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Christ Church Exeter

## Birth Pangs

13 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Mark 13:1-8

I begin my thoughts this morning with the image and last words of the gospel we just heard: This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

I just returned yesterday from Chicago from three days visiting our second grandson, born just three weeks ago. Our daughter Lydia is going well. Baby is healthy and growing. My son-in-law is juggling work and fatherhood. Leslie and I got the precious opportunity to watch our now grown child nurture a child of her own. I think of the aspiring hope of Psalm 128:6: "May you see your children's children."

The actual birth of any newborn is not without a fair amount of pain and moments of concern and fear. I'll go light on the details, but the labor preceding my grandson's birth was not progressing, so surgery followed many hours timed breathing and pushing. Newborn Atlas did not breathe at first for what I'm told was a few seconds that seemed to last forever to his parents.

So perhaps being so close to hearing of the ordeal and the joy of the birth of a child, I heard the verse about birth pangs in a fresh way.

We know that for centuries, the culture and the people who heard Jesus speak these words would have connected "birth pangs" with the process of God doing something new in the world – namely ushering in a more just and peaceful creation. Scripture again and again tells a story of something new being made. We hear this so clearly from St. Paul: "So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" 2 Corinthians 5:17.

People in our day will often ask as we witness world events swirling around us: is this the end as we know it? Is it the beginning of the end? The end of the beginning?

Was Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* spot on? "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

We look to Scripture to guide our way through today and into tomorrow.

In today's gospel, Jesus has a few things to say about permanence and what may in be store for the future. As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" They were sitting across from the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives. This is the general area of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would come in the hours of nightfall before his trial and death. It was in Jesus' day, a place where pilgrims and travelers would come to camp out for the night if there was no room in the inns or homes of the city. It was prime viewing of the temple with all its splendor. When the sun would rise at dawn, the light reflecting off the gold surface looked like fire. It was a humanmade structure that pointed to the holiness, the permanence, the location and might of God.

From the beginnings of recorded time, humanity has gathered to worship the infinite in temples, shrines, pyramids, mosques, cathedrals and even humble parish churches. Yes, God of creation is present in all of nature, and there is something about a sacred space that refines and focuses prayer and devotion.

Consider for the moment: what is the most grand, spectacular, impressive building or structure you have ever seen or entered? Don't shout it out -- but tell me before you leave this morning.

Have you even visited the Capital building in Washington D.C.? -- stood under the rotunda. The Junior High trip for many of my generation was a rite of passage and for me the first time in an airplane.

Cathedrals are always on my list in any city I visit. Where to start? The National Cathedral in Washington -- our own Episcopal church -- is the site of presidential funerals and remembrances. Europe's grand cathedrals are hard to rank: St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Duomo on Florence, Salisbury's towering spire can be seen for miles and miles, Seville's grand church was built on the site of mosque. Mexico City in our hemisphere hosts a cathedral in the central square built out of the ruins of the Aztec Temple on the same site. You might not want to travel with me because, not surprisingly, I'm a fan of churches. They never get old.

How about the pyramids of Egypt or the Taj Mahal in India? I have not seen these famed grand structures and not sure they are on the ole' bucket list.

I have poignant and nostalgic memories of going to the top of the World Trade Center in New York -- almost dizzy trying to fathom how tightrope walker Philippe Petit could have walked between the twin towers in 1974 -- an audacious feat if there ever was one. No one could have ever imagined then the events of 9/11.

What are we to learn from this gospel account?

When Jesus says: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." -- He was pointing at something people thought would be there forever and was trying say something hard to grasp: you are looking at the wrong direction if you are searching for what lasts and endures. The stones and structures that you thought were firm and forever may not be. They will all fall under the weight of history, changing shifts and movements as empires rise and fall.

Where then do we turn to find, locate and center God? To guide us, to show us not to invest our time in things that will perish and run dry.

Commentator Amy-Jill Levine writes that what Jesus is doing here is "helping the disciples both keep their hopes alive and prepare for difficulties before the end comes."

Keeping hopes alive. Preparing for difficulties. Jesus warned: don't be fooled. "Beware that no one leads you astray.

So when will the end come? People in Jesus' day thought it could be any moment. Those who followed Jesus wanted to know when: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

Our sense of when has moved and evolved.

This point we know: it matters what we do, how we live and in whom we believe as we wait to see whatever will unfold.

Are we in the end-times? Are we marching towards World War III? Will Climate change be the world's undoing? Will Middle Eastern wars forever be the backdrop of our collective angst and slow walk to the apocalypse?

Nothing made by human hands is permanent. Nothing is indestructible. Buildings of thick walls, roofs covered with gold and finished with all of best woods and can be fall. What does endure and last is the One we gather to worship.

We are not the first nor the last generation to see shifting movements and history unfolding. And we continue to build upon what others have begun.

Talk in church about the end times can seem as distant and remote as the stars in the heavens. You and I are likely to be more concerned with just getting through our days and weeks and don't always ponder the cosmic timetable of it all.

What can you do?

Look at your life. See if and where there is space for something new to unfold.

If you have a chance to see the new movie *Conclave*, go and see it or wait until it streams somewhere. A thriller about the election of a new pope with a star-studded cast has one of the better lines from a movie I've seen in a while. During a heated debate about the true mission of the church in a changing and violent world, one of the cardinals said this: "The church is not the past. It is what we do next."

Something in our world is constantly being born and reborn.

Let's you and I be part of that unfolding.

And this something new does not come about without some pain, and blood, and worry, and pushing, and help.

We believe that Jesus Christ reveals the true heart of God – the location from where all grace and forgiveness flows – the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.  
Revelation 1:8.