second time. A Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation in Palestine

Between 66-70 CE. According to Josephus, over one million Jews were killed. Not only that, but their Temple was destroyed. The remaining of God's faithful tried to make sense of such loss, such devastation. Was their world ending? Absolutely. And they were trying to make holy sense of it all.

Jesus predicted, "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." To this hurting people, Mark brought forth the message that is core to who Jesus is in all his teaching: in the midst of death and destruction, look for what is being brought forth and how God is being born into the world today.

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There is nothing like the promise and new hope a baby brings. I will tell you the best thing that happened to me ten days ago when I was feeling really down about the elections was going to visit Diane and Yanni, and meet their newborn baby. I would have understood if they had held their baby close and accepted my blessings from afar, but they handed her over to me. There was something deeply satisfying for me, after her feeding, to hold her up and rub her back, waiting, waiting, waiting, while her parents and I talked on and on, until finally a very loud, resonant burp came out of that tiny little body. In a world that feels chaotic and out of control, I am glad that my hands can still bring forth a burp from a baby, and that the milk she has eaten can be eased into digestion. I was reminded to focus on the small miracles— that God is in those, as often as God is in the big things— and maybe even more so. For it was in the small body of a baby that God chose to come into the world.

If you are someone who has ever wanted a child, but struggled to make it happen, as Hannah did, you know the heartbreak of each failed cycle, each miscarriage, each year of waiting on an adoption to come through. Or maybe you know the feeling each season brings, of hoping you'd find the right partner to start a family with, as the years lead you later into life. It feels like the world is ending. Hannah's mouth as she was praying silently: only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; I am familiar with *that* prayer. It is true that infertile women in the bible repeatedly bring forth the most remarkable children: prophets

and patriarchs, changers of the world. But I also know the fertility of those who never do bear a child, but instead put their creative energy into their community, into making beauty, into the life of the church.

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Even as I still have a lingering dizziness as I continue to grapple with the meaning of the election and latest appointments on the well-being of this country we call home, I got a message from Nancy Salvati. I knew she was planning a shopping trip with Maliha, from the Afghan couple our church helped to resettle when they arrived a couple years ago. Nancy has continued English lessons and friendship with them and their baby son. But when she arrived at their apartment last Wednesday, she was greeted by Maliha, plus a family of 6! Maliha's sister had arrived, with her husband and four daughters, ages 16 to 21. I realized that even as I am sighing with despair over the future of my country, there are others who are filling their lungs with the breath of new hope at how they might be reborn in this country. I am grateful to, and inspired by their faith and their willingness to risk *everything* being new, in order to see what life here can be.

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One distinction I will make against my Christian siblings who think that God is done with this world, ready to dispense of it like a piece of garbage, in favor of a better, heavenly world is that I do not think God is so wasteful. God created this world out of love and sighs. I trust God is not done with us. Whatever world God dreams of for us and with us, is one God calls forth out of this dirt, from these stones, through our breath, with the Spirit designing and coaxing and sighing with us, and Jesus himself setting the vision for what we can be.

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Thanks be to God.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Most Common Why questions people ask Google:

Why is there a leap year?

Why is the sky blue?

Why do we dream?

Why do dogs eat grass?

Why do we yawn?

Why do men have nipples?

What are your why questions?

In the bible, the writers tried to take our why questions and make meaning out of them. Why are we here? Why is there suffering in the world? Why is there war? Why do I have this feeling in my heart that there is something deeper, that is loving, and good? Why do I feel like I want to jump and shout?

Here's a line from Psalm 89:

O Lord, how blessed are the people
who know the triumphant shout,
for they walk in the radiance of your presence.

16We can do nothing but leap for joy all day long,
for we know who you are and what you do,
and you've exalted us on high.