

November 18, 2012

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Undoubtedly all of you are holding on to one of these Rite 13 service booklets today with the names of all of our Rite 13 participants printed on the front. I am going to be preaching to them, but know that this is for you, too. None of you are immune from this sermon...

Strange and scary readings: Daniel talking about the ominous "Day of the Lord" when creation gets torn apart and a Gospel about pestilence and wars and rumors of war. Strange gospel to hear today on this "Rite 13" Sunday. Jesus and his friends have been hanging out in the temple-- a place that was, to Jesus and all Jews, the holiest place there was-- the most important place a person could be. Jesus gives them all the bad news that someday the temple will come down.

Then, later on when they admire this magnificent place from across the way. His friends want to know when everything will happen they want in on the secret. (Maybe one of them was a building contractor who wanted to get in on some repairs?) Jesus shocks them all with the news that someday even something as amazing as that temple will come down. That even this holiest of holy places built by human beings is not permanent. No thing... no place... no time can ever remain the same, he reminds them.

Much like you. We all watch you growing older- physically and mentally- becoming more independent, getting sassy and wise and handsome and argumentative and beautiful, and we are at once thrilled, annoyed, sad and fearful and joyous. We wonder, "have we done a good job...:" and "do they know enough to survive?" We ask, "What happened to our little baby?" Like the bricks of the temple in Jerusalem that did in fact fall about 45 years after Jesus' death, childhood falls and you wake up one day and you are adolescents. Then later you are finishing high school... going to college... starting careers and families of your own.

Getting older and growing up physically are inevitable. However, maturity is not. Being grown up is not. You know as well as I do that adults can be hugely immature. You may have heard grown-ups in your house arguing like a couple of toddlers! Witness the antics of various folks of the blue and red persuasions in any election cycle, hurling half-truths and lies at one another in attack ads, saying things that you are taught not to say about anyone. Turn on your television to any number of reality tv shows and you'll see immaturity on display for great profit and laughs. Maturity is not a given. Immaturity follows many, if not all of us into adulthood in some ways...

Professor Bingham Vick at Furman, (where I went to college) used to say quite often, "You are only young once but you can be immature your whole life...."

Immaturity is not always a bad thing, though. 40-somethings can like The Simpsons and the occasional episode of South Park. We can skateboard and snowboard and run marathons and wear red high-top Chuck Taylors and listen to punk rock and wear concert t-shirts under our clerical garb. We can watch every Star Wars movie in a row in one sitting, become virtuosic at Super Mario Kart and Guitar Hero know our way around the world of Harry Potter and laugh at that paragon of immaturity, Will Farrell. Yes, small doses of immaturity can be a blast.

At your age though, who among us didn't wonder like the disciples do today, "What, exactly, is going to happen?" We want to know the future- perhaps know what will happen in the passage of time. You want to do things now! Believe me, I know, because quite often in my household we have had this argument, "Why can't I?" "Because you can't" "Why can't I?" "You just can't."

You push your limits and you want to do things too soon, we tell you. You want to control when things happen. But time is largely out of our control, though. We attempt to control it. You are some of the most meticulously scheduled human beings I have ever known! On any given weekend your parents are playing taxi service to any number of ballet rehearsals, karate events, soccer games, concerts, scout meetings, ice hockey, soccer, lacrosse, basketball and football games, SAT tutorial sessions, SNL meetings, Sunday school classes and choir rehearsals. No wonder there's never enough of the stuff. No wonder time makes us so uneasy.

CS Lewis (of Chronicles of Narnia fame) said that we live half in eternity and half bound by the temporal realm around us... Part of our being human is our uneasiness with time... He says:

"Humans are amphibians...half spirit and half animal...as spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time, means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation--the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks."

The only consistency we can count on is inconsistency. The only constant in life is change! Take heart, though, because Jesus tells us something today that I never quite understood until now... that all things that happen- all the wonderful and hard things that happen in the present- the parties and celebrations and the crumbling and destruction and pestilence and pleasure and play and work- the famines and wars and times of peace... all the critical, yet problematic details of this life are "birth pangs."

Thankfully this is not something I have experienced first-hand because I am not so sure I could take it. I don't think that men are really that tough. I remember when my wife was giving birth to our oldest child, Madeline, I brought time into the room and even tried to use it to control things. I remember trying to get her to breathe in rhythm with me and after about 5 minutes she sat up in bed and grabbed my arm and yelled, "Just stop! Your breathing doesn't go with my pain!" Controlling time did nothing for us then.

Thankfully, birth pangs are not an image any of you understand very well. The people who will stand behind you in the Rite 13 liturgy do. One day, 13 or so years ago, you came to life after some very real "pangs." Getting you in the world was quite an accomplishment, believe me, yet it was only the beginning. Now, here you are. You do feel birth pangs, though- every time you run into limits- things that you are not quite ready for yet. You will feel "pangs" the first time you fall in love, the first time get your heartbroken, experience the deaths of loved ones and suffer disappointment. Take heart, though. Jesus promises us today that all of these things are necessary- and even life-giving. These "pangs" are just the beginning of better things, with his help.

Birth pangs have to happen before we can grow up. And, we do want you to grow up, and not just older. Grow up and find ways to contribute to the life of God's people instead of just taking it in. Grow up and stop just absorbing and consuming the good news but find ways to become the good news. Grow up and stop just experiencing and hoping for miracles but find ways to be the miracle. Grow up and take the strength this community and the body and blood of Christ that you take in to your bodies, and take it out in the world and leave nothing but life and love in your wake.

All temples, even the temple of childhood, must fall, Jesus reminds us today. But from their rubble, from the "pangs" comes nothing less than resurrection. From birth pangs comes real life in God in Christ as an adult, as a "grown up" who is born again and again and again into the reality of God's love for us and for this world.