

ōNew Birthö

1 Samuel 1:4-20

Mark 13:1-8

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You have often heard me asking the question about how to define the ministry and mission of this church. It can be a difficult question to answer. I think it is important to make use of the scriptures (and of course, daily prayer) in every way we can as we attempt to define the Christian mission of this church to the wider community of Elmira. Let's see if today's reading can help us with the process. Here's a bit of background for the reading. I think it is fair to assume that the disciples have been with Jesus for quite a long time before this encounter takes place. Certainly, they have seen him do amazing and miraculous things, but they have also seen and heard him challenging the political and religious structures that were the foundation of society for them. Considering how much they have seen and heard, they seem to remain blissfully ignorant of the thrust of his messages.

In today's Gospel reading, while Jesus has been in the temple challenging the scribes and Pharisees and trying to teach about the Realm of God, the disciples have been noticing how impressive the building is. This is understandable. The temple had been there (in some form or another) for around five hundred years, at least since it was re-built after the destruction of Jerusalem. It was generally thought of as the focal point of the worship of, and in fact the very presence, of God. What, then, can be the significance of Jesus's prediction that it will be thrown down? The disciples cannot imagine it happening. Everything there is so big and imposing. Surely it will last forever, they think. Jesus, as usual, is talking at more than one level at a time. We know from history, that the temple finally was destroyed in 70 C.E. but the import of Jesus's words is more than simply a good call about the future of the building. (We also must remember that the Gospel of Mark was probably written at about the same time ó around 70 C.E.) I believe that Jesus is saying two things to his disciples, and to us by extension. He is telling them that their structures, whether physical, like the temple, or theological, like the specifics of their religious belief, are transitory. Furthermore, those structures do not even represent the most central feature of the Realm of God. Remember, Gospel Christianity is radically relational. What is most important is not how people believe or what they build. What is most important is how they relate to others and how they love. Jesus gives the disciples a warning not to be led astray by others who come claiming to be The Messiah. He then goes on to tell them that the conflicts associated with a changing world are natural and necessary parts of the process.

What strange words! And who are those who come claiming to be him? We can only guess that Jesus means those who would tempt people away from what is most central to their faith. Unfortunately, Jesus is not very clear about how to tell the authentic Messiah from the pretender, so we must make our judgments from the context. Jesus consistently elevates the importance of having loving relationships above possessing material things. Jesus consistently teaches about the love of God that does not need to be earned. Jesus consistently challenges anyone who attempts to exploit others, particularly in the name of God. And Jesus consistently invites people to figure out what is good and healthy for them and then to do those things. He does not seem to be interested in religious ritual for its own sake. He certainly does not seem to believe that the

correctly articulated theological position, or the correctly performed ritual, or the impressively built building will carry any ultimate weight.

So what then is this passage about? Jesus gives us a hint when he refers to the process as the beginning of "the birth pangs". This is a powerful and incredibly hopeful image. Birth is the epitome of hopeful human activity. We are joyous at a birth, but we do not forget that birth never happens without some blood and some pain, and no child comes into the world without shaking things up pretty thoroughly in any family.

What then is being born here? Perhaps it makes sense to say that the Realm of God is constantly in the process of being born. But that sounds so wonderful in the face of all this talk of wars and suffering?

Jesus is telling his disciples not to be overly concerned about the wars and rumors of wars. They are part of the process, however strange it may seem to me or to you to consider something as awful as war inevitable.

Let me try to explain it this way. Change, any change, includes both the development of something new or even something better, and it also includes some loss. The more we hold on to our possessions, be they money, buildings, status, or even beliefs, the more difficult it is to let go of them when their time comes. Furthermore, most of our wars are based in human fears about losing material possessions or power.

It doesn't take much imagination to see that Jesus' words spoken to the disciples 2000 years ago are directly applicable to the present situation facing this church, and for that matter, the wider church. Life is changing, and what may have been useful and valuable in years past apparently doesn't have the same appeal and usefulness to communities today. Does that mean that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has lost its relevance? Hardly. In fact, we could argue that the Gospel message is exactly what our material success so easily obscures. It is worth finding new ways to express that central message to a world sorely in need of it.

However we look at it, it is undeniable that something new is being born. Those of you here who have gone through the birth process know what it takes for a child to be born. Now, perhaps you had your children in a time when drugs were used to dull the pain. Sorry, there is no such drug available to dull the pain when churches change; nothing exists to make things easier. Natural childbirth takes a different approach. Its objective is to cooperate with the process instead of fighting it, and women can learn to breathe through the pain instead of being overwhelmed by it. Truth be told, however, neither drugs nor good breathing techniques make birth an easy process. They don't call it labor for nothing.

Nevertheless, if you know that it is a natural, if difficult, process, and if you are prepared, you can get through it. Women have been doing it for millennia. But, if you think that there is something wrong with the process, or if you insist on not losing any of your sense of control, it will probably be excruciating. Knowing when to let go and what to let go of makes life easier. There will still be pain, but it does not have to be suffering.

One further thought about the comparison of the birth process with change in the church. With change in the church, the men get to participate as fully as the women. And you know already, that after any birth, life can never be the same again.

Whenever new life comes into a family or a church, something else is always lost. Perhaps it's your freedom, perhaps it is a particular routine, perhaps it is your experience of having your own personal time and space. Given how much difficulty children can introduce into a family, we must remember that the gifts they bring are even greater than their difficulties. They bring challenges that may upset our peace in many ways and take us in directions we cannot predict and that we might not have chosen on our own. But it's worth it. They bring new life.

The same could be said about changes that can come from the birth in this community of new forms of ministry. Changes always cost something; life will change; but that new birth will bring divine surprises as well.

This human process is nothing new. Religion has always been a vehicle to preserve a particular way of believing or doing things. The temple in Jerusalem is a perfect example. Then someone, like Jesus, or life itself comes along and changes everything. That some people decide to go to war in an attempt to hold on to the past is understandable, perhaps inevitable, but new life happens anyway. In short, the Spirit breaks through the confines of the institution. Then the institution modifies itself to carry the new wisdom. Sooner or later, the institution becomes rigid again, so the spirit breaks through over and over. This cyclical process has been going on for as long as humans have been on earth.

Now, in our age, the birth pangs have begun and we do not know how the new birth will change things, either at the level of the local congregation or at the level of the whole transforming world.

But we can still learn to breathe through it (remembering that breathing is a form of prayer) and together we can prepare ourselves to welcome a new manifestation of the Realm of God in our midst.