

The Beginning of Birth Pains

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 13, 1994, the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18); Mark 13:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One morning about 15 years ago, Kay got called to substitute for a Home Economics teacher who was taken to the hospital with appendicitis. When Kay got home from school that day she had quite an interesting if almost unbelievable story to tell me. The Home-ec teacher, overcome with severe pain in her stomach, was rushed to the hospital with a preliminary diagnosis of appendicitis. She was prepped for surgery but some tests indicated that there was something else wrong - something not related to the appendix. After running more tests it was discovered that the home ec teacher didn't have appendicitis, she was pregnant and in the throes of labor pains. She had been pregnant for nine months and didn't know it! A home economics teacher! Her anxious husband stood by waiting for the results of her appendectomy only to be told that he was the father of a baby boy. What a shock! But it's a true story.

There's a big difference between labor pains and most ordinary pain. Labor pain is pain with a purpose. Birth pains are hopeful pain. Birth pains point to the birth of a new baby. The fact that they lead to new life makes those pains endurable. Meaningless suffering is unbearable. Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychotherapist who survived one of Hitler's death camps. He wrote about his experiences in the concentration camps in his book, Man's Search for Meaning. He tried to figure out why some people, in every observable way equal, survived and some didn't. One factor more important than many others was that suffering has meaning. Once

someone feels that his or her suffering has no meaning one is very likely to give up and die or even commit suicide. But if you believe that your suffering has meaning – not only meaning – but suffering that actually brings about new life – you are better able to endure.

Jesus teaches us to see suffering as birthpangs. The suffering we experience when we're tempted to follow false prophets; the suffering that accompanies wars, earthquakes and famines – Jesus teaches us to see these sufferings as birth pains. They point to the birth of God's future kingdom where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Temptation is a form of suffering. Jesus warns us to watch out and not to give in to the temptation to follow false Christs. There are false Christ's. There are false religions. False Messiahs teach us that we expect to escape pain and suffering. That's a very appealing message. "Follow me and you can escape pain and suffering!" Beware of false Christs that preach that kind of message. The Christ we trust is the crucified and risen Christ, the wounded healer. The real Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. The real Jesus calls us to love and love always makes us vulnerable to suffering.

War brings suffering. The conflict in Bosnia, in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland and all around the world are birth pains that point to a new age when Jesus shall reign. Natural disasters bring sufferings like earthquakes and famine. Jesus also teaches us to look at the pain of the world in a new light.

Some Christians point to wars, earthquakes and famine are signs that immediately precede the return of Christ. But Jesus says that these are only the

beginning of birth pains. Sometimes birth pains come suddenly, in the middle of the night, and there isn't time to get to the hospital. Sometimes birth pains begin and continue for hours and hours. When Kay was pregnant with Andrew, the birth pains began about 10 p.m. That was only the beginning of birth pains. Her contractions lasted all night and all the next morning. Jesus says that heresy, war, earthquakes and famine are just the beginning of birth pains. Don't listen to people who point to every war, earthquake or famine as announcing the end of the world or the second coming of Christ. The world and we ourselves may spend a long time in our birth pains as we await the coming of God's kingdom.

Jesus calls us to try to alleviate needless, purposeless suffering. He calls us to feed the hunger in time of famine. He calls us to work for peace and reconciliation between nations of the world. He calls us minister to victims of natural disasters like earthquakes. And he calls us to preach the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ and to warn people about false prophets. But we will never live in a pain free and a suffering free world until God gives birth to his new creation. Nevertheless we Christians don't lose hope. We see these sufferings as birthpains of God's new creation. God is at work in these sufferings to bring about something good for us and the world.

Jesus used this analogy of birth pains one other time: In John 16:20-24, he says, "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time

of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”

In other words he's saying, "You will feel pain when I'm crucified and buried. But that grief and suffering are like birth pains because I will conquer death and come to you. And your joy will be like that of a mother who soon forgets her birth pains once she embraces her new born child."

There've been times in my life when I've felt that Christ has been taken from me. That feeling must be like what the disciples felt when Jesus was betrayed and crucified. This experience has been called "The Dark Night of the Soul". It's a utterly painful and lonely experience. It's like losing a loved ones to feel like you've lost your hold in Christ. But it helps me to think of these experiences as birth pains. God is at work in that feeling of grief and loneliness and abandonment to bring about new life and a new relationship with the Risen Christ.

Matthew Arnold, the Victorian poet, saw modern man as "wandering between two worlds,/ The one dead, the other powerless to be born." The Gospel teaches that, although our dead world is powerless to give birth to a better, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the assurance that God intends to give our world a new birth.

What do we do when we're experiencing these birth pains or when we see the world's sufferings? What I learned in the Lemaze classes Kay and I took help me to answer that as a Christian. The Lemaze method taught us how to deal with birth pains. During the contractions I sat next to Kay who squeezed my hand whenever she felt a birth pain. She also learned how to breathe so as lessen the discomfort of the labor contractions. What I learned about birth pains in the Lemaze class helps me

now to deal with the birth pains that Jesus talked about.

First, I want someone with me. I need the fellowship of the church. I need a few good friends with whom I can share some of the suffering I'm experiencing. I believe that the church also needs to be a mid-wife to those around us who are experiencing pain in their life. We need to be there, to be with them and to bear witness to God's presence in their sufferings. That God in Christ is with them to bring good and new life out of their pain and suffering.

Second, when I experience pain and suffering I need to practice my breathing exercises. Prayer is the Christian's breathing exercise. "The Prayer of the heart" is an ancient practice to encourage praying constantly, moment by moment, as naturally as breathing. In Eastern Orthodoxy it's called the Jesus prayer. The prayer is simple: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." There have been times in my life when this is the only prayer I have.

Third, when I'm experiencing pain and suffering I trust that God is at work in me in a life giving way just as when Kay was experiencing the pain of labor contractions we found comfort in the hope of having a child. God is doing something life giving in our pain and in the world's pain.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we pray that you will preserve us through the suffering and anxiety of the spiritual birth pains that we and the world experience. As we hope and pray and stand beside one another in our pain and suffering we look forward to your coming Kingdom, the kingdom of Christ. Amen.