

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Stephanie Sorge Wing
1 Samuel 1: 4-20; Mark 13: 1-8
“Birthing Love”
25th Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2015

Whew! I made it! I am sure both Lib and Robert are breathing a sigh of relief about that. Since Mac came 7 weeks early, Lib was not as confident as I was that I would, in fact, be here preaching on this Sunday, 12 days before the estimated arrival of our son Micah. I had done it once before! My final Sunday preaching before Isaac arrived was 20 days before his due date, but what's a few more days at that point?

I couldn't help but see today's lectionary readings as a gift, particularly as I prepare to birth son #2. As I worked on this sermon, my laptop faced significant competition for space. The jumps and jabs were constant reminders of the life that has been growing inside, which will, soon enough, be birthed. So it was, as I sat down to study the passages, that I was drawn again to Hannah's story, and to the image of the birth pangs from the gospel reading.

The Gospel of Mark was written shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 CE. Mark could not really ignore that context. In the midst of the narrative of Jesus' life and death, this passage is almost an interruption. It is often referred to as the Markan apocalypse. One of the disciples lobs Jesus an easy one: "My, look how big and impressive this temple is!" Jesus responds that it will soon be leveled, and each stone thrown down. The disciples ask him if this is a sign that the end is near.

Jesus' response is to caution the disciples to beware of false prophets. Certainly plenty of Mark's contemporaries would have pointed to the Temple destruction and other events as signs of the end times. In the nearly two thousand years since then, there have been others who have pointed to any number of earthly signs and predicted that the end of the world was imminent - even going so far as to predict exact dates. Many of those dates have come and gone, and yet people still look for signs.

Jesus says there will be wars and rumors of wars, and nation will rise up against nation. There will be earthquakes and famines. All of these have been experienced many times over since Jesus' prophecy. We could certainly point to our own times as ripe with these signs. And how can we read this passage without thinking of the last few days in our own world? The terror and mass killings in Paris, the deadly blasts in Beirut, the dozens of Shia Muslims killed in attacks in Baghdad, the earthquake and tsunami in southern Japan... Some days it surely feels like the world is caving in. But rather than it signifying the end of times, Jesus says, "this is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

The beginning of the birth pangs... I remember the beginning of birth pangs with Isaac. They began the day after his due date, at the end of a day-long Presbytery meeting. The two were mutually exclusive, I'm sure. I woke up in the middle of the night and made my way into the living room to read my baby books and consult Dr. Google about signs of early labor. I struggle with pregnancy insomnia anyway, especially in the third trimester, and as time ticked on, I kept telling myself I needed to try to go to bed and sleep, because I knew I would need every ounce of strength very soon.

Birthing new life is not easy, no matter what form that birthing takes. It comes in pregnancy - sometimes planned, sometimes not, sometimes welcomed, sometimes not. It comes in the pain and often silent struggle of infertility. Hannah's distress and bitter weeping in the temple. It comes in the long and difficult process of adoption. Sometimes the new life that is birthed looks like nothing that we had expected or hoped for, but in every case, birthing does not come easily. Never is the preparation easy.

Wars, earthquakes and famines? Check, check, check. And so much more. Look at the refugees risking everything to find new life, new birth, in the midst of a treacherous journey. Look at the ways that

creation is groaning - glaciers and ice caps melting, sea levels rising, and more extreme weather patterns than humanity has ever experienced. And these are but the beginning of the birth pangs?

Of course birth is on my mind these days. I could share many more details about my labor and birth with Isaac, and I'm sure that many of you have your own stories to share. I've been hearing a lot of birthing stories lately - that's another side effect of pregnancy that they don't tell you about in the baby books. Once we finally got to the birthing center, I had many mixed feelings - anticipation, but also a bit of dread, and a sense of inevitability. This baby was going to come one way or another. This baby would be birthed, whether or not I was ready.

Jesus' disciples ask for signs of the end times, but instead Jesus points to the pangs that accompany the birthing of something completely new. What is that new thing? Nothing less than the redemption of all creation, new life and restoration for a world that is plagued by violence, war, injustice, hatred, sickness, loneliness, and death. Redemption. Tears will be wiped from all eyes. Mourning and sadness will be no more. People from every tribe, nation, and tongue will be gathered together to worship God. There will be no wars, no territorial disputes, no famine, no poverty, no starvation, no violence, no hate, no terrorism, and no retribution, because all of creation will be redeemed and reconciled to the Creator.

In her most recent book, "Wearing God," Lauren Winner examines different and often neglected Biblical images of God. In a chapter on God as laboring woman, midwife, and nursing mother, she writes "When I think about the hard work of labor, I realize that my unreflective assumption is somehow that redemption is easy for God. Because God is all-powerful, I somehow imagine redemption being a snap of the divine fingers. But Isaiah's image tells us how hard God the laboring woman is working to bring forth redemption... Underpinning the hard work is the profound strength of laboring." - (Lauren Winner, *Wearing God*, copyright 2015. HarperOne, NY, NY. p. 149)

What is redemption, if not birthing love? And the work of birthing such healing and redemptive love is not easy. It doesn't come without labor and pains because the world in which we live has a death grip on war and violence. The violence of the world was epitomized in Jesus lifted up on the cross. I imagine his final cries were similar to the deep and involuntary cries of the laboring mother. In his death, new life was being birthed.

When we look at the suffering and pains of the world, it is sometimes easy to take comfort in what is to come, beyond death, beyond the grave. Indeed, promises of the coming kingdom of God have been used to minimize the very real pains of this world here and now. But recognizing the current problems of the world, big and small, as the beginnings of the birth pangs reminds us that God is still with us, laboring, working, feeling our very real pain, and birthing love and redemption that is intimately connected to our lives here and now.

Redemption is a process. Growth is a struggle. But love is being birthed. It can be easy to focus on the birth pangs. There were times in labor when I thought, My God, I can't do this. And then, I was holding the most amazing bundle of pure love. In all the struggle it took to get there, love was being birthed.

There are so many signs of laboring humanity and creation in our world today. Paris, Beirut, and Baghdad. Horrific acts of terror that are perpetuated around the world. The carnage of gun violence in our own country. Refugees are fleeing wars, and rumors of wars, and famines, and earthquakes, and once-fertile lands laid barren by global warming. They are finding borders closed off, dangerous and deadly waters in the Mediterranean Sea, smugglers charging huge prices only to put refugees in even greater danger on unsafe rafts and overcrowded trucks. Families are separated. Mothers cry for their lost children. Terrorism rocks cities and villages around the globe. Birth pangs. But love is being birthed.

The image of God panting in labor - which we heard in our call to worship from Isaiah today - is perhaps one of the most earthy and embodied images of God in the Bible. That, alongside the birth of Jesus, remind us of the deeply incarnational love of God for us. God with us. God laboring, panting, being born with us. Birthing love and redemption is very hard labor, indeed. And it is labor into which God invites us, to witness, and to serve. To be midwife and doula. Holding hands, wiping sweat, and ready to catch and receive the love and new life that is springing forth.

We are witnesses to the love that God is birthing through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not ignore the pangs of birth, and the very real suffering in this world. We name it, and we enter into it as bearer's of God's redemptive love. When we are able, we point to signs of new life and real hope. To the families reunited on the journey. To the people and places that have opened hearts and homes to traumatized travelers. The "PorteOuverte," or Open Doors hashtag, spreading throughout Paris, with residents offering shelter and food to anyone in need in this time of chaos. Sikh Temples throughout the city opening to any and all as safe havens. Taxi Drivers in Paris - not always known for their hospitality - offering free rides to stranded citizens and visitors as public transit is shut down. In many places, big and small, we can get glimpses of what is being born. Love is being birthed.

Writing in response to the gospel passage and recent attacks, David Henson says, "The world ends not with flames and terror, blood and carnage. That's not what our faith tells us. That's not what Jesus tells us today in the wake of violence and terrorism... we look forward to the end of this violent world, birthing a peaceful one. The end of an impoverished world, birthing a just one. The end of a hateful world, birthing a world pulsing with love."

In a world where hate begets hate, Jesus comes to birth something entirely new and different - love, redemption, and reconciliation once and for all. The birth pangs are real. The pain and work and labor is real. But God's holy child of redemption is the great hope and promise to which we cling, to which we point, and of which we are assured. Thanks be to God!