

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
November 18, 2012
Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
"Birth Pangs"
Texts – Mark 13: 1-8

Imagine for a moment going back in time. A little more than a decade, say, to summer 2001. If I had told you that the World Trade Center would soon be reduced to rubble, would you have believed it? Would you have believed that the twin towers—structurally sophisticated, among the tallest buildings in the entire world—could come slamming to the ground in just a matter of hours?

I suppose the disciples felt the same way when Jesus told them that every stone of the Temple would be thrown down. The Temple in Jerusalem was no small place, and for these small town Galilean men it must have been an amazing sight. It is said that more than 125,000 people could fit inside the Temple complex. It was built of stones that were so heavy that their weight alone provided the stability that held the building together. No mortar was needed. The smallest of the stones weighed between 2 and 3 tons, but many were 50 tons or more. We can still see a bit of evidence of this architectural feat in the Western Wall, the only part of the Temple that still exists.

Yet, despite its size and stability, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans less than 40 years after Jesus' prediction. And with it went Judaism as it was known in Jesus' time. A Judaism where the Temple was the center of religious life—where people regularly made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate the holy festivals. Ultimately, the Jews themselves were driven out of Jerusalem and a whole new way of practicing the faith—the rabbinic Judaism that we know today—had to evolve.

Even though the disciples had heard Jesus being critical of the Temple culture, calling the people back to faithfulness, the idea of the Temple's destruction probably never entered their minds. As catastrophes go, this would be huge. It must have sounded a lot like the end of the world. So they asked Jesus for signs. How would they know when the end was coming? How could they be prepared? But Jesus' first word to them was "Beware." "Watch out." A lot of things are going to happen. A lot of bad things always happen, but that doesn't mean that the end is coming. Some people are going to try to deceive you. They are going to claim that this is it and get everyone riled up. But they are false prophets.

We can see how right Jesus was, can't we? Remember back in 1999 the fears that were spreading as the new millennium approached? There was, of course, the concern that all of our computer systems were going to crash—or go back to 1900—upsetting our economic structure, our national security, and who knows what else. Besides the computers, though, there were those who believed that the millennium would signal the end of the world—not unlike people at many other times through history who pointed to some world event or catastrophe as "proof" that the end was coming. The conflict in the Middle East is an example (as was the Communist Soviet Union before that). They have calculated specific times,

named particular people (mostly as the "anti-Christ") and generally stirred up a lot of anxiety. Yet, the predictions have never amounted to anything. Just last year, Harold Camping planned for the end and the Rapture. He said it would take place on May 21, 2011. When that date passed without incident, he revised it to October 21. This year, there are a variety of predictions for next month including galactic alignment, a geomagnetic reversal, the Earth's destruction by a giant supernova or collision with an interplanetary object, alien invasion, and even a zombie apocalypse. And, of course the Mayan Long Count calendar that comes to an end on December 21.

The disciples' lives and struggles were very much different from ours. Our worlds have few similarities. At least on the surface. And yet, the human condition has not changed all that much. Ancient people had things that were important to them – things that grounded them and gave their lives stability just as we do. And they suffered the same kind of anxiety and pain, disappointment and betrayal as we do. Caused by their institutions. Or their relationships. Two things that we know were all-important in the disciples' lives were the Temple and Jesus. Here, they were being told that the Temple would fall. And, though they didn't fully realize it yet, their relationship with Jesus was about to change dramatically. Jesus' discourse in the text this morning took place on that final trip to Jerusalem. The one that would end in Jesus' death and resurrection.

What are the things that are essential to your well-being and happiness? Things that you think you couldn't live without, that you absolutely count on? For some, it is our government, our country, the freedom and security we have become accustomed to. When elected or appointed officials are caught in illegal or immoral acts, we are disillusioned and disappointed. When greed and irresponsible decisions create economic meltdown, we become anxious. When random, seemingly unpreventable acts of violence or terror occur, we despair. For some, it is a homogenous society where values and expectations are shared. This is threatened as our communities and our life styles become more diverse and our neighbors no longer look or act like we do and, in fact, have very different ideas about how we should live.

For others, it is our workplaces, where if we can just keep our noses to the grindstone, we will be rewarded with success. Mass lay-offs, the closing of businesses knock the foundations out from under our feet. For still others, it is our institutions, like the church, that seems to offer a sanctuary from the madness of the outside world. For these people, a scandal like the abuse of children and parishioners by priests is a betrayal that rocks their faith. For them, a drastic change in worship style, music, or language becomes intolerable, let alone the splits taking place in the church over differences in theology and biblical authority.

Relationships, of course, are not immune. The death of a loved one, a divorce, a child leaving home, a friend who you've come to depend on who tells you she is moving away, can cause a seismic shift, leaving us with feelings of loss, grief, or even betrayal.

It is a natural human reaction to grab hold of something – anything – to regain equilibrium,

to reduce the anxiety. We may react by pretending that everything is still the same, by denying the pain and disruption. Or we might latch onto whatever seems to be stable – new ideologies or relationships even if the solution we choose is simplistic or dead wrong.

There are two messages that I think we need to hear. The first is that when we become anxious or fearful when our lives are disrupted and in turmoil, we need not panic and settle for easy answers. We must, in fact, beware of those who use these events to claim that they have the truth. They tell us what we want to hear, and we let ourselves be led astray. Second, we need not dig in our heels and hang on to what is comfortable instead of risking the pain that leads to new birth.

You see, Jesus tells the disciples that many disturbing things will happen in life that do not mean the end. These are just the beginning of the birth pangs. Every woman here who has ever had a child understands birth pangs – the hours of labor and pain that must be endured until that precious new life lies in our arms. The pregnancy ends. Life as we knew it ends. It is new and surprising, often not exactly as we imagined. And so it is with much of human life. Birth pangs that will, one day, deliver us into the realm of God.

That, of course, is our hope. And, if we but look, there are signs of that hope all around us. The ballroom of the Westin Hotel in Lombard was filled with signs of hope yesterday in the proceedings of the Diocese of Chicago. There was hope in the people of the Diocese of Quincy in the pledge to proceed with exploration of reunion. There was hope in the stories of transformation in those who have participated in partnerships with parishes in the Dioceses of Southeast Mexico and Renk, Sudan.

There is hope in the continued support of the Crosswalk Initiative that stands against violence in our cities – including an offering yesterday of more than \$10,000 and Convention support of the Illinois House Bill requiring heightened accountability of gun owners through the registration of guns. And so much more joy and praise and hope in the uplifting worship that surrounded the convention. Even ending in a mini rap concert. You might ask Lynn Giles for a demonstration. Unfortunately, my cellphone photos of our delegates rocking did not turn out well.

This is our hope as Christians. Human institutions and relationships may fail us. Bad things may happen to us. But in the midst of suffering and upheaval, we can be assured of God's promises. Just as we pray each time we say The Lord's Prayer together, "thy kingdom come" we can believe that God's realm of peace and justice *will* come and what we do here matters – that all we do in Jesus' name – healing broken hearts, freeing captives, feeding the hungry, and spreading the Good News, will hasten its coming.

Amen and amen.