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Proper 28B
Peace, Seattle
November 18, 2012
Psalm 16; Mark 13:1-8

END AS BEGINNING

As the church year draws to a close, our Sunday readings pick up on themes about endings and beginnings, and today's gospel reading is a case in point. Mark's 13th chapter gathers a number of Jesus' teachings about end times into one place.

Sandwiched between his confrontations with Temple authorities in chapter 12 and the events leading to his arrest and passion in chapter 14, chapter 13 contains pointed prophecies, admonitions, and warnings for Jesus' followers that the world as they know it, is about to come apart at the seams.

Standing in the shadow of the Temple with their mouths agape—like country bumpkins in the big city for the first time—the disciples can't help but express their amazement at what they see.
LOOK TEACHER, ISN'T THIS AWESOME! LOOK AT THE SIZE OF THESE STONES! THESE MAGNIFICENT BUILDINGS!

But Jesus, who throughout the gospel has been hammering away at a foundation wildly out of plumb with God's reign, cuts through their awe-struck reverie, and says: **IT'S ALL COMING DOWN.**

IT'S ALL COMING DOWN. With all the uncertainty in the wake of Super Storm Sandy, all the anxiety that attended the election, and all the hyperbole we've been hearing about the impending FISCAL CLIFF, this seems a fitting text for us to contemplate this morning!

And the reality is, in the face of Sandy, structures did topple—and not structures only, but records of how far ocean waters could transgress, and perceptions about how much damage one storm could inflict.[1]

Shorelines and cities once considered secure now seem vulnerable. Urban planning that was based on political rather than scientific considerations has been proven untenable.[2] And the whole conversation about the weather-altering impacts of a warming planet—so notably absent from the presidential debates—has begun asserting itself once more.

And these are not the only examples of what may be coming down.
Election night demographics confirmed what many of us have been experiencing in our schools and neighborhoods: that in every measurable way, we are becoming a more diverse nation.

The hundreds of millions of dollars channeled through deep-pocketed campaign ads to sway the electorate were, ultimately, no match for the new demographic realities within our changing nation. For those who long have benefited from the status quo, it must indeed seem that everything is coming down; and how all this will shake out in the long run remains to be seen.

But I, for one, am hopeful. And there are two reasons why this morning. The first reason has to do with what went on in Roxhill Park in the days leading up to the election.[3]

[1] Read about the records that fell with Sandy here: http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/30/us/sandy-records/index.html
[2] Read about the need for a revised shoreline development plan for New Jersey in the wake of Super Storm Sandy: http://www.planetizen.com/node/59276
[3] See the project in action: http://www.westseattleherald.com/2012/11/06/news/roxhill-volunteers-made-it-happen-playground-gear

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For five days, beginning November 1st, through election Tuesday, from sun up to past sundown, volunteers from throughout West Seattle and beyond (including nine of us from Peace) converged on Roxhill Park for the purpose of building a new play structure that will serve families and children in our community for a generation.

When you signed in at the site, your first name was written on masking tape, stuck on your jacket, and you were sent to work. Whether you were highly skilled or a total novice didn't matter. How you made your living apart from that place didn't matter. Whether you were voting RED or BLUE didn't matter. Your gender, your level of education, your race—none of it mattered!

What mattered was that you showed up, that you were there and had time and energy to give, and so you were put to work. I worked with school architect one morning and VP from Starbucks the next; a sister coop parent from Naomi's preschool one afternoon and an intern from Mars Hill the next.

And the energy of that place—it was incredible!
- Saws cutting and ripping, drills driving, routers and grinders humming;
- teams forming and reforming, troubleshooting, sometimes taking apart and re-doing;
- all under the pressure of knowing we had a scant five days to get the job done.

And we did it! Working into the dark of the final night—election night, the job was completed.

I met BARRY, the construction supervisor for the project, on day one and I was impressed. At any given moment Barry had five people coming up to ask him what to work on and another five asking how to deal with the hundreds of little fixes and obstacles and decisions that had to be made each day.

When he found out I was a Lutheran pastor, he said, I'M FROM A DIFFERENT PLACE, BUT I'M SYMPATHETIC. PRAY FOR ME, he said. I said we would, and we did.
I'M A JEWISH CHRISTIAN, he said; MY PARENTS STILL CAN'T WRAP THEIR MINDS AROUND IT.

Barry asked me how big our church was. I told him we had around a 100 in worship on Sundays. He said the biggest church he'd worked with had 26,000 members.

BUT THE THING WAS, he said, WHEN IT CAME TO DOING THE PROJECT, THEY COULDN'T GET THE VOLUNTEERS. IT WAS ALL ORGANIZED FROM THE TOP DOWN, Barry said.

WELL, I said, THIS PROJECT IS AS BOTTOM UP AS IT GETS.

The second to last day, as I was leaving the site I stopped to say good-bye to Barry.
YOU COMING TOMORROW? he asked. I HOPE TO, I said.
WELL, he said, IF I DON'T SEE YOU TOMORROW, I'LL SEE YOU IN GLORY.

The whole experience made me hopeful. You knew when you stepped on that site that you were part of something bigger than yourself. Nobody HAD to be there—but you chose to be there, and together you were doing something meaningful.

Barry reminded me that the body of Christ has a soul big enough and welcoming enough to bring a Lutheran pastor from Seattle and a Jewish evangelical Christian from Ithaca under the same umbrella of faith. And that is beautiful.

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There's a second reason I'm hopeful today, and it's because of what we're about to do as we welcome two families to Peace and welcome little Jack Paul into the body of Christ through the church's GREAT BATH.

At the end of today's gospel, after what sounds for all the world like the most dire predictions the future can hold, Jesus' says: **THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS**; and for me these words put the whole chapter in a completely new frame.

This language about labor pains can only mean one thing: something is being brought to birth here. And if what God is up to, if what Jesus is about, is ultimately LIFE and not DEATH, the MIDWIFING of a WHOLE NEW WORLD, then we need not fear, we need not be afraid.

Little Jack, who comes to the font today, and little Brooks, who'll be baptized at his mother Melanie's home congregation next spring, remind us that trusting, above all else, is what this is all about. **Baptism forever tethers our lives to a Lord who is worthy of our trust. All other allegiances, all other gods, inevitably disappoint.** (Ps. 16)

This afternoon, our confirmation class will be heading down to Fauntleroy Creek to the place where the creek has provided nurturing habitat for the Coho salmon fry that have been released there by school children over the past 21 years.

We'll talk about baptism as the headwaters of our spiritual life, the place we first belonged, the place where we first get our spiritual bearings within the community of God's people. No matter where life may take us, no matter how far or near the journey, these baptismal waters, like the birth stream of those salmon, will always be calling us home. Fourth Century church Father Tertullian:

> *"We, little fishes, after the example of our* (Big Fish—Jesus Christ), *are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water."* [4]

Baptism doesn't come with a guarantee that life will be easy, or sure, or risk free.
As much as we might like it to, it doesn't provide us with immunity from life's mistakes, temptations, and challenges. **But in, with, and through it Christ Jesus bequeaths to us an indelible promise that no experience or circumstance will be able to separate us from him, no force can wrench us from his grasp.**

When Jesus looked to the future, he did so with candor, yet he held on to hope.
When we look into the future, we must do the same.

Not with an attitude that says ALL OUR HOPES WILL BE SATISFIED, or with a naiveté that suggests endings can be postponed or ignored; but with a sure confidence that in Christ **there will always be a new beginning, a new birth, even if we must wait to see the shape that it will take.**

Such a beginning may feel like death, as, to a newborn, birth must feel like the end.
***And it may mean death*—as it will and does for us all. But finally all these deaths, in whatever form, are the birth pangs of God's new creation.**

So we keep on watching, we keep on trusting, we keep on swimming, working and believing that God will accompany us, shaping our endings as he has promised, into new beginnings. Amen.

[4] Tertullian, 4th Century.