

“A Covenant of Birth Pangs”

1 Samuel 1:4-20, Psalm 16, Mark 13:1-8

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From the Pulpit

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*Let us pray: Grace, peace, and joy to each of you this day,
through faith and Christ Jesus. Amen.*

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Here we are in the final weeks of the church year following a tumultuous week.

The texts we draw from during this part after Pentecost leading into Advent are increasingly oriented toward the challenges of what we understand as the “end times.” We are hearing all kinds of cries of destruction.

At first glance, this Gospel passage seems to **hold little hope** for believers to get some measure of solace. But it also gives us a glimpse of **good news** that is easy to miss.

I want to underscore that it is **easy to miss**.

Good news, you say? Where?

It is this line: **This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.**

Jesus is giving the disciples a reality check conversation.

In the history of the Jews, they had lived through the destruction of the Temple before, and it happened during the life experience of our Gospel witness, Mark. This text **puts reality** before you, me, and the disciples.

Those kinds of truths are hard to hear. Pain and heartache are hard to bear. We prefer to avoid it. Or put it on something or somewhere else—the blame game.

If we at all have internalized a prosperity gospel message in our theology, which is so prominent in our culture, we either don't acknowledge pain, we minimize, avoid – or as our Healthy Congregations team learned – we activate the f-words – **Fight, flight, freeze, fuse, frenzy, fornicate, feed or fabricate.**

Those are ways that each of us has in our bag of emotional responses that God gave us in creation to help us survive.

But are they enough?

In the first century of the common era and at the time of this Gospel message, many prophets and seers were present who proclaimed that **they had the answer.** They claimed to be the ones that the Jews were waiting for, who would overturn the oppression of being under the thumb of the occupiers and usher in a new world order. They all claimed to have special insight into how to engage in the reign of God and how to make it all better for the gathered masses.

How the people longed to be released from their pain, their trauma, and their stuckness.

And Jesus says, and these are my words – “Don't be led astray. Look out for the people who are **not the real deal.** And if I might add, this all is going to **be rough.** There will be wars, rumors of wars and lots of bad actors. Some of you will believe things because of your own anxiety or will catch the anxiety of others. People are not going to trust one another; there will be lies, half-truths, and all kinds of upheavals in the world in which we live. The weather, the earth, the sky, and all we engage with will be in chaos. There will be issues with food, with water, and with horrible diseases.”

As I read all of this and look at the world around us, it seems that these challenges are before us with every generation – **and now.**

The reality check is worth a view for each of us today. Can we gather in a faith community and look with real eyes at the entire scope at our challenge?

Can we also have a bigger view of God's promises in Jesus, which we have the gift of knowing and hearing?

When I was a parish pastor, I tried to visit each family soon after the birth or adoption of a child. I made regular hospital calls and served as a chaplain, so I knew most of the hospital staff. I would check in and see if I could visit on the first day after birth. Timing is important.

I had a conversation with a first-time Mom after a complicated pregnancy and an even more complex and painful delivery. With a steely glance, she looked at me and said, **“That was the worst thing in my life. I will never subject myself to that kind of pain again.”**

Now, that is not an unusual response to difficult pregnancies, labor, and delivery. I have been in circumstances where **much more colorful language** was exchanged with doctors, delivery staff and partners after similar circumstances.

What shifts the focus often is the reality that there is the gift of a baby. It gets more painful if other things happen, including the loss of a child or health issues with the mother and child.

Birth pangs do signal the good news of new life – a new member of the family. And they **signify a reversal in this passage.**

Excruciatingly painful experiences are also the possible beginning of something new, vibrant, possible, and filled with hope – if we can manage the reversal and gain enough perspective to acknowledge God's wider message.

The covenant God gives to us is one in which God does not leave us, and we are absolutely loved and accepted amid all that we face in life. We each have the gift of that relationship that can sustain us and make us see the pain as

something we can learn from and grow from. That pain is the reality of life at times that can be transformed into strengthening us for more forgiveness and wisdom as we face whatever it is that is to come.

For the past year, I have had the great gift of working with a team of remarkable Healthy Congregations leaders. They have been thinking and praying about and for their families and each of you. They have been learning about the dynamics that we know are true about how people are when they are together. They have been discussing this congregation's pain, vulnerabilities, and strengths throughout its history and into the present. They have been and are working to incorporate what it means to have a covenant of and with birth pangs throughout difficult and painful times in the past and in looking toward the future with eyes of faith and reality checks about what **living in a human community is like**.

The challenge of this Gospel today is our response to this powerful covenant that God has with us – how do we respond each day and in every way: stories, backstories, emotions, grief, joy, and the gift of a life where we “**get to**” love others because we have first been loved.

In my seminary days, we had in the fourth and final year of an MDiv, following a year of full-time internship, a course called “Senior Seminar.” We would bring our experiences into the classroom and discuss them with our colleagues from a theological, Biblical, historical, leadership, and pastoral perspective. It was a great model for a whole life of engaging with colleagues who can **both** support and challenge us. I continue to use it today.

In response to a case study, the professor said that the main thing that matters in ministry is that the people you encounter experience **your love** for them and **what that demonstrates about who Jesus is for you**.

I thought that was the most naïve thing I had ever heard. Poppycock. Hogwash. Silly.

I was the naïve one.

My spouse Bob and our family moved to Ohio after a long, challenging, and powerful parish ministry for me and a formative teaching experience for him. **We hit a very rough patch that first year.**

When I would say to him, “I love you,” he would wax philosophical and wonder about the meaning of love. I interpreted it as rejection, which it was not, but that is what I heard.

I responded out of fear, hurt, and history, so I missed what was really going on for a time. Thank God for the covenant that we had both made with each other, and the presence of supportive and challenging, clear-eyed group of friends and family.

On my standing desk at the home office, I have a **framed photo** of Bob and me taken just before we married. We are dancing and laughing, joy and delight, pure and true love – not yet to the place where pain and sorrow **smacked us into reality**. There was much we would experience in the years ahead that would test us and shape us. It could break us or deepen us with each painful passage.

No matter how full my desk gets with books, files, computers, microphones, and headsets, **there’s always room for that photo.**

It is a reminder that we are **framed by love. This love is a product of a covenant of birth pangs that God has given us in Jesus.**

The love God has for us makes it possible for us to love each other and the people in the churches, neighborhoods, clinics, byways, and schools that we are a part of.

My professor was right.

Could that be?! God’s love poured out on us and fully displayed in who and how we are is the greatest, most powerful preaching.

Part of the challenge of being a believing, honest-to-goodness disciple like you and me is to work on not just whether our leaders are the real deal but also whether we look at ourselves first, remember the frame, and become the best we can be of the real deal.

The words of Jesus in our text this morning may not sound like it, but they are framed by love.

We know this frame because we have had Jesus among us. Jesus helps us understand the broader picture of what living in hope is like.

Life has all kinds of icky, but what will YOU make of it? **Do not waste your pain** or miss the gift and challenge of the birth pangs.

I recently spoke with the Mother I told you about earlier. She had more children: two daughters are now in their 20s, and an adopted son just began college. I told her that I often thought about what she had told me when her oldest child was born and asked if she remembered.

She laughed and said, “Pastor, I sure do. And for a while, I stayed in that place. My anger and experience of the pain was real. I put it in perspective and realized that my fear of being a good mom was really at the heart of it – wondering if I was strong enough to be the person I needed to be for this little one. I realized I had something to learn about me and God’s love for me, too. **And it put the pain in the place it needed to be.**”

We live in troubling times. We experience pain and upheaval in many places, including our churches and with people that we most want to be strong and almost perfect.

Through baptism and gathering for worship and communion, God gives us food and fellowship for the journey so that we are reminded that we are free to learn from our pain and see it as a journey of hope and new life.

We get to BE the real deal ourselves and not expect it just from others.

That is the gift of our baptismal heritage. Let's go for it.