

26<sup>th</sup> Pentecost

**Mark 13:1-8**

As Jesus 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 birthpangs.”

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

When I was a kid, which I must admit some days seems longer ago than others – I used to play on a regular basis with my Lincoln Logs. Anyone else remember or have those? I also inherited an erector set that was my dad’s, I think, and of course had a set of blocks. If you did not have any of these things, fill in the blank with what you played with – Legos or most any other building type item that is usually big with most kids.

And I remember, even if my Lincoln logs were not around, I would play and build with what the world seemed to be offering. Empty boxes, building dams in the yard on a rainy day, trying to build a dam in the brook near my grandparent’s house – kids do like to build and make things, don’t you think? Even playing in the sand box was an exercise in building things!

We hear the echo of this admiration for building things when a disciple observes, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Not just admiring the buildings, but admiring the potential material for more building in the large stones. I sometimes like to believe this is the way God looks at us – with potential for what can be built. What are your strengths? What would you like God to build with you? And remember, you can build more if you have more parts to work with – this is another reminder of the importance of community. What can we build, or what can be built with us, together?

In response to this seemingly casual observation of the buildings and stones, Jesus makes a jump to speaking of the destruction of the temple. He observes, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” Like the blocks we played with as kids, all that is built is temporary, and will be thrown down. All

that is built is impermanent, perhaps especially in the eyes of God. We were so proud of our towers as young builders, and at bedtime, the blocks would have to be put away again, to our disappointment. Would we every build like that again? Thanks to the grace God offers, we can build again the next day.

In Tibetan Buddhist practice, they make an incredible artistic display when they make the sand mandalas. If you have not seen these, I recommend checking them out. These are considered sacred by the buddhists, and, being made of sand, are often whipped away when complete. Intricate, lovely and time consuming, they are also completely impermanent, as is everything we make.

After this somewhat apocalyptic and gloomy prediction, Jesus continues. He offers “, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray”. I imagine this is one we can all identify with in our own way. Much comes up in life that will lead you astray from your own call to God. Much in our current modern life will cry out, very convincingly, “I am he!” We all get led astray and end up building what we think we are supposed to build. But only if we are lucky, we get to build what we feel we should be building. I pick on advertising a lot, because that is often the loudest voice in our society. Telling us what should we be devoting our time and money into? What should we be building? And how often is that astray from where God would have us?

Jesus continues, offering “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.” It was almost chilling to write this, because I could think of examples of each of these items offered in the news today. This apocalypse that Jesus speaks of seems to not be a dim and distant thing, he could just as well be talking to us now, today. He caps this chilling, frightening sounding proposition saying “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Is this meant to make us feel better? I understand birth pangs are painful! So these are the birth pangs of the Apocalypse?

Let’s make sure we are all of the same page regarding a few things. The apocalypse is often referred to in the Bible, and people often only speculate wildly as to what it means. Apocalypse is defined in a broad sense to be the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation. Or as an event involving destruction or damage on an awesome or catastrophic scale. So the fires in California are an Apocalypse in their own right. In context of Biblical times there was a practice at the time of Christ that taught the apocalypse was imminent. This was not a matter of a poetic metaphor – they practiced and preached it with some urgency, because they believed it was happening soon! Not imagining it as a someday kind of thing, but more like it was happening next Wednesday,

The word *apocalypse* is derived from the Greek word *apokálypsis*, which translates most literally to “an uncovering.” In the context of religious texts like the Bible, the word is most

often used in relation to a holy disclosure of information or knowledge. So less poetic imagery on dramatic leaping flames and explosions, more a sense of knowledge that changes your perception of the world. The end of the world as we know it, if you will. Looking at it this way, every new day is an apocalypse, because it provides building blocks and possibilities we did not have yesterday. Every day is new, so every day is an apocalypse of the previous day.

The apocalypse is always presented in big and scary way, but if we think about the actual definition of the word it is all of a sudden a little less scary.

So now that we all have that definition in mind, lets go back and talk about “birth pangs of the apocalypse”. Like I said, I understand birth pangs are painful – I was there for the birth of my daughter, so I saw just how painful they can be! But I have never met a woman who regretted them. The pain seemed justified by the joy that follows. Having a child is an apocalypse in its own right – life as you know it is over – chaos and madness ensue on many occasions, but wait, so does a deep and incredible love.

So that pain, that chaos, that panic, that apocalypse may be worth something after all. Maybe we don’t need to fear it at all. Maybe we just need to contemplate and wonder what it is that is getting ready to be born. A perfect consideration as we enter the time of waiting and wondering that we call Advent.

So consider the apocalypses in your life and consider what may be being born in you at this time. Consider the chaos and panic we see on the news, the wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, and wonder what these birth pangs mean is getting ready to be born both in the world, and in you. - *Amen*