

Sermon Notes for 11/15/15 (Second-Last Sunday of Church Year, Pentecost 25)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Mark 13:1-8

Theme: LABOR PAINS ANTICIPATING THE END

The Point: Many and varied signs point to the certainty and the imminence of the return of Christ, which leads His people to rejoice in their bestowed righteousness and to extend that gift to others as well

Introduction: Jesus uses the image of birth pangs to picture for His disciples just what is going on with all the uproar and disturbance and unrest that the world (and even the Church) has been going through during history and that it is still going through. And we sense disturbance all around, don't we? The terrorist attacks in Paris have had a ripple effect on people around the globe. Many American cities are seeing record levels of crimes such as murder, burglary, rape, and assault. The education system seems to accomplish less and less with more and more resources. Our US Congress is stymied about how to get anything done. We hear claims that ISIS has brought down a Russian airliner, widening the fears about terrorist activity. Financial markets are distressed over events in China and the Middle East and here at home. Disturbance and unrest are all too common.

The mission of the church is at best a confused and confusing picture. I suspect the apostles were pretty confused as they heard Jesus teaching about the signs pointing to the end. We are confused as well. Many of the signs Jesus identified have been fulfilled and are still being fulfilled generation by generation. Some thoughtful, though misinformed, Christians have tried to pinpoint the very date of Christ's return and in the process have alienated many. City churches have often abandoned their neighborhoods for the suburbs, leaving vast holes where there used to be active Christian ministry. There is a growing list of countries where missionaries are not welcome – and where Christians are being actively persecuted. I receive a weekly blog from former LCMS President Gerald Kieschnick, who has devoted the past six weeks of that blog to the place of Islam in American history and culture. The Muslims are in our neighborhoods, representing a huge group of people for whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ seems to be a fiction. How do we share Good News with these neighbors of ours?

While the disciples were dumbfounded about the size and beauty of the temple structure, Jesus reminded them of what lay ahead. He pointed them to what was coming in just a generation or two, namely the thorough destruction of Jerusalem, which happened less than 50 years after His predictions. He warned them that beautiful buildings do not guarantee a beautiful future. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." When Titus led Rome's armies against Jerusalem, this is exactly what happened. Historians say that Titus himself wished to spare the beautiful temple, but his troops had been so overwrought over how long it took them to wear down the Jews that they took matters into their own hands and burned the temple, knocked its stones down, and flattened this beautiful structure. And Jesus says "this is but the beginning of the birth pangs." The birth pangs are underway – but the birth is still to take place.

What is it about the birth pang experience that makes it an appropriate picture for Jesus' point here? Well, first of all, birth pangs signal the end of a long haul for Mom and baby. The progressive experience of pregnancy usually lasts a full nine months. No mother has ever complained about it being too short – at least, no mothers that I have come across. For some moms the experience is relatively non-complicated, but there are none who do not go through hormone changes, added weight that complicates moving and living tremendously, adjusting to the needs of this growing child taking precedence over your own needs, and the like. For some, there are even extended periods of severe limitations, intricate medical care, and even protracted times of bedrest. And of course, the experience seems to be more and more overwhelming as the due date draws closer. No movement is easy, no assignment is smooth, no relationship is unaffected

as this awaited child becomes the center of the mother's (and even the family's) life.

We often have the experience of the psalmist or of Habakkuk, that mournful experience of asking, "How long, O Lord?" We wonder how long God will tolerate the dislocation, the brokenness, the rebellious spirit that marks our human family. How long will He put up with the mistreatment of one man by another, the prejudices that separate us from others, the hatred that foments violence and warfare? Birth pangs seem to drag on endlessly.

The Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, tells a parable of a theater where a variety show is proceeding. Each show is more fantastic than the last, and is applauded by the audience. Suddenly the manager comes forward. He apologizes for the interruption, but the theater is on fire, and he begs his patrons to leave in an orderly fashion. The audience think this is the most amusing turn of the evening, and cheer thunderously. The manager again implores them to leave the burning building, and he is again applauded vigorously. At last he can do no more. The fire raced through the whole building taking the fun-loving audience with it. "And so," concluded Kierkegaard, "will our age, I sometimes think, go down in fiery destruction to the applause of a crowded house of cheering spectators." (*Resource*, July/August, 1990) Jesus' words are geared to keep us from being so blissfully unaware of the crisis that is upon us.

In addition, birth pangs are sharp and harsh, but purposeful. Someone has said that, if God had arranged that husbands and wives should have children alternatively, there would never be more than three in a family (some might say, not more than one!). Once they start, those birth pains are hard to ignore. I remember Connie having about 30 hours of labor with our firstborn (she might remember it better than I do, since I probably slept through more of that labor than she managed to do). Finally those birth pangs were brought to an end by a merciful MD ordering a Caesarean surgery to drag that 11-pound little girl out of the darkness and into the light. Any woman who has experienced birth pangs knows the experience of pain, usually sharp and biting. Any woman who has heard about the experience from family or friends – or who has stood by as a mother or cousin or sister went through it – amazes me with the determination still to go through it herself. She knows that birth is a necessity if one is going to have a child, and having a child makes the experience of labor something that can be borne bravely.

So the birth pangs that the world experiences are pointing forward to a purposeful conclusion. We hate to see suffering – or to experience it ourselves – but the promise of Scripture is that these wars and rumors of wars, this pitting of nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom, the famines and earthquakes that mark our human history all have a final conclusion. There is no enjoyment in facing the drama of this sort of pain and agony, but it does keep us in mind that there is a dropping of the final curtain that is coming, by the grace and mercy of our Lord.

Birth pangs herald a new arrival. Birth is one of the greatest miracles that our Lord allows every generation to experience. I have been around a lot of hospitals where children have just been born, and it is a rare experience in those visits not to have someone remark on the miraculous nature of what they have just gone through. Even those who are not particularly of a spiritual bent seem to be struck by the wonder of birth. Of course, we realize in our experience that not every pregnancy, not every delivery, results in a live birth. Those parents who have lost a child who was stillborn or where a miscarriage took place know those pains all too well. And perhaps the knowledge of this potential, of this lurking reality of death even in the birth process, makes the reality of the miracle that much more potent. There are other possible challenges in the pregnancy/birth process, challenges which sometimes bring about injury or disease or other harm to a child.

But for most parents, birth pangs are soon forgotten in the joy that birth brings about. As a child is born, there are hopes and dreams and confidence that this little one will find meaning and purpose in his or her

existence. That is the joy of the parent, the belief that this child will live a life of meaning, will make the world a better place for his/her having been in it, that this child will learn to live at a higher level than the parents have lived – and I don't mean economically, but in terms of purpose and direction. We want our children to know a purpose that is marked by eternity. So even though they may face times of severe anguish and suffering, they will be held up by the promise of the One who has given His life for their eternal welfare.

A modern poet and playwright has written, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." (George Bernard Shaw) That is truly a description of a desperate man, isn't it? "A feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." Ouch! May the Lord deliver us!

But joy and purpose is found in shining like stars in God's universe. Daniel puts it this way in today's Old Testament reading: "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." True wisdom is found in knowing our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of His resurrection. Our brilliance is not found in glorying in our own abilities or accomplishments, but in God's ability to use us, with whatever gifts and abilities He has given, to be part of His eternal plan for His world. He will use you today to touch the hearts and lives of those who are feeling the birth pangs sharply. You can assure them that such things do not happen at our Lord's instigation, nor does He ignore them or belittle you because of them. But He has plans for a final new birth for a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness and truth abound.

The old Standard Oil Company offered an enormous sum of money to a missionary in China to work for them, to help with the development of Standard Oil in China. The missionary turned them down. So they doubled the salary offer. He turned them down again. They said, "What do you want? We can't give more money than that." He said, "The money doesn't have anything to do with it. The job is too small." Is your job too small? I don't mean the tasks for which you receive a paycheck, though that may be part of the picture. I mean the job of living, the task of staying on task with the things that matter.

Conclusion: Many and varied signs point to the certainty and the imminence of the return of Christ. These signs in themselves may at times be depressing and discouraging. But we as the body of Christ read these signs as indicators that our Lord has set a time for His return. At that time He will call, "Come forth", and all the dead will rise, "some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." We who know this God through His Son Jesus have the joy and hope that come from a clear conscience and a joyful approach to life. We can thus rejoice in our bestowed righteousness and labor in His kingdom to extend that gift to others as well. So in this time, "since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." In His faithfulness we can take heart. The birth pangs will not last forever, but His love and grace will. So we serve as those who are confident and robust in our service of others for Jesus' sake. AMEN!