

We're Not Dying, We're Pregnant

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Mark 13:1-8

Nation shall rise against nation...bombs will go off in Paris and Beirut...earthquakes and tsunamis shall rock Japan...There will be wars on terror and wars on women and rumors of wars on Christmas...and if some pundits are to be believed...a war on Christians...

Well, at least that war on Christians won't have to last too long...because...I'm not exactly sure how to say this...but the statistics are in...and, friends...the church is doomed. Not this church...but THE CHURCH.

Oh, sure, it won't happen while any of us are alive...but every religious tradition in the west except for Mormonism and Islam are losing adherents...even Southern Baptists are in decline...

The question is simply how long it will take...or at least that's what many pundits are sure of...

And in the midst of this talk of the wars that encroach and the fall of the church, today we encounter Jesus, only two or three days away from arrest...and while the very powers of the temple he has just condemned to be rubble are likely already plotting his demise...he launches into chapter-long speech to the disciples about that mysterious time that tradition calls the Paraousia...the time when the old world will pass away into a new way of living, a way of living where all of creation is united in loving celebration of eternal life in God..... this Little Apocalypse

of Mark contains that odd little phrase at the end of today's passage...actually the middle of the longer speech..."birthpangs"

Jesus seems to be saying...the world will be the world...there will be violence and loss and pain...just as there has always been...Don't look to any of those events as a sign of the end...for these are just "birthpangs"...what a word...A rather presumptuous word some have suggested...It's not like Jesus or any of the named disciples anyway, have any idea what those feel like.

Years ago on a talk show Carol Burnett was instructing the men in her audience on how to experience what childbirth is like. Grab ahold of your bottom lip she said...squeeze very hard...and then pull it up over the top of your head.

Jesus may not know just how bad it is...but he knows that it is pain in the midst of anticipation of wondrous things...

Pain in the midst of anticipation of wondrous things sounds a lot like Hannah's song that Jessica read just a few moments ago. Hannah is like many women of the Old Testament, she is looked upon with derision because she, though of considerable age, she has not provided for herself or her husband a child...perhaps she is thought to be cursed...her sister wife is certainly disdainful of her...but after receiving a promise through the Priest Eli, Hannah learns she is not to die childless...but indeed, she is pregnant...and in thanksgiving, she sings...

The song sung in the days of the Judges, ...before her son Samuel anoints the first kings of Israel—Saul, David and Solomon, some 600 years before Jesus...is remarkably similar to the song Mary will sing when she learns she is bear the Messiah...

Like Mary later...Hannah sings of the transforming power of God...of God's justice...of God's lifting up the downtrodden...and of times of conflict and trouble...

Both Hannah and Jesus declare that in the ongoing life of this planet...there will be conflict, there will be pain, there will be famine, there will be violence...but in the end...there will be life...new life...for all the world.

In a landmark video produced for our denomination four summers ago, my friend and colleague Mary Ann McKibben Dana announced something very similar about the Presbyterian Church USA...as a certain group of conservative pastors announced a terminal diagnosis on the church, MaryAnn suggested...that no...the church was, in fact, pregnant¹...and she went on to identify some characteristics that I agree apply to the church...but I think they also apply to our world...

First, she said, there is fatigue. And surely we are tired...tired of endless wars, tired of the cycle of the powerful nations arming this or that group only to have them rise as a threat to peace a few years later...tired in the church of debates and battles about who is in and who is out...tired of struggles to appear relevant... The world and the church, like most expectant mothers...is tired.

Second, MaryAnn reminds us that when you are expecting...queasiness is not uncommon. And surely that is a term that describes our world today...as we spin from crisis to crisis...from politicians acting like children to news reports that show the problems of our cities and our wars demand adult questions and adult answers...But who is right? What is the best course for peace in our streets...peace in our cities...peace in our families...peace in our global relationships...it's enough to make your head spin...

And it's the same in the church...do we add wifi to the sanctuary, encourage tweets of the sermons, do we change the

¹<https://theblueroomblog.org/what-to-expect-when-your-church-is-expecting/>

music or the decor or the pastor's neck tie....what will be the magic bullet to attract young families...do we expand community service programs or faith learning programs....do we take positions on issues of the day and use our power as advocates for change? These aren't just Northminster questions...they are being asked in almost every faith community in the western world.

Two of the other descriptors that MaryAnn uses about pregnancy are to remind us that pregnancy is a time of anxiety and that frequently, it's not pretty.

Quoting Mary Ann now, "As much as we talk about women glowing, it is not a glamorous time. Your face breaks out. Your joints go slack. You get gas. You can't sleep at night. You have to pee every 10 minutes. And let's not even talk about the dreaded "cankles":"

Anxiety and a slightly unkempt air are certainly things we can see when we look around the world and the church...Can we make the budget for some churches...can we keep the doors open for others...Can we travel safely in our own city or in an airplane...Can we balance the state budget without putting our most vulnerable citizens at risk of endless cycles of poverty and despair. Anxiety? You bet....is it pretty? Not a lot.

So is it worth it...in the church and in the world...is it worth what we are going through? And I don't mean will the lives that are lost be justified if we achieve peace...but is it worth to keep seeking peace and unity in the world....or in the church? Should we just circle the wagons....as a nation, as a church...and ride out the storms that lie ahead.

That would be like an expectant family fearing for the safety of their coming child and retreating to a cave in the wilderness...Sure, there might be some reprieve from the

challenges of today...but what kind of life is that? What kind of world does that make? What kind of faith is that?

Hannah had hope...Hanna who was looked upon as a failure...persevered...and one day found herself the mother of the prophet to the greatest kings Israel would ever know...How could she not...in the midst of the fatigue, anxiety, messiness, the queasiness....how could she not sing a song of hope and deliverance...in joy and thanksgiving for the hope that was born in her...

And I want to suggest, we can be that song of hope for the world and for the church as well...

For the world? Look at the response to the bombings in Beirut and Paris...nations are uniting...religious leaders of every stripe are condemning the attacks....there are sparks of hope for common ground...perhaps not yet birth pangs...but maybe, at long last, the baby that is coming...the world that says we will celebrate our differences when we can and honor them when we cannot...we will respect all of the children of Eve and see every child as one of our own...That day is coming I believe...perhaps not in any of our lifetimes...but we are a hopeful people..and we must not surrender to the anxiety, the messiness, the queasiness, the fatigue of living in the world today...we must live through them...but live through them in resurrection hope...knowing that the world, and the church, will likely never get it fully right...like a first time parent who obsesses over the self-help books...we will probably, no certainly, get it wrong...but there will, can, still be life...abundant life.

And for us, the church can be a mechanism for that abundant life. Diana Butler Bass in her new book "Grounded"

points to the expectant difficult challenges of the current church and say this..."The most significant story in the history of religion at this time is not a decline in Western religion, a rejection of religious institutions, or the growth of religious extremism; rather, it is a changed conception of God, a rebirthing of faith from the ground up."²

Sure, being the church is changing...the pews are no longer filled with people who are here because you have to be here to have a place in a decent society...you are here because at some level you have felt the call of God in your life...to make your family life richer, to help mold your children's futures in a more hopeful loving direction, to participate in the transformation of our culture as we lovingly and passionately serve the unfortunate, the forgotten, the rejected and the oppressed. Whatever your reason...you....we...are a new kind of church that the church of 50 years ago where so many were present out of obligation or social constraint...

And Diana Butler Bass has something to say to us about that as well...For she sees something that is happening when the church is no longer a place of social obligation, but of lives seeking meaning and purpose...Our relationship with God is changing...we are opening ourselves to the birth of a new understanding of who God is and how God is acting in our lives...She is right.

"Now, ...the personal, mystical, immediate, and intimate is emerging as the dominant way of engaging the divine. What was once reserved for a few saints has now become the quest of

²Bass, Diana Butler (2015-10-06). Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution (Kindle Locations 406-408). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

millions around the planet— to be able to touch, feel, and know God for one's self."³

Like the parents who await that first moment of connection...when we can gently feel the grasp of our newborn hope, our newborn faith, our newborn world...we prepare....seeking in our learning, our loving, our service, our hoping...to be witnesses to and nurturers of new life...a new world of peaceful possibilities and a new church that is held in our Mothering God's loving embrace...that is ready to follow that other newborn whose coming again we begin to prepare for in just two weeks..

No, we aren't dying...not the world...not the church...not this church...we are pregnant...with possibility...with hope...with love...with grace... and despite the fears and the messiness and the fatigue.. I for one can't wait to welcome what is coming...even if it sometimes feels like we are pulling our lips up over our heads...and the events of this week demonstrate that we have some preparing to do, some changes to make...So let's get on that...Thanks be to God...

³Bass, Diana Butler (2015-10-06). Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution (Kindle Locations 314-315). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.