November 18th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

The Birth Pangs

1. As the Snow Lays

 As I read our Gospel lesson this past week, I also had the opportunity to watch the snow fall to the ground. I considered in this beautiful scenery, the language that Jesus uses as he talks about this apocalyptic end time. As the snow lays, I thought about wars, false messiahs, nations against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms, earthquakes and famines. What a heavy scene to behold in your mind, what a difficult thing to comprehend.

 Yet it was not for the people Jesus was speaking with, as they held the deep history of their ancestoral ties to Israel and famine and wars. This is a language that they are very familiar with. This text was heard first in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE, where pressure was mounting for the Markan community to join the battle. The large stones they speak of are the stones of the Temple of Jerusalem, which in the end fell, and was never to rise again. What they thought would last, what they were confident of, Jesus tells them, would fall to rubble.

 I found myself getting caught up in the state of the world today, in thinking of the rubble, in thinking about what walls were being raised up and what walls were being broken down. I don’t think most of us imagined such a tall structure, such as the World Trade Centre, would come down in a day. I don’t think any of us could have foreseen the deep divisions that lie between neighbours in politics and religion, or at least, to the extent we see today. I don’t think any of us could imagine the chaos of the wildfires in California, the Earthquake and Tsunami in Indonesia, or the devastation that still plagues places like Puerto Rico. As I sat and considered the state of affairs of this world, the fact that this world seems to be changing in such a negative way, a tear trickled down my face.

 But then I considered further – is this message that Jesus is giving the disciples one of despair? Is Jesus seeking to put them in a depressive state, a space of hopelessness, a space of feeling insecure and anxious? No. He is warning them, he is saying to them and as well to us – do not close your eyes. Be aware. Be awake. See what is going on around you. Do not stand still, do not pretend as if these things aren’t happening. There is something new on the horizon of hope, you just can’t see it yet.

II. The Birth Pangs

 The last sentence of this Gospel lesson is a projection of hope: This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Now, let me say, I’ve never given birth, but I can imagine that birth pangs, that labour, those contractions are not super fun. I can imagine that the beginning of them must induce all sorts of feelings, from fear, to relief, to pain, to anger, to wondering how long this birthing process is going to last.

 I’m not sure to be honest which definition of ‘birth pangs’ Jesus was going for here, but birth pangs are defined in two ways, first – the birth pangs of childbirth, and secondly a more societal definition of disorder and distress to major social change. No matter how you decide to describe birth pangs, whether individual or plural, the essence of it remains the same. Birth pangs are going to be painful. Birth pangs will lead you through trouble and torment and pain. Labour of any kind is usually challenging. But here’s the residing hope.

III. The Birth Pangs to New Life

 The fact is, that no labour lasts forever, for at the height of those birth pangs, a child is delivered. Through all the pain and yelling and aches, at the end of that labour, at the end of what can seem like an insurmountable and scary time, a baby rests in your arms. And the same is true for society – while we can look at the decades and centuries of disorder and distress, we know that it does not last forever. It can’t. It may feel like forever, but the truth still remains: new life reigns.

 And my hope comes in the fact that I can see the new life coming out of the birth pangs. I see activists who rise up and look at our globe and seek to stop climate change. I see prophets who are wise beyond their years, in the faces of youth, who are pointing us to new and more hopeful ideas that we have not encountered before. I see people of reputation putting their lives and livelihood on the line to say, ‘Something must change.’ I see those people who continue to press on with the #metoo movement, for my LGBT brothers and sisters who are advocating for rights, to our partnership with the Indigenous People of America. I see hope, more than glimmers of it, in those people who continue to stand up and say that there is a better way, a way of love, and a way where we can all co-exist.

 I see it in the church. You could look to one another and say, ‘things are bad in this world, so let’s quit church – let’s quit this community – there’s no point.’ Yet you don’t. Because, whether you can see it or not, you see the hope. You see a new life here in this space, the Spirit at work, and a constant, comforting, challenging, and nurturing community. You see that even little old Sykesville, in the midst of the suburban countryside, can do meaningful and wonderful things. Despite the birth pangs, despite change, and despite all that could weigh us down – we, together, choose hope.

IV. And Why Do We Choose Hope

 And why do we choose hope? Because even in knowing that the society and world as a whole is changing and turning faster than we can keep up with, we know that Christ is at the center. Things must grow and change, and things may appear as if they’ve fallen apart, but the center stays intact. What seems insurmountable is no longer unrealistic to those who have kept the faith.

 My plea to you, in the time of tumult, whether that’s in our world, in our community, in our house – that you remember the center that holds you firmly when the world spins. I often say, but it bears continual repeating – remember that God is God, and you are not, and in that we recognize that God will hold us securely.

 We could choose to get tied up into this rapture talk, or the uncertainties and anxieties of the times, or we could choose to live in the present moment and witness to the Gospel today. We can choose to move from alienation and individualism to divine community. We can move from the darkness into light, from guilt to pardon, from slavery of the mind to freedom, to fear of hostile powers to a new sense of liberty. We can choose life over death.

V. Faithful Still

 I ask that you remain faithful still, that you rely on God and that you rely on one another as we face uncertain times. I ask that when you see a need, to be a source of hope and light, rather than being dragged down by fear. When you feel like the world is falling out from under you, know that God remains at the center, ready to hold, committed to steadying your feet, and guiding you along the way. May this, in the birth pangs be our hope – may we be a people who declare new life.