

Our Daughter, Autumn, has a way of starting sentences when she's trying to make a point. She says, "I'm not going to lie to you," but that really upset me, or but that was really amazing. Well, I'm not going to lie to you – I don't know exactly what to make of this scripture. Oh, I know that it was written around the time the temple had been destroyed, when literally no stone was left upon another; I know that there are many resonances with our times; I know that this scripture has been used by liberals and conservatives as evidence that one side or another is dangerous – see, it says it right here. Jesus said it.

It's easy to understand why the disciples want to know when these things will come to pass. We want to know when their equivalent might come in our time. I don't know about the disciples, but when I ask when something is going to happen it is either because I'm eager for it and don't like waiting OR I'm afraid of it and want confirmation that it is way off in the future, so far off in the future that I don't really need to do anything about it, let it be someone else's problem. I suspect the disciples were wondering because of the latter. Once he's terrified them, he tells the disciples that all this drama is nothing more than birth pangs. And that is where I get a glimmer of what Jesus, or let's say, Mark is trying to convey. These descriptions of what seems to be the end of civilization, are not about the end of something, but its birth. Birth pangs are not full on labor – they are the twinges that tell us labor is coming – but there is no one who feeling that cramp, as if the hand of God had grabbed your stomach, hard, and then let go – anyone feeling that would be justified in thinking that there is worse to come. And there is, worse pain, perhaps fear. But we know that the process of birth begins with pangs and ends with a baby. If a woman hadn't known about birth or pregnancy, why wouldn't she think that something violent and deadly had hold of her. Birth pangs or full on labor – we often mistake the beginning of something as the end; we sometimes think the end of something is the beginning. Strange as it may seem, we have a difficult time telling the end from the beginning, recognizing which it is we are undergoing.

We moved on Friday. We left a house we all love to downsize into an apartment – less than a half mile away. Carol, my wife, has lived in the house for 33 years and I've lived there for 21. It was where we welcomed Autumn into our lives – and where we buried the bodies of beloved pets. Autumn is bereft that she will not have one more tussle in the snow with our current dog. Downsizing involved getting rid of years of memories in the form of furniture, books, clothes and souvenirs. We pored over dishes and paintings, tools for Carol, Clothes for me. I opened a drawer in my office and discovered a stack of old journals I had vowed to read and then dispose of. I began to quickly read the one on top. I'm not going to lie to you, that writer was so full of indignation and self pity that no one could make it through them. As moving day got closer, we realized that unless we wanted to be chained to a storage bin for the rest of our lives, we had to donate or dispose of many things. Reluctant at first, the freedom of less stuff began to creep up on us. We cried and at each 'last' – the last time we swam in our pool, the last time we used the fireplace, the last time we had a cookout on our deck – each 'last' was one more sign of loss, one more glimpse of the tragedy about to come - saying goodbye to the house. We've been in this apartment about 36 hours now – and even in such a short time, we're beginning to identify another series of 'lasts'. The last time we have to rake up a yard of leaves, the last time we'll have to go up 2 flights of stairs to get something, the last time we need to sign the snow removal contract, the last time we have to get our trash down on the curb by a ridiculously early time on every Tuesday morning. There are a lot of lasts which describe a birth, a freedom from the weight of ownership and a freedom born of lightness.

So we're asking ourselves whether what we're experiencing is death or birth. Worrying about how our dog will adjust to not having a huge yard to run it feels like a sorrow, a lessening of our life. But not worrying about Carol's arthritis and her knees feels like a huge gift - and a life giving one.. What was this - a birth or a death? Both.

We all stayed in our houses for about 18 months; we've only been worshipping together for a couple of months; no one would say we are back to "normal". We're still not gathering like we used to. Maybe that part of our life is over for ever; maybe we've lost real church, the way church is supposed to be. Or maybe, we've given birth to something new. People are joining us for worship from near and far through livestreaming. People whose distance or disabilities have prevented them from coming to church now have the opportunity to join us. People who we thought we 'lost' - moved away - went to college - they can still read scripture. Beloved friends can speak at a memorial service they never would have been able to before. Would we arrange for a pandemic to bring about these things? Of course not. And the births that result from the end of something else cannot be foreseen, do not come about because the impetus, the need isn't there.

Yesterday we had a memorial service, a death of a beloved member, Bruce Lauterwasser.. It was definitely the end of his bodily presence with us. But at the same time that service of goodbye rekindled faith in many of us. It was sorrowful; and it was glorious. I came to church this morning with a new feeling, the building literally felt like it was holding a deeper level of spirit. Perhaps we will go forward with a new spirit, knowing that Bruce is not with us as a gentle model; perhaps others will rise to inspire us; perhaps that person has already arisen in Rev. Lisa Loughlin who stepped into ordained ministry here in this Sanctuary just a week before we said goodbye to him here.

We cannot recognize endings when we see them - often waiting for years for things to return to normal; we cannot identify beginnings either - they so often come in the form of things we've dreaded; things that objectively appear to carry no good news.

When Jesus responded to the disciples' admiration of the temple with the words that not one stone will remain upon another, he seemed to be predicting destruction. Little did the disciples know that these were the words that would be used as evidence in the trial that sentenced him to death. And, who could have seen him hanging from the cross as anything but the end of his ministry, the end of the new life Jesus offered. But we know, we know that there was good news to come. Jesus would not be bound by death - and stones even larger than those of the temple could be rolled away to set his body free, so that the world could experience his resurrection, so that many could testify to it. We have seen over and over again that through Jesus what looks like loss turns out to be gain. What looks and feels like destruction are actually the pangs of birth, the precursor of new life.