

**Sermon for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost
November 14, 2021 Yr B
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: Mark: 13:1-8**

Birth pangs. Ouch! I can only imagine how a woman physically feels as she gives birth to her child. Even then, my imagination must surely fall short. Birth pangs.

So it is with everything that we create, I imagine. We seek to create things that will stand "*the test of time.*" Our spirit, effort, and love go out into the world, and a small part of us can remain empty as we watch, hope and pray that our contributions, private or public, will withstand the test of time. No matter how you slice it, creativity and creating and giving birth to creation is always risky.

Holes, gaps, empty spaces, are always being created in our lives. As perfect as our world may seem at times, we still must go through the pain of broken relationships, of job losses, of the death of loved ones, and sometimes of painful physical decline.

"Do you see these great buildings?," Jesus asks. Do you see what humankind has made? Do you see in this temple the intricacy of architectural design, the choosing of the perfect slabs of stone, the backbreaking work of the masons, and the blinding displays of the goldsmiths? Look, and look closely, Jesus says. "Not one [stone] will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." And as though we didn't know this already, Jesus even gives us a heads up that we will encounter some pretty nasty things in our lives. "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." Yet, we are hardwired to create lives that maximize pleasure and minimize pain. We strive to keep ourselves well clothed, housed to protect us from the elements, and nourished to ward off hunger. For all of our efforts, our lives are still punctuated by moments of conflict, sorrow, infirmity and pain. What we create, nurture, and invest our lives in will not stand the test of time.

What is left in the destruction? What can survive and thrive in the empty spaces? What can fill in the gaps left in a life that must always be subject to dark clouds? I've been following the goings on of the Climate Change Conference in Glasgow and the faces of anger and hope of the youth who feel betrayed by a world that prized profits over creation care. I followed the US infrastructure deal debate, as our government leaders preened and postured, rejoicing in petty party victories as the ramifications of poor policies and the primacy of political power fed their game of brinkmanship that certainly failed to serve their constituents. In between, images of war-torn Ethiopia flash alongside the desperate faces of asylum seekers from the Middle East stranded between Poland and Belarus. As I think about these people who are left to ponder their lives, which seem so utterly in chaos, I think about the empty space

where conflict has left desolation of body and spirit. So it is in the world, so it is in our own lives.

But we need to look into that eternally empty space, because our deepest longing is to have our emptiness filled. We will gnash teeth, we will wail, we will rend our clothes and throw ash upon our heads because we cannot face a life of nothingness, or emptiness.

We are called to peer harder into that empty space, because in those areas in between, in those spaces of pain, confusion and anger, in that “nothingness”, Jesus seeks to enter. It is where the continual birth pangs of a life in Christ exists and calls us forth to fill our lungs with the Holy Spirit and to know that even when we are thrown down like a pile of rubble, we can be fortified and built anew in Jesus Christ. This rebuilding can take the form of reconciliation, renewal, and rejuvenation. It may also be of a kind in which a dull pain will continually ache in our hearts. Do we really ever get over the loss of one so dear to us? I hope not. But the hard spaces of our pain, agony, or distress, are also the spaces that can be softened, made pliable, and, above all, healed in Jesus.

The world humankind creates will always fall short. Not because it is not beautiful, not because it lacks joy or love, but because we know that the buildings that will survive the test of time will be those that we inhabit in the Kingdom of God. The struggle is real and we will continually be called to participate in the struggle we call life until Jesus brings us home into the community in which he has promised us eternal rest, eternal joy and eternal life.

This is not to say that the daily round of our common task is for nothing. The birth pangs that we experience can be those of the creation of a life in Christ with one another - that allows us to see our world in a visionary way. The birth of new ways of living that ensures that we all have our fair share, that ensures that we value the lives of every person, and that ensures that we can bridge differences that span empty spaces of distrust and conflict. So let us take the risk to create lives that seek to give birth to the body of Christ, because the full realization of this is a community built on foundation stones that will never tumble down, and a community in which our sympathy for the hard knocks of life will be transformed into actions of love and care. This is our great commission and we undertake it when we ask God to *“Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart.”*

Jesus says one thing *will* stand the test of time, *through* the end of time. And that is Jesus himself, and our lives with him and in him. Amen.