

Congregational Church of Pinehurst
United Church of Christ
November 15, 2015
Pentecost25B

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Mark 13:1-8

Birth Pangs or Just Pangs?

Many fathers remember the experience of their child's birth
as a joyful one.

And I'm really glad for them.

But I must confess that it was anything but joyful for me.

Oh, the outcome was one of the most joyful possibilities
I could ever hope for.

Being Abi's father has been, and is,
among life's most precious experiences for me.

But the actual experience of being present at her birth
was more frightening than it was joyful.

I remember the deep worry
that I had for her mother, Cherrie.

A worry for her health and well-being
as she experienced the contractions and pangs of birthing.

And certainly as Abi's head crowned

And the miracle of birth unfolded,

There were also those fearful moments of initial silence
as the nurses whisked her away to a corner of the OR,
to suction her nose and mouth,

as we waited to hear her lungs fill with air
and make that first wild cry of life

that brought tears of relief to my eyes and heart.

And so it seems to me that birthing,
whether physical or emotional or spiritual,
rarely if ever happens without pangs---

the opening and growing never seems to come
without the experience of something,
and perhaps everything,
falling apart.

And so it is not surprising that in Mark's gospel
we find Jesus standing amidst the rubble.

One of Jesus' disciples,
apparently feeling on top of the world
as he comes out of the Jerusalem temple,
admires the strength
and awe-inspiring nature of the temple's architecture.
But to this disciple's surprise,
Jesus' response is probably NOT what he expected.
In fact, his reply is more like something
we might expect to hear
in a "Debbie-Downer" skit from Saturday Night Live.
"It's all about to fall apart", Jesus says,
and we can almost hear the iconic sound-effects on cue---
"whaa-whaaa!"

And as if that isn't enough,
Jesus goes on to add insult to injury.
Not only will the Temple fall apart, stone from stone,
but the whole world-structure which supports it
will crumble as well.
There will be earthquakes, famine, conflict---
whole nations will totter and collapse.
"Whaa-whaaa!" Bigtime!

Jesus' seeming pessimism has been twisted
to fuel a whole cottage industry of dooms-day naysayers
and "Debbie-Downer's" throughout history---
communities of people who bet the whole farm
on the destruction of the present age---

some of them looking forward to it all
with a kind of psychotic religious fervor
that welcomes war and devastation
as the necessary condition for Jesus to come again
and take at least some of us to heaven.
The problem is that that kind of thinking---
whether it finds its home in Islamic,
Jewish, or Christian fundamentalism---
is that it invites us to give up on the present world around us.
Fundamentalism of any kind will ultimately breed
conflict, violence and war,
which is precisely the opposite
of what Jesus lived his life and died for.

The dooms-day nay-saying “Debbie-Downers”
seem to have somehow overlooked that.
And they also seem not to know that these words
attributed to Jesus in Mark’s gospel
were almost certainly written shortly after
the Temple in Jerusalem had already fallen around 70 AD.
Once again the Hebrew people had been conquered in war
and subjugated to second-class citizenship,
by their Roman oppressors.

So the writer we call Mark was not calling attention
to Jesus’ words about the Temple’s destruction
as a future prophecy.
He was offering these words
as a statement of their present reality---
and as a word of hope
that the rebirth of people and nations
can sometimes happen when life’s conditions
do not seem to in any way provide for it.

This reality is not about the end-times---
it’s about the present times---

and it's about the reality of life in the present world.
And Jesus' words call us to consider how it is
that we can be open to that rebirthing process
at those times when we believe our world has come to an end.

Buddhist nun and wisdom teacher Pema Chodron
has wisely written,

*Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing.
We think that the point is to pass the test
Or to overcome the problem,
But the truth is that things don't really get solved.
The come together and they fall apart.
Then they come together again and fall apart again.
It's just like that.
The healing comes from letting there be room
for all of this to happen:
room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.*

*When things fall apart
and we're on the verge of we know not what,
the test for each of us is to stay on that brink
and not concretize.
The spiritual journey is not about heaven
And finally getting to that place that's really swell.
In fact, that way of looking at things
Is what keeps us miserable.....*

*When there's a big disappointment,
we don't know if that's the end of the story.
It may just be the beginning of a great adventure.¹*

And I would add as Chodron implies-----
it may just be the beginning of a great adventure
in this world,
in this life,

in this present moment.
That is the great adventure that Jesus lived,
and that his great and Spirit-filled life calls us to now.
Jesus' response to the world's falling apart
was to feed the hungry,
eat with the outcast,
clothe the poor,
and to challenge the powers that be
so that a more just and compassionate world might be born.
And Jesus' response to his own life falling apart
was to stay with the mess,
taking time to be alone and still with it,
offering it to God in heartfelt prayer,
and compassionately connecting his own pain
to the lives of those around him.

That may not sound like the kind of triumphal journey
lived above the painful realities of human life
that most of us would like to lead.
As gifted UCC preacher and teacher Fred Craddock once said,
*"Maybe people are obsessed
with the second coming because, deep down,
they were really disappointed with the first one."*
At one time or another,
We all want Jesus to come and sweep us up and away
to some place of unending peace and joy and song.
But Jesus' life suggests that when things fall apart,
he is more likely to sit with us in our pain and fear,
until we can see how these very experiences
birth a deeper gift in us that the world desperately needs.
I am not one to believe
that bad things happen for a specific reason---
to test our faith or make us stronger.
I do not believe that God sends the bad,
knowing that it can turn out to be something good.

I believe that THE world,
And OUR world falls apart,
because that is the way of both temporal reality,
and the way of human anxiety and insecurity run amok.
But I do trust that there is a deeper underlying reality
in this mass of evolving creative, process---
a hopeful stirring that reminds us again and again
that new birth is always, always possible
when the world falls apart,
and comes together,
and falls apart again.
And this possibility gives me hope.

When I read the assigned words from the gospel of Mark
Early last week,
I did not know that by Friday,
there would be a horrific and heartbreaking
terrorist attack in Paris.
I did not know that there would be a vivid reminder
that the world is falling apart---
or perhaps more accurately---
was being torn apart by human hands.
But I should not have needed that reminder.
Because everyday the world is falling apart
in Syria, and Afghanistan, and numerous places
around the globe,
in places that I may or may not know much about.
But rest assured that God does.
And the challenge to us as God's love ones,
is to see the falling apart,
not as the end of the world,
but as the jarring, prophetic call
to birth something new in it.
Will we stay with our fear and pain,
rather than moving quickly to our thirst for revenge?

Will we stay with our fear and our hurt,
long enough for acts of compassion,
and a movement for peace to emerge
from acts of violence?

I did not know on Monday,
that by the writing of this sermon on Saturday,
things would have happened in my life and in yours,
to cause us to wonder if our lives were falling apart.
But then, perhaps I should have.

Because that is the way of life---
things fall apart, and come together,
and fall apart again.

But that is not meant as an uncaring, hopeless observation.

Rather, it is meant as a **grounds** for hope.

It is meant as a call to hear Jesus' words anew
that falling apart-ness,
can be the birth pangs of new life
if we can stick with the disarray long enough,
and if we can stick **together** compassionately enough,
and look for the life of the Spirit
moving amongst the rubble.

As we attempt to be faithful to that task
and to start again and again whenever we fail,
I trust that in time,
the Spirit will indeed have her way,
and the birthing will yield a most beautiful creation.

May it be so.

Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette

¹Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000, pp. 8-9.