

Mark 13: 1-8 "Beginning of Birth Pangs" Rev. Janet Chapman 11/14/21

Working as an associate pastor in Kansas City, I learned a valuable lesson. While my youth group was still gathering, one of the 8<sup>th</sup> graders told me that one of the other kids was especially gifted at prophecy and he could prove it. I was sent to the chalkboard where a square had been drawn with nine smaller squares. Names being changed to protect the guilty, Sean left the room while Sherry told me to point to a square. I did and Sherry called Sean back into the room and we watched as he pondered the squares for a moment and then pointed to the exact square I had chosen. I chalked it up to a lucky guess and Sherry asked if I wanted to try again. I tried again, and again, and again and each time Sean was able to name the square I had secretively pointed to. I even ensured he was nowhere near the door before I did it so he couldn't oversee or hear my choice. Every single time, after pondering for a few moments, he got it right. It wasn't long before others wanted to see if they could match Sean's skill. They would leave the room and come back and try and guess the square but to no avail. I began to wonder if this truly was a gifted young man, and pondered how we could get him on the local news? My downfall was not considering that my ex, who is a professional magician, had spent time with Sean and Sherry before the meeting. Otherwise, I would have known he set the whole thing up. Being married to a magician, you learn some tricks of the trade along the way but this one I had missed. It wasn't until the meeting was over that I was able to weasel it out of him; please don't tell his colleagues at the Magic Castle in LA or he might lose his membership. Apparently, Sherry was passing signals to Sean every time he walked into the room; each of the 9 squares equated to a specific and very subtle physical movement she made as he came in that told him which square had been chosen. It is a common magician's secret, one of many that so-called mind-readers use to distract the audience. Like so many others in the room, I was looking in the wrong direction and was unable to see what was right before me.

Ironically, I read this week I am not the first minister to be fooled by this trick from a youth group member, and Rev. Janet Hunt draws an interesting parallel as she asks if such an experience might be likened to encountering the sorts of 'end-time' texts we read today. Of course, we don't live in the same context that the people who first heard these words did, we

don't have the same reference points. Either way, it is understandable that we easily find ourselves 'looking in the wrong direction' as the sorts of things Jesus speaks of now begin to unfold. Our attention can't help but be drawn to wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes and famines which crop up all around us. As people of compassion and goodwill, that is an appropriate thing, and yet, it is no wonder we tend to turn our focus away from what undergirds it all. We are led astray by those who claim to predict the future, who use current events to prove biblical prophecies. The reality is no one in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can understand the historical horrors and trauma early Christians experienced under the tyrant Nero and the destruction of the temple. Folks prophesy they know the day and the hour of the end of the world, which if you know your scripture, cannot be. Mark 13 contains no code for deciphering the future and is a direct rebuttal to those who claim to know. Still literalists use such words to incite fear and anxiety as they complain things are only getting worse. In 2016, American author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown wrote in reference to racial injustice, "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. (Therefore) we must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." When we read this text from Mark and other texts which reflect apocalyptic themes, maybe we can borrow Brown's words: Things are getting uncovered, revealed, which is what the book of Revelation is all about, a revealing not a prediction. "So let's hold each other tight and pull back the veil."

Look back at the text. Jesus is standing in the temple courtyard with his disciples, shortly after asking them to notice the widow surrendering her last 2 coins to the treasury. Dazzled by the architectural majesty, one of the disciples asks Jesus to notice something in return: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Imagine if you will, standing in the middle of Times Square for the first time! According to 1<sup>st</sup> century historian Josephus, the Jerusalem temple of Jesus' day was a magnificent wonder. Newly reconstructed by Herod the Great, the retaining walls were composed of stones 40 feet long, 11 feet tall, and weighing 300 tons. Herod reportedly used so much gold to cover the outside that anyone who gazed at the walls in bright light risked blindness. In building this monstrosity, Herod clearly intended to bolster his ego and impress his former foe, the

emperor Augustus. But Jesus throws cold-water on the disciples amazement with his prophecy that not one stone will be left upon another. Did Jesus have a crystal ball prediction or was it more of a rational, wise insight? Pompey had invaded the holy precincts, Herod erected a Roman eagle on the entrance, Caligula crafted a statue of his divine self to be placed within the Holy of Holies and thus trouble was indeed coming. But even after the Romans crushed the Jewish Revolt of the 70's and destroyed the temple, a few stones did remain standing which reveal the Wailing Wall we know today. Did Jesus miss the mark or maybe we weren't meant to take Jesus' words literally about no stone left standing? Contrary to what our hysteria-hungry, "if it bleeds, it leads" culture so often encourages, Jesus doesn't capitalize on chaos, he doesn't fear-monger or incite suspicion nor does he thrive on human dread. Instead, he says to the disciple, "Do you see these great buildings?" And why does he ask, "Do you see?" Aren't the two of them seeing the same thing? Well, no – they're not, says Debie Thomas – They're not seeing the same thing at all. The disciple has been looking in the wrong direction. The disciple sees an unshakable symbol of God's presence in those massive stones which hold religious tradition and memory, they are emblems of religious certainty and permanence. Jesus sees rubble and leveling, fragility not permanence, change not stasis. Jesus sees a new birth coming.

Jesus opens a window of hope, explaining that our intense sorrow over how the world is now can be compared to labor pains. Anyone who has been in labor knows that the birth pangs are not the same as birth itself. They are merely the prelude. Nevertheless, when the labor pains begin, you know you need to be prepared. It's time to go to the hospital or wherever you plan to give birth. When the water breaks, the mother-to-be gets a sense of urgency about the future. When we begin to experience the birth pangs, we should be ready even if the birth itself is not yet occurring as both Jen & Rob will tell you from that lengthy labor process. But when the birth occurs, there is joy to be experienced. Don't be alarmed for there will be wars and rumors of wars which will shake the foundations of the world and our faith in humanity. There will be death, disaster, disease, and all manner of things to hold our attention and rattle our souls. It's always been this way throughout history. But Jesus says don't be alarmed, it is not the end, for the world does not end with flames, terror, and

violence, it ends with peace. When the Divine Midwife, our Creator, is at work, then the end of a violent world means birthing a peaceful one. The end of an impoverished world means birthing a just one. The end of a hateful world means birthing a world pulsating with love. Don't be alarmed because peace which is birthed even through violence will be a holy child indeed.

With a playful imagination, Henri Nouwen ponders labor pains that ferry us into life and newness. He tells a story about fraternal twins talking with one another in the womb: This sister says to the brother, 'I believe there is life after birth.' Her brother protested vehemently, 'No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing to do but cling to the cord that feeds us.' The little girl insisted, 'There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light, where there is freedom to move.' Still she couldn't convince her twin brother. After some silence, the sister said hesitantly, 'I have something else and I'm afraid you won't like it, but I think there is a Mother.' Her brother became furious, 'A Mother?' he shouted. 'What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let's be content.' The sister was overwhelmed by her brother's response, and for a while didn't say anything more. But she couldn't let go of her thoughts, and since she had only her twin brother to speak to, she finally said, 'Don't you feel those squeezes once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful.' 'Yes,' he answered, 'What's so special about that?' 'Well, I think those squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our Mother face to face. Don't you think that's exciting?' The brother didn't answer. He was fed up with the foolish talk of his sister and felt that the best thing would be to ignore her and hope she would leave him alone.'" Jesus said to them, "Don't be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come... This is but the beginning of the birthpangs." So I say, "Let us hold each other tight and pull back the veil as the birth of peace, a holy child indeed, arrives." Amen.