

Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Pastor Joan L. Beck  
Texts: Mark 13:1-8

Nov. 18, 2018  
B Lectionary 33 & New Stewardship Consecration  
Birth pangs of new life

*Help us turn from "bigger and better" to confidence in what you are doing again and anew, that we might join in your holy labor. Amen.*

**"So, how are you doing today?"** When people ask, I usually answer, "Fine." This week one day I answered, "Okay" because I didn't really feel "fine." But I didn't elaborate. **But it really stands out when someone says something like, "My world is falling apart!"** (A student said that to me once.) Even so, I think I know how that person feels when they say that. So do you.

**The world fell apart for many people** when gunmen entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Oct. 27 and the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, Nov. 7. Life shattered for 11 victims' families (Pittsburgh), 12 victims' families (Thousand Oaks). And shattered a second time for a large number of those at the bar who had been at the country music festival a year earlier in Las Vegas when 58 were shot and killed. Their world falling apart.

**The world fell apart for people who live in wildfire areas in California.** (Including the parents and grandparents of the father of a child in Pointe of Grace preschool.) 246,000 acres burned, 13,000 structures destroyed, 74 known dead with more than 1000 still missing. Their world falling apart.

**The world falls apart,** for example, when cancer or some other disease enters the scene. When there's no health insurance to pay the bills.

The world falls apart when a person can't find a job in this economy. When a fixed income falls short of rising costs. When a marriage fails.

The world falls apart when someone you love is in pain or gets in trouble with the law. When a congregation or community is torn by conflict and division.

The world falls apart when there are *wars and rumors of wars. When nation rises against nation, and country against country. When there are earthquakes and famines.*— Jesus' words in today's Gospel.

**Jesus was right.** Things like these keep taking place with a seeming inevitability that says they "must" take place. That's life as we know it on planet earth. That's the world, and when it happens to us, it's like the end of the world.

**All of Mark chapter 13 is about the end of the world for people in Mark's community.** We're talking about some of the earliest Christians, the ones who lived in the same land where Jesus had walked. Jesus and his disciples had been in Jerusalem just 30-35 years earlier. They had seen the temple that Herod built, in all

its mind-boggling splendor. Huge white marble stones of overwhelming size gleaming in the sun.

**Even back then Jesus had said** the glory wouldn't last. And now it was happening. **The Judean people had revolted** against the Roman occupation forces, and the Roman army was crushing them. Making life as usual impossible. Desecrating even their most solemn and sacred places. Their religion, their life, their homeland were all teetering on the brink of being destroyed.

**Mark's community members, understandably, were in a panic.** They didn't know what to do. How to stay safe. Where to turn. Whom to trust. The gospel writer Mark is like a pastor to them, saying, "Let's remember what Jesus said back when he first started talking about this." And what did Jesus say?

**Jesus said, "Do not be alarmed.** Hold a steady course. Find patience to see the thing through. God can bring something new and good even out of this." This is Jesus' wisdom and courage and leadership for crisis times as presented in the gospel today:

**"When your world falls apart, trust God to hold you until you get to a safe new place with him."**

**The image that Jesus uses for this safe new place is unexpected.** Disarming. He says, all the trouble, all the turmoil, all the conflict and violence—these are not the *end* of everything. These are the *beginning* of something. They are birth pangs.

**Birth pangs.** Birth pangs, the contractions a mother has when the baby is about to be born. From Braxton-Hicks contractions to her water breaking; from contractions that dilate her cervix to contractions that push the baby out. Birth pangs mark the *end* of a pregnancy but the *beginning* of a new life in the world.

**Where would Jesus have us look for the new life that can come out of trouble?**

**I know where the disciples would look: For something bigger, better, stronger.**

"What large stones and what large buildings!" a disciple exclaimed in awe over Herod's temple.

"These banks are too big to let them fail," the government said in 2007.

Microsoft. Google.

Facebook reports that 2 billion people use its services every day on average.

"Amazon accounts for about half of every dollar spent online in the U.S. and sells more than 500 million products worldwide. But Amazon is bigger than you think. It isn't simply an e-commerce company. It is a logistics company. It sells food. It manufactures robots and hardware. It is a movie studio. It is the largest provider of cloud infrastructure in the world." (*online quote*)

And Apple is even bigger. And bigger than Apple by revenue is Exxon-Mobile. Bigger than that is Berkshire-Hathaway. And biggest of all—Walmart. (*online statistics*)

**Yet 'bigger' is not the direction Jesus takes us. He takes us, I would say, deeper.**

When Jesus talked to his disciples about everything that was tearing lives apart, he repeated again what he had said before (in chapters 8, 9, 10): Jesus insisted that Life does not consist in being great, in lording it over others, in being first.

Being 'great again' was the hope the Temple stood for. Lording it over others was what the Romans were doing. Being first is the secret hope in every human heart, perhaps.

**But life, says Jesus, life** consists in needing other people, as children do. Life is known in serving others, not in being served. Life grows when you yield, take turns, and make sure that *everyone* has what they need to flourish.

**God is served,** Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, not in doing great things, but in doing small things with great love.

**Jesus practiced what he preached.** When speaking with his disciples on the Mount of Olives (*in today's reading*), Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem on a humble donkey and be put to death. Looking back at Jesus, Mark's community and our community observe that Jesus *was carried by God* while his world fell apart. Jesus went to his death on the cross at the hand of the Romans. He himself despaired of God's presence before he gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

Yet God did not abandon him. On the contrary, God reached into the tomb and brought Jesus out to a safe new place. To resurrection life. God in Christ emerged victorious over death itself.

**Jesus' death and resurrection were the birth pangs of something new. For him and for us.**

**The invitation for Mark's community** was to trust God and God's ways in their time: the years when Jerusalem was under siege and their homeland was being destroyed.

**The invitation for our community** is to trust God and God's ways in our lives: also in the times when things are falling apart around us, or in us.

**But, when trouble arises, how do we learn to practice compassion?** When disaster strikes, how do we learn to offer mercy? How do we learn to open our tightly clenched fists and soften our hard hearts to make an outpouring of generosity?

**Well—how does a mother learn to cooperate with the birth pangs, in order to bring a new life into the world?**

*Disclaimer: There are as many birth stories as there are parents and children, but I think that it is customary now for expectant parents to create a birth plan. To decide upon their preferences for where they want to deliver the baby, who will be in the room, what procedures they will or won't request. The birth plans don't always happen as*

they wish, but they set an intention, and the parents to be are taught practices that help with labor—practices of how to sit, stand, massage; practices of how to breathe, how to push, how to encourage.

**So what is the birth plan that helps us join with God** to welcome the transforming life of Christ into the communities we are part of? What are the breathing exercises that ready us for such holy labor?

There are many answers. Just two of them today: Stewardship and worship.

**To me, stewardship means caring for everything God has given.**

My stewardship is what I do with my whole life once I know that my whole life belongs to God because I came from God and I have been turned and returned to God through my baptism into Christ.

My stewardship-of-my-whole-life is how I say 'Yes' and 'Thank you' to God: for the precious gift of life itself; and the precious gifts of communion with God!- being provided for by the bountiful earth!- and being part of the human community!

**You see, for me, stewardship is much more comprehensive than money.** If I were to answer the question, **"What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?"**

**I would have to answer, 100%.** Everything I am, and everything I have use of, comes from God, and I am called to give it all for the glory of God. 100%.

**That being said, the 100% goes in different directions.** Figuring out which directions is part of my spiritual practice.

Some of the 100% that I give for the glory of God I use to pay for my housing, food, drink, clothes, transportation, medical and dental care, insurance, etc. etc.

My husband and I are finalizing plans for retirement. Preparing a budget has been one of our most important practices, and it is spiritual as well as practical.

I remember in college I had a professor named Kenneth Korby who with his spouse determined what they anticipated needing for their expenses each year. They made a new budget each year. They reserved the portion of their income they needed for expenses, put some more in savings, and simply gave the rest away, whether it was a lot or a little. I'm sure it was more than 10%.

**I have not been that bold.** But for me, since I was in college, giving (at a minimum) 10% of my income to God's work through the church has been something important to me and something I enjoy.

I actually love giving money away. In November and December a "spirit of fervent philanthropy" descends upon me and I take my opportunity to give beyond a tithe by supporting ministries and good causes outside my congregation.

**But just imagine if your congregation had to deal with the question of what to do with all the money given next year.** Wouldn't that be a nice problem for it to have! What ministries would God be able to lead you into? I wonder.

**And so my stewardship practices are like a birth plan that keeps me trusting in God whether my world is in tune or falling apart.** That keeps my eyes on the prize of God's new world.

**I also think of our common worship as full of breathing exercises, one after another.** (*Breath = Spirit, in the biblical languages.*) We learn to trust God through our worship practices. Here's some of what I see:

- When we gather for worship when our lives are going well AND when they are falling apart, God is helping us develop a patient endurance.
- We learn that because nobody can do life or have faith all by themselves, we come together for worship, and so nobody needs to go it alone.
- In worship we learn to get along with each other—sitting side by side with folks we don't know very well and sharing the peace of the Lord.
- We learn to listen, really listen, to Someone Else speak and practice letting ourselves be changed by what we hear.
- We learn to pray for each other.
- We learn to share our money and other resources by making our offerings.
- Today we learn to trust that God will continue to provide next year, too, by filling our our Estimates of Giving Cards for 2019.
- In worship, Jesus will give us food to share with each other.
- And then we will be told to go into the crazy-falling-apart world with peace in our hands and our hearts and our ways.

**With Jesus helping us, we will find the courage and leadership to take these simple, deep, and important life skills with us into worlds that we know are falling apart.** When people are sick or in prison, we will visit them. When people are hungry or thirsty we will feed them. When people are naked, we will clothe them. When people are sad or afraid, we will comfort them. When they are strangers, we will welcome them.

**And we will do this even if nobody else does.** Because it is right. Because it is what Jesus taught us. Because it is how God brings God's new world into being amid the scraps of the old world. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Bonus not used:

Canticle: A Song of True Motherhood  
by Julian of Norwich

God chose to be our mother in all things \*  
and so made the foundation of his work,

most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.  
God, the perfect wisdom of all, \*  
arrayed himself in this humble place.  
Christ came in our poor flesh \*  
to share a mother's care.  
Our mothers bear us for pain and for death; \*  
our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.  
Christ carried us within him in love and travail, \*  
until the full time of his passion.  
And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy, \*  
still all this could not satisfy the power of his wonderful love.  
All that we owe is redeemed in truly loving God, \*  
for the love of Christ works in us;  
Christ is the one whom we love.