

## November 14, 2021 | Journey Worship Service

TEXT: [Mark 13:1–8](#)

### TITLE: Harvest & Birthpangs

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

When we get together with friends and family, invariably we tell stories. We share memories. Even though we've told the stories before, we name the highlights and low-lights from our lives—the time we backed the car into the garage wall, the time we won the lottery; moments of great sporting triumph or painful defeats; trips and adventures, broken bones and broken hearts. Some of the stories are so well-known and oft-shared that we don't need to re-tell them; we simply say "Do you remember when...?" and everyone smiles and nods.

Memories about pregnancy and giving birth often fit this pattern of storytelling. A couple years ago, a literary magazine asked five women novelists to briefly describe their memories about being pregnant. One of them, the novelist Lydia Kiesling, mentioned these analogies: *Sometimes being pregnant felt like having a rock in my shoe, where the fetus was the rock and I was the shoe. Sometimes being pregnant felt like being with a new friend in a cozy cottage, where I was both inside the cottage and, somehow, the cottage itself...Sometimes I felt enormously beautiful, like Venus arising from the sea, and sometimes I just felt enormous, and old and feeble and short of breath...I [remember feeling] hungry. I mean, visit Burger King three times in one week hungry. I mean buy one bagel with cream cheese and then go ahead and buy a second one and eat it standing up. [Pregnancy] felt [biblical]. I felt like Eve and Mary, but really more like Job, or Jesus in Gethsemane (only sorer for myself)...I hated it a lot of the time, but it's so hard to think that I might never feel that way again.*<sup>1</sup>

Kiesling's images capture the mood swings of pregnancy—*I felt enormous; I felt enormously beautiful. I hated it; I can't imagine not feeling that way again.* This close proximity is appropriate because this is precisely the juxtaposition of opposites that happens when a child is brought into the world—intense labor pains followed by the intense joy of holding a newborn child—a tension well captured by the English word "birthpangs."

Birthpangs was also the last word of Mark 13, verse 8. And it perfectly captures the convergence of opposites that Jesus' disciples were feeling as they sat on the hillside of the Mount of Olives looking across at the ill-fated city of Jerusalem. Mark 13 contains a long speech from Jesus about a coming time of trials and persecutions, of wars and rumors of wars. Some scholars have called this chapter "Mark's little apocalypse," but I think that's wrong. This chapter is just the opposite—it is Mark's "little anti-apocalypse."

Apocalyptic writings like the Old Testament book of Daniel were full of cryptic references to periods of time like seventy weeks or sixty-two weeks that some preachers try to decode in order to discover exactly when Christ will return in glory. But Mark 13 not only doesn't contain any such numbers; when Jesus' disciples tried to get him to tell them when "all these things will be accomplished," Jesus refused to answer

their question and warned them not to be led astray by folks who think they know such answers. Other apocalyptic writings like the New Testament book of Revelation involve a speaker having a vision of what is to come. But Jesus didn't speak about visions at all. He was quite straightforward and simply told his disciples not to read deeper meanings into events that were unfolding. The great temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed. The Romans would wage war on the land, and natural disasters will still happen. But through it all, he told them to stay alert and hold on—hold on to faith; hold on to God. Something new was being birthed. That's why he called it all "birthpangs."

It is not easy to hold onto hope when things get rough and times are hard. But then again, that is precisely when you most need hope. When the sun is shining and your belly is full and all's right with the world, you rarely think about what the future may hold. But when it's cold and overcast, or you're in a hospital waiting room, or things look quite serious, then we dig deep and draw on the reserves of our faith. We look beyond the immediate moment to the promise of God's future horizon, God's hope-filled assurance of new life. The apostle Paul basically said exactly this in Romans 8, when he wrote: *We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we [are] saved.* (Rom 8:22-24a)

None of this takes away the reality of labor pains—of loss, suffering, injustice, of what it means to live in a hurting and broken world. But it does affirm that labor pains and suffering are not what define our lives. Yes, the temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed, but in Christ people of faith were called away from temple rituals to new relationships outside the temple of Christian love and justice. Yes, there are wars and rumors of wars, but disarmament is possible—détente is possible—taking our fingers off the collective triggers and launch buttons is both possible and imperative. We are not defined by violence. And yes, there are floods, earthquakes and famines—disasters natural and manmade. But those are not sent by God to punish us; they are either the result of living on top of a turbulent, fragile planet or living among people and politicians unwilling to step away from a path of ecological self-destruction.

Yet through it all and despite it all, something else is waiting to be birthed. Something else has been glimpsed by our spirits, even as in a mirror dimly. By God's grace, we have seen it. We have held it in our arms. We know it to be true. In Christ Jesus, we trust and believe it is real and true. To quote my favorite verse from Zechariah 9, we are prisoners of hope—and from such yokes of salvation and grace and persistent hope, may we never be released.

The theme for Journey this month is Harvest. Typically we think about harvest only in terms of the end of the process—the gleaning of wheat or corn from their ripe stalks, the gathering in of fruits and vegetables from orchards and gardens. But harvest is only possible if something comes before it—something intentional, often unglamorous, and almost always hard work. You prepare the soil and break up the clods of dirt; you plant and water and weed; you sweat and worry and work now for what will hopefully come

thereafter. There are moments of satisfaction in this prep work and there is excitement in the anticipation of the crops that will follow; but there's no escaping the fact that pain, discomfort and struggle are the pangs that precede the joy of the harvest.

Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, looking across at the gleaming temple and the mighty walled city of Jerusalem. The two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, wanted to decode the clues as to when God's kingdom might be established here on earth. Jesus deflected their question and warned them not to over-read the prophecies of old—not to be led astray by people who claim to be experts on the world to come yet are blind to the kingdom of God that is here and in our midst. Jesus doesn't deny that there are times of hardship in this life, but he also reminds us of lilies and sparrows and children that bring us such joy in this life. Rather than wring our hands and try to see everything as signs of impending doom, Jesus tells us to breathe, to trust and to know that while birthpangs may be inevitable, they lead to new life.

Lydia Kiesling ended her essay on pregnancy with two powerful images. She said, *I'm afraid of flying and when I flew [while pregnant], I would feel the fetus knocking in a friendly way from the inside, patting me like I was a frightened horse and it was the groom. It felt like I had the nicest, smallest, most delightful travel companion imaginable...[I admit that] sometimes I felt like I was an old whaling ship, creaking and grinding and pulling [through the waves]. But I also felt like the whale, because whales are full of milk and oil and they sing to their sweet calves in the dark water. [All in all] it felt like a miracle.*

In the coming days, many of us will gather with friends and family—to tell stories well-rehearsed and fondly remembered. Many of us will share about struggles and joys, about hard work that preceded every harvest, about being bone-weary of this Covid-season and yet daring to glimpse a way forward out of this pandemic. Remember: We tell these stories as people of faith—as followers of the Christ who walked this lonesome valley, who died yet rose again, who is with us always. Remember the harvest song of our faith: in Christ there is a new creation. The old is gone; the new has come and more is still to come. This is just the beginning of what is to be—birthpangs felt by us, prisoners of hope.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Lydia Kiesling, *The Cut*, May 2, 2018 – column called “New Mom”