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Pentecost 28B
Peace, Seattle
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Mark 13:1-8

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

When my first child, Nathan, was born I used a pay telephone in the lobby of the hospital to spread the news. By the time Naomi came along, digital photos were on the internet within a few hours.

Two years later, I imagine newborns with FACEBOOK homepages set up to go, and real-time Twitter tweets telling the story of their births.

Change is a constant in our lives, yet, no matter how much technology evolves, birth remains both an ending and a beginning.

- **The end** of a perfectly warm, weightless womb, where all needs are met.
- **The end** of life as the babe had up to that point experienced it.
- **And a beginning, too,** of a life full of sights, sounds, and sensations of every kind.
- **The beginning** of wants and needs, of relationships and of possibilities.

Birth is also an ending and a beginning for parents.

- **The end** of preparing for parenthood and **the beginning** of responsibility for a new human life.
- **The end** of spontaneous "date" nights out and **the beginning** of diapers and late night feedings.

During these final weeks of the church year, our texts speak of both endings and beginnings.

The whole of chapter thirteen of the gospel of Mark is a call to wake up, look around and notice what is taking place. At the time of Jesus the massive project of restoring the Temple, begun by Herod the Great the century before, was finally accomplished, and it was impressive.

- Stones weighing upwards of 500 tons each had been meticulously cut and fit together, restoring the Temple walls to a height not seen since Solomon's reign 9 centuries earlier.
- The great stone pavement surrounding the Temple proper was expanded to an area the size of 24 football fields.
- The upper roof of temple was covered with thick gold plating so that those who approached the city compared the brightness of its reflection to the rising sun.
- It was a striking symbol and a place of spiritual centering for the Jewish people.

Its completion seemed to signal a new beginning. No wonder the disciples were awe struck!
LOOK TEACHER, WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS!

But Jesus, in his teaching, had been challenging the Temple's religious guardians and calling the whole system into question.

He wanted his disciples to look beyond the old order to the new thing that God was about to accomplish.

SEE ALL THIS? he tells them. THE DAY IS COMING WHEN IT WILL BE NO MORE. ALL WILL BE THROWN DOWN.

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In the past year we've watched many things come crashing down.

- Retirement portfolios,
- financial institutions we once trusted,
- employment options.

Since the bursting of the housing bubble, we've heard and seen again and again how hopes and dreams have been dashed by the financial crisis and the deflated value of real estate.

Many were led astray by easy money and payments they could not afford. People have lost their homes. Some can't sell their houses, or won't sell them when the market's so soft. Retirements have been postponed for now.

For many, there is the more immediate problem of where to live and what to eat. People are living in cars, tents, and shelters. Several of them have spent the last week sleeping downstairs. Food banks continue to be inundated with new clients who have never before needed help. Agape Fund resources go out the door almost as soon as they come in.

These aren't the only problems we face, of course. Random acts of violence at home and mounting causualties abroad dog our consciences. Places throughout the world are continually gripped by deep poverty, famine, HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the ravages of war. The beauty and integrity of the natural world is under assault. The list of woes seems endless.

Each of us can easily add our own personal list of concerns.

In the midst of this time that feels like a reckoning, some have also said, in effect, THE TIME HAS COME TO TAKE A LOOK AT WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE TRULY VALUE. It's the sort of thing that happens when things get tough—when suddenly things are different due to an illness, a major life change, or a death. WHAT IS IT I REALLY VALUE?

Oddly enough it is at times like this that chapter thirteen of the gospel of Mark can make sense. It's got our world pegged: it talks about a world gone mad, a world engulfed by strife, and a world overwhelmed by any number of voices promising to fix things and make them all better.[1]

We all have experienced beginnings and endings in our lives, and the questions prompted by them. Some of those experiences have been joyful, some wrenching; some hope-filled, some tearful.

The difficult thing about endings and beginnings is that they require us to LET GO OF WHAT HAS BEEN.

A couple with a newborn baby that tries to cling to the identity and social life they knew before their child was born, cannot be fully engaged in the present task of parenting.

Families, congregations—even nations—that can't release their former glory—whether real or imagined—**cannot move forward.**

The day is coming when the world as we know it, will be no more.
Yet, even then, says Jesus, God, like a midwife, will be coaxing those with faith into the future.

[1] Portions of this section are from a sermon by Peter DeVeau, Rector of St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Seattle, written for TV Eucharist, 11/15/2009.

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When Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple, and spoke to his disciples about what lay ahead, he did not mince words.

He couldn't avoid the difficult topic that was central to his identity and ministry:
- His call to be a suffering servant;
- to go the distance to the cross so that the world could receive a new beginning.

When we look into the future, we must look with the same candor and boldness.

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 we who have been buried with Christ in baptism will experience resurrection.

There will be new beginning, even if we must wait to see the shape that beginning 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, keep on watching, keep on trusting, keep on believing that God will accompany you, accompany us, shaping our endings as he has promised, into new beginnings. Amen.