

**Sunday, November 14, 2021**  
**Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28 (Year B)**

Mark 13.1-8

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/607564257101134>

*(Sermon begins at about 21:25)*

**“Birth Pangs”**

Some people think that the Bible is irrelevant. That it has nothing to say about where we are today. But truth be told, much of today’s Gospel reading could be ripped straight out the pages of the Long Beach Press-Telegram, the LA Times, or the headlines on the nightly news:

Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Mk 13.5-8)

In this passage, Jesus is looking at what is going on in the world around him and seeing signs of the end times. Obviously, the world did not come to an end after Jesus made these observations. The Gospel passage starts off with Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Temple. Which did actually happen at the hands of the Roman Empire in 70 AD—about 40 years after Jesus’ death. Given what we read, destruction of the Temple, yes. End of the world? Not yet anyway. But when we look at what Jesus says about being led astray, about wars and rumors of wars, about earthquakes and famines, all being the beginning of the birth pangs—the birth pangs leading to the end of the world—that just doesn’t fit what was going on at the time. But today? Looking at what is going on in our world as compared to the Gospel sure seems to indicate this might really be the beginning of the birth pangs. The beginning of the end.

“Beware that no one leads you astray.” Sounds to me a lot like our modern concept of “fake news.” With all sides twisting the truth all out of shape for their own political purposes. Politicians on both sides of the aisle saying one thing and then doing the opposite. And more recently, the politicization of mask mandates and vaccination requirements. The rabid cries against public health directives in the name of civil liberties and individual rights. “I’m going to do what I want, science and health considerations be damned.”

“Wars and rumors of wars.” While few make the regular news cycle, there are no less than 60 armed conflicts going on around the world even as we speak. Ranging in size from major wars with 10,000 or more deaths each year, all the way to minor skirmishes with less than 100 deaths each year. Some of them isolated to groups within a single nation and some involving conflict between two or more nations. The vast majority having been going on for two, three, even four decades, and even one that is still going on after 99 years.<sup>1</sup> And what about “wars” that are not armed military conflicts, but conflicts, nonetheless? Such things as trade wars

between various nations—not the least being between the United States and China. Allegations and even overwhelming evidence of Russia interfering in our 2016 and 2020 elections, as well as elections in other nations. The increase in cyberattacks against governments, institutions, and businesses. The increase in terrorist activities, both from foreign and domestic sources. And of course, the seemingly endless incidents of gun violence in recent years.

And what about rumors of wars? In light of climate change and environmental degradation, there has been all sorts of speculation as to what the wars of the future will look like. More likely over resources than over actual territory. With wars over water being among the greatest possibilities, given the increasing number of areas around the world in drought conditions that are only becoming more severe. Like right here in California, with increased political battles over who has rights to decreasing water resources.

Jesus also mentions famines. That is certainly becoming more prevalent thanks to climate change, decreases in the availability of water, and increased population growth, particularly in poorer, less-developed areas of the globe. While Jesus does mention earthquakes, he does not even mention such things as rampant wildfires and increasingly destructive tropical storms and hurricanes. Nor does he mention economic difficulties such as high unemployment, high rates of inflation, skyrocketing housing prices, and increased rates of homelessness. All things that tend to occupy our attention more than some of the other things he talks about.

You get the idea. So much negative stuff going on in the world around us. Looking at the news compared with Jesus' summation of such things being the birth pangs can make us question whether we are indeed living in the end times. We may be. Who knows? Despite some trying to pin down a date for the end of it all, despite some trying to equate what Jesus was talking about with our own times, we just don't know when it will all come to an end. Jesus himself says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13.32). Nonetheless, pretty nearly every generation has read what Jesus talks about in today's Gospel and has related it to their own time, and has seen signs of the end times. In a world as complex as ours, there is always going to be stuff going on. There is always going to be things that some will point to and say, "see, this is it. This is the beginning of the end." It's been happening for 2,000 years now. And you know what? We're still here.

Rather than saying that all the stuff that is going on around us is the sign of a fiery end to our planet and life as we know it, what Jesus was actually doing was sending us a message of hope. As one commentator notes, "When death-dealing forces seemed to have the upper hand, one ancient literary response was to envision an imminent future in which God directly comes to the rescue in spectacular fashion: righting wrongs, routing wrongdoers, and thereby inaugurating a new era of justice and compassion. This literature is often called 'Apocalyptic' (from the Greek [meaning] 'uncovering' or 'revealing'). God pulls aside the veil, revealing to God's people the hidden, dramatic rescue to come." Today's Gospel passage is one such example, with Mark chapter 13 sometimes called "the Markan Apocalypse."<sup>2</sup> Following the ancient tradition of apocalyptic oracles, Jesus frames the events of his time and the coming struggles as "birth pangs." Not so much that these are birth pangs of the end, of fiery destruction, but rather as signs of a new era ready to be born. An era of hope and promise,

where all will be set right. Where God's love and mercy, God's justice and compassion, will prevail. That God will turn everything upside down.

What we tend to overlook in today's Gospel reading is the timing. Not the timing relative to the destruction of the Temple, or the oft-specified timing of the end of the ages. No, we tend to overlook the timing of when Jesus said these words. Jesus is speaking literally days—three, four at the most—before his death. Less than a week before his resurrection. That was the beginning of the birth pangs he was talking about. The beginning of a new age that would be ushered in with his death and resurrection.

As one commentator so beautifully notes, "in the midst of desolation and despair, Jesus announces the radiant good news of a new era of healing, liberation, and love . . . Jesus contends that God is on the move, even and especially where all hope seems lost."<sup>3</sup>

The world may seem that it is being turned upside down. And it is. But not by wars and rumors of wars. Not by earthquakes, famines, etc. Don't get me wrong. I'm not dismissing or even downplaying the severity and seriousness of the issues we face as a nation and as a world. There is some seriously bad stuff going on all around us. But the good news, the truly good news as we move ever closer to the beginning of Advent, is that the world is being turned upside down by God's love. Turned upside down by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which ushers in a new era. The era of the Kingdom of God. The era that we live in. The era in which we as Christians, that we as the Church—the Body of Christ—have a hand in helping to bring to fruition in small yet tangible ways.

I have to believe that even in the midst of all the ugliness going on in the world around us, God's love is at work against the forces of evil that are causing wars, that are fomenting political unrest, that are enabling and perpetuating social ills. That as God's people, we are called to be the catalyst for change to all that we witness playing out in the world around us. To help bring about the Kingdom of God in all its glory.

Our calling as the Body of Christ in the world is not to cringe in fear at what we see going on around us, despairing that all hope is lost. Our calling is not to see what is going on around as birth pangs of destruction. Rather, our calling is to hold on to the hope and promise embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ. Our calling is to discern how our current struggles may be birth pangs that lead to new life. Our calling is to live into that vision and to work to make new life a reality. A new life filled with hope and promise built on the foundation of God's love.

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<sup>1</sup> "List of ongoing armed conflicts," Wikipedia, November 9, 2021.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ongoing\\_armed\\_conflicts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts).

<sup>2</sup> "Birth Pangs: SALT's Commentary for Twenty-Fifth Week after Pentecost," SALT, November 8, 2021.  
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-sixth-week-after-pentecost>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.