

Year B Proper 33 Let's Make Some Ripples Mark 13 verses 1 to 8

We are hearing a lot today about birth and babies and birthpangs. Hannah, who endured shame and mockery because she'd been unable to have children, finally became pregnant. God heard her plea. He had compassion on her and "opened her womb."

Hannah was filled with joy. She was incredibly thankful to God for having answered her prayer. Of course, in the midst of this joy and thankfulness, she also knew – like we all know, even if we haven't personally experienced it – we know having the baby was going to be painful. She was going to endure excruciating birthpangs in order to bring her little bundle of joy into the world. But it sure was going to be worth it. It was worth it to have the child...with God's help and with her hard work, she had a son – a son she named Samuel.

And then we have Jesus talking to his disciples about birthpangs in our Gospel reading. As you know, "Gospel" translates as "good news" but sometimes, like today, we hear things that don't really sound all that good. Jesus tells us today that there will be wars and earthquakes and famines and that's just the beginning of the pain – that's the beginning of the birthpangs he says. In fact, this passage is often called the "Little Apocalypse" by scholars – so let's explore and find out what the good news is.

In modern use, the word "apocalypse" is used to refer to the end of the world, usually also implying that something really horrible will happen to cause the end of the world. This is actually a distortion of the original meaning, a distortion that has occurred over the centuries. Apocalypse is a Greek word that means

“revelation” or “disclosure”. Apocalyptic literature was a very popular type of literature when Jesus and the disciples were alive and so, of course, we find it in the bible – it refers to the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth to reveal God and God’s plan for the world. Apocalyptic writing uses symbolic imagery – usually of animals and numbers – to talk about not the end of the world, but the end of history. There is a big difference.

Jewish people believed that their present age would suddenly end with the coming of God’s kingdom ushering in a new perfect age. When Jesus came along, his followers realized that Jesus had brought God’s kingdom and yet the present, evil age was still continuing. The two ages were continuing along together. And so Jesus’ followers spoke and wrote of the time when those two histories would no longer be continuing together – the current imperfect age would end and only God’s age will continue – God’s kingdom would be fully revealed here on earth and a new perfect history would be recorded from that time onward. That’s an apocalypse – the final and complete revelation of God’s kingdom – and that’s what Jesus was referring to.

But, in order for God’s kingdom to be fully revealed on earth, for God’s kingdom to truly be on earth as in heaven, there is an awful lot of brokenness in our world that needs to be healed, a lot of evil that needs to be purged, a lot of hearts that need to be changed. In short, there is a lot of work to do. This changing of hearts, this purging of evil, this healing of the brokenness that must be accomplished by God is described in apocalyptic literature through destructive imagery of earthquakes, famines, floods, and fire. But this isn’t aimed at the destruction of the whole world, of all civilization, only that which has turned from God, been

irredeemably tainted with systemic evil. It is difficult to describe in human language what our God will do to purge his creation of evil. As Bishop N.T Wright explains, God must take “drastic action to purify the world, to cut it back as one would with a tree that had become dangerously diseased, removing the deadly cancer so that the rest may be saved. [Jesus is talking today] of the necessary work of radically upsetting the human systems by which millions had been enslaved and degraded, but which were kept in place by structures of apparent beauty, nobility and high culture – [structures like the temple so admired by the disciples]. A little modification will not be enough [to rid the world of systemic evil]. Only major surgery will do” (Wright, Study of Revelation, 53).

And so we hear Jesus shocking his disciples with the disturbing news that the gorgeous temple, a testament to human power and ingenuity, will be completely, and utterly, destroyed. We must keep in mind that when Jesus tells his disciples, “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” He had already said in the previous passages that this wondrous building had been built off the sweat and exploitation of widows and the poor. It was for this reason that, although it looked magnificent and pure to the admiring glances, it was truly tainted and broken on the inside. The destruction of this magnificent building would be troubling for those who maintained their power and prestige in its survival.

The cataclysmic events of apocalyptic literature are not destruction for the sake of destruction. God has set out to bring healing and wholeness to our broken world, to purge it completely of evil, lifting up the poor and the oppressed, toppling the mighty who had been stripping the world of its resources to

accumulate wealth for themselves, stomping on the heads of others to climb their ladders of success. Jesus is describing a world in the process of being brought to perfection and that is good news indeed.

God's kingdom fully revealed here on earth. It sounds wonderful. Jesus was announcing it, his followers were waiting for it, we're waiting for it...hmmm...so that means we're in the birthpang stage.

We don't know when this stage will end because, like Jesus says, we don't know when God's kingdom will be fully revealed. That means we have a choice to make. We can focus on the pain of new birth – and, really, sometimes it's hard not to focus on the pain because there is so much of it, so many bad things happening in the world – or we can be like Hannah and choose the deep joy and thankfulness borne of the hope in God's promises. This doesn't make the brokenness suddenly disappear but it gives us the strength and courage to work with God against that brokenness because we know that new birth is ahead, a new creation is coming.

There are some words scribed in the second epistle of Peter. They are words that stir hope and inspiration deep in my bones every time I hear them proclaimed or I silently read them for myself. The epistle talks of the Day of the Lord, the day for which we watch, the day when Christ will return, and God's purpose and promise for all creation will be fulfilled. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, says the epistle, and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Then the epistle poses a question: "What sort of persons ought you to be," it asks, "what sort of persons

ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?"

I think of those words often, and feel wonder every time I do. I feel wonder at the notion that we can hasten the kingdom. We can hasten the kingdom not because we try to spark some cataclysmic conflict in the Middle East. Rather, the kingdom is hastened when we live the ways of the kingdom - being kind and compassionate and giving. Seeking justice for those who are overlooked and whose voices go unheard. In other words, we hasten the kingdom by living the kingdom life, living into the perfection that we know is coming. Imagine what the world would be like if everyone thought like that, if everyone lived like that. Picture the image of ripples on a lake...throw an act of kindness out there and watch the ripples spread. Throw in an act of generosity and watch the ripples spread. Throw in an act of justice and watch the ripples spread. Then more and more people like us throw in acts that mark us as kingdom dwellers and look: more and more ripples spreading in ever-widening circles!

Those ripples may be hard to see sometimes, but they are there. What could have been, and still sometimes looks like it could be an explosive conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples has birthed profound signs of reconciliation. The issue of same-sex marriage has, in some places, devolved into shouting matches of right and wrong but, in other places, it has brought people together over coffee to talk to each other. More and more ripples spreading in ever-widening circles! We are called by God, chosen by God, to live lives that will

spread the ripples of kingdom life to those next to us, to those down the street, to those across town, to those around the world.

To return to the image that Jesus puts before us...What do we do when faced with the pangs of birth? Birth is seldom if ever an easy matter, bringing forth these new creations, causing these transformational ripples, takes effort and is almost always painful. Bringing forth a child into the world means the parents' lives will be changed forever and change is not easy or comfortable. The nervous, excited parents know that when the birthpangs begin, great change looms large. Christian author, Steve Aisthorpe, in his book, *Rewilding the Church*, reminds us that as Christians we have signed on for change. He writes, "Following Jesus brings change. As his followers and apprentices we will be changed continually from the inside out. As agents of his kingdom, we will be catalysts of change. For any group or community with Jesus at its centre, change is integral, fundamental, to be expected" (12).

As we live those birthpangs, nervous and excited, the task before us isn't to numb the pain or ignore the pain or to fear the pain of change. The task is to scrub up and get ready for the new arrival. Says Jesus, "Get ready, be prepared" and let's make some ripples.