

November 16, 2003  
Season after Pentecost  
David L. Edwards

## Chaos and Creation

Mark 13:1-8, 32-37      *“This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”*

I confess that when I looked ahead at the readings for this Sunday, my heart sank. I don't want to deal with this stuff! Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famine, nationalism that causes continual suffering and conflicts. It's all still going on, and it wears at our spirits. Furthermore, I don't want to even think about the end of the world. I love this world. It is God's good creation, soiled and spoiled by us human beings who are the problem, but still wondrous and worth fighting for. And I love the struggles, difficult as they may be, of being a community of Christ's love and service. I'm not the least bit interested in this business of the “end time.”

This week, however, as I read this passage each day, it opened up to me in new ways. It isn't about the end of the world, but the beginning of new life. When Jesus said “the end is still to come,” the word is *telos*. Jesus uses it. Paul uses it. And it doesn't mean what the alarmists mean when they dramatically talk about the “end of the world” in terms of destruction. It means literally “fulfillment” or “maturity.” Jesus is talking about God's will that life be fulfilled, that everything and every one of us become what we were made to be, that the original goodness of the world and us be brought forth completely. It is a process. This came to me as I went through the week, hearing the scripture in dialogue with what I was facing and living each day. That's how we need to read scripture. We read and study scripture daily. We live fully each day, being as faithful as we can to Christ's call, being open to what each day brings us. The Living Word of God is what happens in us through this dialogue. Scripture interprets life. Life interprets scripture.

The disciples are outside of the Jerusalem temple, waiting for Jesus. When he comes out, they sound a little like Gomer Pyle: “Gaaaawly!!! Look at these BIG buildings!” The disciples were kind of “country” and didn't get into town much. But like us, they are impressed by bigness, whether in cities and buildings, or in religion. The Church of the Covenant is a grave disappointment in terms of bigness or greatness. Those who come here have to work through some of that stuff. But we can fall victim to bigness, too. Worshiping achievements. Clinging to structures and old habits. Contemplating big dreams and visions without being willing to plant small seeds, the little beginnings that God uses to grow what God wants.

Jesus hoses down the disciples' excitement: These great buildings will come down, stone after stone. Mark wrote his gospel some time after 70 C.E, when the actual destruction of the Jerusalem temple took place. It was a faith-shaking crisis for Jews and the early followers of Jesus, who still considered themselves Jews. The physical center of their spiritual universe had disappeared. People had to learn a new way of faith, focused not on buildings or structures, but on living faithfully without getting lost in the outward manifestations, the institutions and false securities. Jesus is not interested in religion and building up religion. Paul Tillich wrote that “Jesus is the end of religion.” Jesus was interested in how we come alive as human beings who are created by God to be filled with God's light and love. He was wary of religious buildings, structures, and institutions. They are two-edged. They can lead us to and nurture faith, but can also stand in the way of faithful living. Jesus wanted people themselves to become temples of God's spirit. He understood that sometimes the collapse of religious superstructure and infrastructure is the only way to give birth to true faith and faithfulness.

Then Jesus is up on the Mount of Olives, contemplating the great city in which he is about to die. Four of the disciples ask him privately about what he just said. When is all of this going to happen? They want to speculate on the big picture of God's dealings. Jesus' response is essentially this: Don't get all stirred up by those who claim such knowledge. Don't be impressed with self-assured prophets who have all the answers. And don't be overwhelmed by circumstances of disaster, human-created or in nature. Wars and international conflicts, great upheavals and the like—these things are going to happen. But don't panic and don't be swayed off course.

Jesus was not telling us to be indifferent toward war and hunger and suffering. But he was calling us away from despair to a deeper perspective and way of living in the midst of it all. And here is where I heard as though for the first time the closing words of this section of his teachings: “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Birth pangs. Not the destruction of the world. The chaos and turmoil of life are opportunities for us to perceive the birth of new life and be part of it. How can we see the reality of war and NOT want to be peacemakers? How can we see people suffering from natural disasters and NOT want to help? How can we see “nation rising against nation,” the sickness of nationalism and NOT want to be people who know in our hearts and live with our lives the truth that all people everywhere are brothers and sisters in the love of the one God? We are invited by Jesus to see chaos as the birthing place of the new things God is doing. The birthing of God’s realm. And the re-birthing of ourselves as citizens of that realm alone and no other. Chaos is where God really goes to work!

Diarmuid O’Murchu is an Irish Catholic former priest who works as a counselor and social psychologist in London, working with the homeless. He sounds the call for a new spirituality, one that is grounded in the creation itself, one that reconnects us with the cosmos as our God-created home. And if we allow ourselves to be reconnected with the creation, we begin to understand and experience the God who is at work in chaos to bring about new life. In his book Religion in Exile, O’Murchu talks about “chaos theory,” the understanding in science that everything is in process. This process is really chaos, nothing staying the same, everything in motion. We prefer to live in the illusion of control and fixed orders of things. But efforts to enforce this illusion breed violence toward the earth and each other. Chaos is the very source of life itself.

This view is as old as the first creation story in Genesis 1. God did not create out of nothing, as is often said, but out of chaos. The story pictures God’s spirit hovering over the dark, swirling, soupy waters of chaos. And out of this chaos, God’s *dhavar*, God’s “word,” God’s creative energy, evokes and separates into life-giving webs of life. The chaos always emerges again—things like floods or the chaos of human greed or violence. God’s continuing work of salvation is the bringing of new life out of chaos and calling human beings into the co-creating work of new life.

If we respond to Christ’s call to the journey of prayer and mission, we will find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of chaos. Discipleship doesn’t take us out of the world but plunges us right into it. The Festival Center Mission Group has given itself to the vision of a place of presence and ministry in the central city. We have experienced the elation and excitement of God’s creative energy and movement toward new life. We have also encountered chaos and threat, the very real challenges and obstacles that come with every call to mission. How are we going to get it all done, being so few? How are we going to overcome barriers that stand in the way of really developing community with those who live in the inner city? How are we going to resolve all the practical and at times overwhelming details of how to put it all together? And, as with every mission, where will the money come from to keep it all going? It’s a swirling, soupy sea of chaos!

Recently we ran into unexpected obstacles as we began working with the city’s building inspections office, which threw the whole thing for a loop. One morning this week, I finished my prayer and meditation time, reading again Jesus’ words from Mark’s gospel and went to the computer to write in my journal. At that moment, I felt that the chaos was just that--chaos, going nowhere but downward into collapse. I found myself thinking of the story of the Israelites out in the wilderness, complaining out of their hunger and weariness to Moses, and Moses’ complaining to God about the situation and these complaining people God had given him to lead. Have you brought us out here in the desert, God, just to kill us off? It would be better to be back in the comforts of Egypt. At least we had food and a place to sleep. At least slavery had some order about it. My writing turned into a prayer: “Have we come this far, God, with this mission only to see it die just when it is ready to be born? I can’t believe this would be your will, and I don’t think it is. Yet, if it is, we will accept it, get over our grief, and move on. But can’t you work the other end of the equation, God, part these waters that stand in front of us just enough for us to sneak through?”

I was surprised to find tears beginning to flow. I simply had a good cry. Out of frustration, or weariness, or sadness. I was at that point of seeing the chaos either as the beginning of the birth pangs or the end of everything. I had a choice. I chose to see that God had led us into this journey, this mission,

which has been confirmed all along the way by our experiences. I chose to see that this latest obstacle would yield before us in some way we could not yet see, and that we had no other choice than to continue the journey, to stay focused and faithful. I think this is really where my tears came from, that place within us where we glimpse God's mysterious and deep way of working to bring new life out of chaos. I understood that in every situation of chaos, when things seem to be, and truly are, falling apart, we can go deeper into our spirits and perceive that these are the beginnings of birth pangs. The disorder and violence, the disasters and destructiveness of life in this world can be for us the opportunities to perceive God's compassion, peace, justice, mercy about to be born, IF we will give ourselves to that new birth, IF we will allow ourselves to be born anew and be part of what God wants to do.

Later that day, Ernest Hawkins, who has done all the truly hard physical work on the Festival Center, getting it ready for us to paint and fix up, came walking through the children's room where I was painting. He told me that one of the men working with him wondered if we would be interested in having one of his drawings for the Center. He had even talked about sharing his art with the children's program we hope to start. Again tears stung my eyes, tears of a different sort. This is exactly what we hoped would happen. It confirmed again the whole mission and vision of the Center as a place where community can be born, where people can be celebrated and appreciated, where people can know themselves loved and valued, where the gifts of those living in the central city can be called forth and shared.

God works with chaos. God calls us to live, not in a safe and illusory world of order that we create in our own minds, but in the great stream of new life that sometimes wells up in frightening waves of chaos, then flows gently and nourishingly through green pastures of a new land. We have to become people who are willing to live out in the desert or to be out on the lake in a small boat when the storm arises. For that's where God is, and that's where we learn what faith really is. And that is where we can become part of what God wants to do with this world to bring it to new life.

I included this morning the final words of Jesus' on the "end time." Nobody knows the times and seasons of God's workings. Not the heavenly beings. Not even the Son himself. Only God. Jesus consistently tells us to quit speculating and getting all caught up in things we cannot know anything about. He calls us to live in the world, each moment, each day, but to live fully awake. "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." This means living with spiritual alertness, sensitive to the movements of God's creative energy and spirit. This means not fleeing the chaos but entering into it fully and with eyes wide open. Then we will see what God is doing. Then we will not panic or fall into despair, but perceive the newness that God is bringing and become part of that newness ourselves.