

November 15, 2009  
Lectionary 33b  
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### ***THE BEGINNING OF THE END***

I imagine that this latest newsflash from Jesus sounded like the end of the world to the disciples. I can picture them, nervous, anxious, looking at each other wondering, “Ok, who’s going to ask about THIS one? I thought we were out for a leisurely walk, heading to our next gig, taking in the scenery, the architecture. Then Jesus springs this ‘throwing down buildings’ thing. I was following the whole ‘coming of the Son of Man’ and ‘salvation’ business, but this...destruction? What in the world is he talking about?” A few of the disciples get up the guts to ask Jesus what omens, what signs will warn them that the end of the world is about to come. Jesus responds giving them a somewhat vague account of, “What to expect when you’re expecting...the end of the world” – deceit, wars, and natural disasters.

Hearing this text I can help but lament a little. “Haven’t we seen enough already?!?” There certainly has been no shortage of crises in this decade. The collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11. The unrivaled flooding and havoc Katrina let loose on New Orleans. Tsunamis in Indonesia. The earthquake that rocked China. The world has experienced plenty of these contractions before, during and after Jesus time. This isn’t anything new, but these are just the beginning of the birth pangs.

We are often surprised and alarmed by the trauma we face in our world today. We simply don’t know when or where to expect a crisis to occur. Those situations that affect us most dramatically are when our institutions, our foundations, our temples are thrown down. Whether it’s the financial hardships of churches across the country or the neighbor down the street who is struggling to put food on the table, it’s hard not to notice the aftershock that continues to reverberate through our communities from a stock market that crumbled right out from underneath us.

The impact of THIS crisis has hit home especially for the people of Flint, MI. A city of nearly 125,000 residents as of the 2000 census, Flint’s population has been reduced to barely 85,000 in the years following the closing of a General Motors factory in the community. A Nightline news camera walks us down the streets of a neighborhood in Flint which now looks like a ghost town...the only thing missing are the tumbleweeds. Nearly 10,000 homes have been abandoned. When asked what could be done to resurrect the depreciating property values and the declining population in the city, the County Treasurer stated that they are tearing down, demolishing 6,000 of the abandoned homes. Is this somehow part of God’s plan?

This type of devastation gets playtime on the radios, on TV, in the newspapers. It is easily seen, however some of the most up-ending struggles of our day-to-day lives rage, often unseen inside of us. The heartbreak in ending a relationship. The despair in a loved one being diagnosed with a terminal disease. The fear in learning to live with a disability. These experiences can make us feel alone. They can tear down our defenses. They can throw down our sense of self worth and it can feel like the end of the world at times.

Still, Jesus gives the hope that these growing pains, these contractions, these are BIRTH pangs. That the end of the world is not death or suffering. It is not deceit or wars or natural disasters. Mark’s gospel itself ends with terror and amazement and fear, but even the death of Jesus is not the end of the world. In these strange endings and beginnings, in these transitions, amidst anxiety and uncertainty, extraordinary things can and do take place.

Jesus tells us that there will be pangs...but in the same breath he promises us that there will be newness, there will be wholeness, there will be birth. Through our distress, our outrage, our panic, Jesus is the dutiful midwife, guiding us, listening to us, providing for us in our need. Jesus is the expectant father, joyful about his growing family and attentive to the strife of his beloved. Jesus is the laboring mother, enduring these birth pangs for the our sake, for the sake of the world. When the end does come, Jesus will be there to deliver us and as surely as he is raising us as individuals, he will fully and completely restore our world, cosmically resurrecting life and reconciling it all to its intended place with God in truth, in peace, and in wholeness.

This is a glorious promise, but in some ways it may seem to exist in some far off future. What are we to do until then? Jesus gives two commands to the disciples to help us out – “beware” and “do not be alarmed.” Beware...be aware...pay attention to what is going on in the world around us, to the stirring and the quaking and the questioning in our hearts. Don't ignore it. Don't turn away from it. Don't pretend that it's not there. Do not be alarmed...do not be burdened troubled...do not be worn down with worry to point that we would be immobilized. In this world, we strive to live in the newness that surrounds us with the rising of the each day's sun. While the end of the world is still coming, we live and we pray that we would live in to this promise of truth and peace for ourselves and for each other. It may seem like the end of the world at times, but maybe it's just the beginning.