

Sunday, November 17, 2024
26th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28B)

Mark 13.1-8

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/457543987372070>

(Sermon begins at about 23:55)

“It’s All a Matter of Perspective”

As you go through the process toward Holy Orders, to becoming a deacon or a priest—what is often and ominously referred to as “The Process”—you are required to undergo various evaluations. Interviews by the Commission on Ministry, a background check, a physical exam, and not one but two mental health evaluations. When you start into “The Process,” there is a detailed psychological evaluation entailing many hours of testing. Then, after going through all the hoops of the multi-year “Process,” the candidate for ordination undergoes a psychiatric evaluation. This one is less time-consuming and onerous than the psychological exams, generally entailing an hour session with a psychiatrist. I know that the purpose of these evaluations is to make sure that the candidate is fit for ministry and not an obvious potential danger to those they will engage in ministry. Although my personal theory is that you have to be crazy to want to become a priest, so the psychiatric evaluation is to make sure that if you were not crazy when you entered “The Process,” you are by the time you complete it.

I don’t remember a whole lot about either my psychological or psychiatric evaluations. Although the one thing that does stand out, and continues to irritate me to this day, was a comment the psychiatrist made during our session. We were talking about my upbringing in a military family. Namely, the fact that we moved around a lot when I was a child. Sixteen homes in the first sixteen years of my life, before my father retired from the Marine Corps. The psychiatrist was insistent, even adamant, that my parents were abusive for subjecting me to that life. That because of the moving around so much, I did not have the opportunity to develop healthy relationships with my peers, and to experience a stable living environment. I honestly do not recall what I said in response. Although I expressed wholehearted disagreement with his assessment.

What the psychiatrist viewed as an abusive living situation I viewed—and continue to view—as a valuable part of my development. A significant part of what makes me who I am as a person. What he saw as being abusive and damaging to my development, I saw as a source of strength and opportunity. Because of moving around, I learned to be resilient and adaptable to change. I learned to be very independent. Because of moving around, I had the opportunity to live in a variety of different places, experience a variety of different cultures, and get to know a variety of different people. I feel that my upbringing, rather than being a negative in my development, was a positive. If not for those experiences, I would likely be a very different person. I will concede that there were some downsides of the military life, some impacts on my psychological development that I might prefer to have been different. But all in all, I would not give up for anything how I was raised and the person I became as a result. What the psychiatrist saw as abusive and damaging, I saw and continue to experience as beneficial and life-giving.

I tell this story as a way of illustrating that when looking at any given situation, it is all a matter of perspective. Which is what we see occurring in today's Gospel reading. In multiple ways, actually.

For context, Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem, mere days before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. They are at the temple, where Jesus has been teaching, as well as criticizing and getting into all sorts of arguments with the temple authorities. Today's account starts off with a bit of a "what?" moment. As they are leaving the temple, one of the disciples observes, "Look Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Seems an odd statement to make. It's not like this is their first time at the temple. They have been here numerous times before. Frankly, I think it was just one of those awkward moments where the disciple in question felt the need to say something, anything, to try to diffuse what was undoubtedly a palpable tension in the air. After all, they all knew why they were in Jerusalem. Jesus had told the disciples three times about his impending Passion. Noting that the events that were about to unfold would be at the hands of the temple authorities. The very people Jesus had just been antagonizing. The disciples' heads are probably swimming, and they are having a hard time processing everything that is going on. They are likely in denial. In the awkwardness of these conflicting thoughts and emotions, the disciple felt a need to say something. The equivalent of "how 'bout them Dodgers?"

Perhaps in an effort to redirect their focus to the seriousness of what is going on, of what will happen in the coming several days, Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Certainly a startling claim. The temple is not even completed at this point. Construction on this, the third temple, began in 20 BC—it's been under construction for 50 years now. It won't even be completed for another 33 years. The thought of the temple, the center of Jewish life and worship, being destroyed was unthinkable. And yet, in 70 AD, a mere seven years after completion, it will be destroyed by the Romans. Jesus foretelling what would become historic fact. Although perhaps he was also using the destruction of the temple as an analogy for what would be happening to him in a matter of days. The temple that is the body of the Son of God likewise being destroyed by the Romans.

Later that day, as they sit on the Mount of Olives outside the city walls, with a direct view of the temple, the disciples are obviously puzzled by Jesus' prophetic statement. They want more details. Maybe trying to make sense of what is incomprehensible to them. Jesus takes the opportunity, not to talk so much about the destruction of the temple, but the end of the ages. The destruction of the temple, in many ways, serving as an analogy for his own death in the short term, and the end of creation as we know it in the long term. He talks about the horrors that will accompany this apocalyptic event, including words of caution: "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." All very ominous: the potential for false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and famines. And yet, interspersed with words of caution and even comfort: "beware that no one leads you astray," and "do not be

alarmed.” Then he says something a bit cryptic: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Implying that this is just the beginning of the horror? Or that something new might come of it?

I think the latter. Yes, things are gonna get real. Things will get ugly. But don’t freak out. “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” In other words, it’s a matter of perspective. You can view what will happen—whenever it actually does happen—as a tragedy. Or you can view it for what it is intended to be—preparation for something new.

Isn’t that what birth pangs are? In its literal meaning, birth pangs are the normal, recurring pain that accompanies labor and the process of giving birth to a baby. Pain and discomfort that are a necessary part of giving birth. Pain and discomfort that are a necessary prelude to new life. Pain and discomfort that, in hindsight, are a dim memory, if not forgotten. Certainly overshadowed by the joy of the new life that has arrived.

Certainly, in using the image of birth pangs, Jesus is pointing to the fact that the events that will accompany the end of the ages, unpleasant though they may be, are a necessary prelude to something new and better to follow. In this case, wiping away the old creation and making way for the new creation, for the new heaven and new earth that will characterize the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. The birth of a new reality and a new existence, in which we will all participate. The new reality and new existence that will only be made possible by another set of tragic and horrific events that, for Jesus and the disciples, will happen in a matter of days—his death. The death that will merely be the precursor, the steppingstone, for the main event: Christ’s resurrection. The event whereby sin and death are defeated once and for all. Opening the way for new and eternal life for all of us. All brought about through the birth pangs that are Jesus’ crucifixion. All brought about through the birth pangs of the events that will precede the end of the ages. Without a doubt, all events that in and of themselves are or will be tragic, even horrific. And yet, which, when put in the broader context of God’s kingdom, lead to something even more glorious: our eternal life with him. It’s all a matter of perspective.

Jesus’ image of birth pangs is one that can be applied to so many areas of our lives. To those events in our personal lives that may be unfortunate in the moment, but which can be the steppingstone, the birth pangs, of something new. Those events in our communal life, be they in our parish community, or in the broader society, that, in the moment, may seem unfortunate, even tragic. Events or situations which can provide opportunities, which have the potential to become the birth pangs of something new.

It’s all a matter of perspective. Jesus, in his words to the disciples and in his own actions provides us with an example, with an opportunity, in our own lives, in whatever it is we face, particularly something we would not necessarily have chosen. To take what happens as a fait accompli, or to view what happens as merely the uncomfortable birth pangs that, in the fullness of time, give birth to new life.