

Sermon: The Beginning of the Birth Pangs

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, November 14, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I won't stand here and claim to understand what birthing pangs is all about. Any attempt to do so would sound ridiculous. I am not a woman, I have never given birth nor ever will—something to do with biology or physiology, so I am told.

But I did witness what my wife Daisy went through, giving birth to our two boys—Justin and Neo. My memory is fuzzy at best, but I recalled that she had initially refused the epidural anesthetic in the beginning. It is an injection designed to lessen the pain experienced by pregnant women in the birthing process. But, it comes in the form of a large tube with long needle, and the needle would have to break skin, right at the lower spine—sounds horrifying to even think about it.

The reason that Daisy initially refused epidural was not the needle part, but she had wanted the entire birthing process to be 'au natural'. Somewhere in maternity literatures, someone had said that epidural impedes the postpartum recovery of the mother, after giving birth. Daisy's own doctor and nurse had strongly advised her to reconsider, as the birth pangs without epidural would be almost unbearable, beyond anything she had ever faced, or could ever imagine.

Yet Daisy insisted, that was until the actual pain started. I remember I was beside her at that point, holding her hand. I remember her fingernails digging into my palm, and that first thought that went through my head was regret—regretting not having her fingernails cut before hand. She held on to my hand so tight, dug her nails so deep, as if intending to transfer some part of that pain to me, on a subconscious level. I could just imagine her thinking... 'You wanted a child! Now share the pain!'

I would never claim to know what birthing pangs is all about, but I did share a little, tiny part of the pain that Daisy went through that day. And yes, she did change her mind and took the epidural injection. And yes, the birth was still painful, beyond anything she had experienced before or since.

The beginning of birth pangs. That is the metaphor that Jesus used to describe what biblical scholars call it a 'mini-Apocalypse' in the Gospel of

Mark. It was during the time when Jesus was in Jerusalem, for the last time. As we know from the Gospel account, shortly after this, Jesus was betrayed, tried for both blasphemy and treason, hung on a cross like a criminal, died, buried and on the third day, rose from the grave.

But before all these were to take place, Jesus and the disciples were doing a bit of sightseeing. As they were coming out of the temple, and an unnamed disciple was mesmerized, saying “*Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*”

To be fair, the Temple in Jerusalem was a sight to behold. The original temple was first built by Solomon in 957 BCE. The size of the first temple measures 40 cubits in length, and 20 cubits in width—about 2,7000 sq-ft, the size of a large mansion. It was destroyed by the Babylonian in 587 BCE as recored in 2 Kings 25. The temple was rebuilt during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, post-exile. However, due to limited resources and precarious political situation of the returnees, that temple was rebuilt somewhat shabbily. When it was finished, after a long delay, and during its dedication as recorded in Ezra 3:10-12, the elderly people in attendance, those who had seen the splendour of the first temple, wept openly, not out of joy but out of lament—lamenting the poor state of the reconstructed temple.

Fast forward the the first century BCE, to Herod the Great. Whatever one’s opinion of him as a king, he certainly had a calling for great building projects—royal courts, fortifications, an entire city by the coast, and his masterpiece surely would be the reconstructed Temple of Jerusalem. In order to accommodate pilgrims from all over the world, Herod had vastly expanded the temple mount, to a staggering size of 1,600 by 900 feet, or the equivalent of about 29 American football field.

To accomplish this enlargement, a huge platform had to be erected to compensate for the sharp falling off of the land to the southeast. An enormous retaining wall was built to hold the platform in place. The massive stones used in construction could still be seen today. The temple area would have covered approximately one-sixth of the area of the city of Jerusalem. It was bigger than the Temple of Athena on top of the Acropolis. It was bigger than the Temple of Artemis in the city of Ephesus, which was actually ranked as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem was an architectural wonder, a marvel to behold through out the Mediterranean world. Had it actually survived to this day,

pilgrims and tourists would still be flocking to it, Wooing and awing... “what large stones and what large buildings!”

To this wooing and awing from the unnamed disciple, Jesus coolly replied, “*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*” One needs to be careful, to hear and observe what Jesus actually said. He did not say that ‘he’ will tear down the temple or throw down the stones, as his accusers would later lob against him before the court of Sanhedrin.

The verbal tense used by Jesus is future passive. One bible commentator calls it a ‘divine passive’—an action that shall occur in the future, in the hands of God. As we now know that temple was destroyed by the Romans during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, a prophesy fulfilled.

Of course, to the disciples back then, they had no way of knowing, no way of imaging what is to happen—that magnificent edifice which was after all recently built, completed and dedicated. It was the pride of the Jewish nation, a place of worship for the Lord of Host, a site of pilgrimage for millions, the centre of the universe as they knew it.

So while sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, with the sun setting, casting a bright reflection off the golden gates, the inner circle of four—Peter, James, John and Andrew—asked Jesus privately, “*Tell us, when will this be?*” They did not dispute nor disbelieve, they simply asked ‘when’, when will the end be? That is an aged old question, isn’t? The end, when will it be?

It is a question we all ponder for ourselves personally, without knowing the answer, as there really is no way of knowing for certain. Even asking that question energizes us, forces us to reflect on our current priorities, our current state of being. I find it fascinating when asking people to imagine if they have only one month to live, how would their priorities change. Many would like to travel, to places they have longed to visit. Some would indulge in various pleasures. Some would seek to make right with others, to repair long lost or broken relationships. And some would seek to make right with God. I’ve always wonder: why wait? Why wait until you are facing the end to do those things? Why not do them now, and live fully!

Coming back to the disciples asking about the Temple, the centre of their faith and universe, when will the end be, “*and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?*” Jesus went on, starting

from verse 5 and all the way to verse 27, providing them with a long list of signs of the time, signs of the end, of the coming of the Son of Man.

Apocalypse conjures up frightening imageries of war, famine, pestilence, and natural disasters. The word literally means 'unveiling' or 'revelation'. It is like being in a theatre: the curtain is drawn back and suddenly we see things that until now were hidden from view. New Testament teacher and writer A. Katherine Grieb, describes in her article posted in the Christian Century magazine, that the Apocalypse is like "*a cosmic curtain, drawn back by an angle of God, that suddenly reveals the world as God sees it, the world as it should be, the world as it will be in the future when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven*". That is a good description of the Apocalypse, the best that I've read so far.

Apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament and the New Testament are not meant to frighten us, they are meant reset our priorities, to refocus our energy, our attention on God, on what God sees, on what God does, and hopes for a future with the Lord God. If Apocalyptic writings should conjure up any negative sentiment, it should really be of 'disillusionment'. Disillusionment, literally the undoing of our illusions, the unwinding of our false image of God, of life, of who or what we are.

Disillusionment is like an antiseptic rinse of our false selves and false idols. It usher us into a space where we have no choice but to reconsider, to reformulate a new perspective on who God is, and how we are in relationship to God. Nobody likes to be disillusioned, but I am convinced that sometimes, we all need a big dose of that antiseptic rinse.

Coming back to the beginning of the birth pangs. I can't imagine the pain that Daisy went through giving birth. But if you have a chance to ask her, she will undoubtedly tell you that she can't remember much of the pain either. It was a while back, but mostly, memory of that pain was lessened and even replaced by the joy of cradling our newborns in our arms, of creating new lives, new beginning.

I believe that is why we named our second son 'Neo', as in the prefix of new, a new beginning, a new creation. And I also believe that is what Jesus had in mind all along. The pain will be short-lived, but the joy of the new heaven and new earth shall be everlasting.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.