

## **Birth Pangs**

Mark 13:1–8

We are concluding a twelve-week chronological walk through several chapters in Mark. Soon we will begin the wonderful season of anticipating the birth of Christ we call Advent.

Mark was likely written during the disastrous Jewish revolt against Roman occupation in Palestine (66 – 70 CE). Mark's world was shattered and shaken to its core. The Roman armies destroyed the Jewish temple, desecrating what for the Jews was their most sacred gathering place. The temple was a place that gave them identity and symbolized the foundations of their faith.

The message of Mark's Gospel is a message of hope proclaimed in the midst of catastrophe; grace in the midst of violence and ruin. To really hear it, we have to listen from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment; we have to listen alongside the displaced refugee, the violence of hate, the addict and his heartbroken family. This is where Mark lives. These are the depths from which he proclaims his good news. Does this sound familiar to our world?

When the world we know seems out of control, we read this ancient literary response that envisions an imminent future in which God and God's people respond with faith, courage, and hope to right wrongs, thereby inaugurating a new era of justice and compassion. This literature is often called "Apocalyptic" (from the Greek meaning "revealing"). God reveals to God's people the hidden, dramatic rescue to come. These are extravagant visions of hope when all hope seems lost. I get frustrated when apocalyptic scripture is misused as a prediction of future events rather than a sign and encouragement for hope here and now.

In the midst of desolation and despair, Jesus announces the good news of a new era of healing, liberation, and love: God is turning the world upside down by calling us to serve all, restore health, free captives, and do justice.

Drawing on the ancient descriptive poetry of "apocalypse" ("revealing"), Jesus contends that God is on the move, even and especially when all hope seems lost. From this apocalyptic angle of vision, even our struggles today can be reframed in light of what's to come, as "birth pangs" leading to new life. Precisely because of this, all of us are called to be watchful and alert, cultivating a mindful attentiveness. Avoiding the ways of idolatrous religion, discerning how our current struggles may in fact lead to new life, and to notice the signs of hope and wonder all around us every day.

Does the world we live in ever feel like everything as we have known it is falling apart? Have you ever had one of those moments, when it felt like everything nailed down was coming loose? When everything you thought was permanent crumbled to the ground, when everything you depended on went up in smoke, when everything you had been so sure of was lost in doubt?

Mark 13:1–8 talks about the illusion of permanence and how we crave it. It's no wonder that change is so hard. No wonder that we bolt our pews to the floor. In a world like this one, where everything seems so fleeting, so transitory, we are looking for something solid and lasting, something we can build our lives on.

There is something solid and lasting we can build our lives on, but it isn't fancy temples or long-held beliefs. Maybe that's why Jesus pries his disciples loose from their attachment to the temple in Jerusalem. Not even that will last forever; you've got to build your life on something more substantial than things, traditions, even some of our most cherished beliefs. Jesus wants us to look for God and focus on what God is doing in the midst of change and transition.

This passage and others like it can conjure up fear about everything falling apart and the end of the world. But it is intended to bring a sense of peace, security, and hope. I believe that the peace and security gleaned from this apocalyptic literature resulted from the faith that there was something better in the future than the present hardship lived by so many.

Even the church is susceptible to the measures of might and the measures of greatness set by society. How much do we evaluate our ministry, even your own personhood, by standards that barely resemble Gospel-kinds of criteria, if at all?

We are called to rise up and speak up about false power known only in large stones, about greatness seen only in observable glory, and the idolatry of grandeur that has taken over. We are called to lift up the greatness Jesus teaches us in humility and service.

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

*Bob*