

Birthpangs  
Mark 13.1-8  
November 15, 2015  
117th Anniversary of St. Charles  
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

As many of you know, a typical Saturday night for me is a 9:00 bedtime followed by a fitful night's sleep as the next day's sermon works its way through me. By Saturday I have been studying and writing for days, but it's usually that last night as I sleep that final images and words come together. Yet words have not come easily this morning. How could words be enough? Following reports of tremendous violence in Beirut, Baghdad, and Paris, what new thing might I speak into another week of global crisis?

In an attempt to hold all global tragedy equal in a news cycle captured more by a theater in Paris than a funeral in Baghdad or a marketplace in Beirut, social media has been covered with images from April's attack in Garissa, Kenya, recent deaths in Turkey and Egypt, and numerous violent atrocities across the United States. Light a candle for Chicago. For Oklahoma City. For Calais. For Missouri. For Seoul. For most of the named cities, I had to research the backstory to know why the candle burned.

There are so many stories to tell. So many stories we ignore. So many atrocities. So much violence. Injustice abounds. There is plenty of heartbreak for everyone. And so, with the Psalmist, we are right to cry out on behalf of the whole world, "How long, O Lord?

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

We could stop right there and sit in that place of lament, couldn't we? Like many of you, I have read enough articles and headlines that I reached a point of maximum saturation—the point at which I am certain my heart cannot hold any more grief stories than it is already carrying. And it was probably at this point early this morning that I read of Adel Termos who was walking with his daughter in Beirut when he realized the open-air market where they stood was under attack. One bomb went off, and Termos noticed a man wearing a second bomb was nearby and heading toward a crowded

mosque. “‘He tackled him to the ground, causing [the bomb] to detonate,’ Elie Fares, a Beirut-based physician, told [Public Radio International]. “There are many, many families, hundreds of families probably, who owe their completeness to his sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of families “who owe their completeness to his sacrifice.” Oh Lord, how long?

I don’t have polished answers. I won’t offer platitudes. I do not think I can tie this all up in a pretty bow in 2000 words or less. This morning all I have to offer are the stories and thoughts that I hold before you, ever so lightly.

The gospel lesson today is found in Mark 13 and is part of a long, apocalyptic discourse. We read 8 verses of a 37 verse speech Jesus gives on the realities of the world and the ultimate story of all things. Apocalyptic literature answers questions we all ask: “Where do you think all of this is heading? How do you think this story will end?”

Jesus’ disciples are impressed by the temple in Jerusalem. “What large stones and what large buildings!” And Jesus quickly tells them to not get too attached. The buildings are not the thing to which the disciples should attach ultimate meaning. “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And like a Facebook or Twitter feed from the past 36 hours, Jesus begins to name tragedy upon tragedy. This is your world in its incompleteness.

And yet...that’s not the end. He tells the disciples to stay awake and keep watch because God is going to birth something new. In the midst of the anguish, despair, and destruction of this world, God’s Spirit is hovering again and the birth pangs are beginning as the kingdom of heaven is born on earth. God is working for completeness—the comprehensive flourishing of all things and all people. God will birth shalom.

Jesus describes competing realities that can either sweep us up into chaos and destruction or into the new birth of the kingdom of God. What catches our attention? The power and prestige of great institutions? The great stones and great buildings that loom over us? The illusion that power protects us? Or is it the fear and devastation by those who wish to control and terrorize? Are we inspired by the sacrifice of one for the completeness of hundreds? What will be birthed through each story? The bizarre and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://mic.com/articles/128558/adel-termos-hero-who-sacrificed-his-own-life-to-protect-beirut-from-from-isis-suicide-bombers?utm\\_source=policymicFB&utm\\_medium=main&utm\\_campaign=social#.baRrg32b3](http://mic.com/articles/128558/adel-termos-hero-who-sacrificed-his-own-life-to-protect-beirut-from-from-isis-suicide-bombers?utm_source=policymicFB&utm_medium=main&utm_campaign=social#.baRrg32b3)

frightening language of apocalyptic texts is invitation to consider which narrative we want for our lives and for our world.

A couple of weeks ago I heard the story of Steve Chalke. A Baptist minister in London and founder of Oasis Trust, Chalke credits a friend's church youth group for the success and trajectory of his life. At 14-years-old, Chalke says the church told him a better story about who he was than the story told to him by his family and school. While one told him he wasn't good enough or smart enough to do much of anything with his life, the other told him he was a beloved child of God made to live into the image and Way of Jesus. And choosing to believe the Jesus story for his life led to a commitment to starting homes, schools, and hospitals for other children who aren't told a good story about their lives.

In a recent interview, Chalke noted the present challenge in the U.K. of the radicalization of teenagers. Every week, a conservative estimate indicates 5 young people in the United Kingdom join ISIS. A more realistic estimate points to 10 young people each week joining ISIS. Statistics don't represent how many are being exposed to ideas or invited to join the fight, only noting the 5-10 young people who join and actually leave the U.K. to fight alongside ISIS in Syria and beyond.

Recently, Prime Minister David Cameron announced a multi-million dollar advertising campaign targeted to young people to warn that radicalization is "risky and dangerous." And Steve Chalke laughingly dismissed the idea as telling teenagers exactly what they want to hear—they want to give themselves to something risky, something dangerous, something big. U.K. schools are now required to teach a program called "Prevent" to address the problem of radicalization. Chalke, who runs 45 schools across the U.K., dismisses the premise of the curriculum and says the problem isn't radicals: "We need radicals. What we need is to be radicalized into a story worth living by; a narrative that your whole life can be caught up in." The problem, he concludes, is people who lack "a narrative worth living by."<sup>2</sup>

It seems we've come back to this place for weeks now. What do we see when we look at the world? What do we hear when we listen to our lives? What is guiding us? To what cause or way do we give our lives? What is our story? Surely the ways we answer those questions are the reasons for our conflicts. And the word Jesus promises in Mark 13 is that our conflict will continue until we are somehow swept up into the larger story of what God is doing in this world.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-47-steve-chalke-and-the-oasis-story/>

On this 117th anniversary of the church, we must ask all of these narrative questions of our institution just as we ask them of our lives. We must recognize the story we are living matters more than the stones and buildings that surround us. Oh, this place matters, and we have named that before. But when we are getting it right, we have the capacity to birth goodness and peace and beauty and wholeness into the world. And when our lives synch up with one another and with God in a way that goodness and peace and beauty and wholeness are birthed into the world, then these old stones and buildings aren't what we hold as ultimately important.

Are we going to take down ISIS? Are we going to end racism? Are we going to stop violence against women? Are we going to guarantee that every child in this world gets a solid education? Are we going to reverse climate change and protect the world's most vulnerable places and people? Are we going to feed the hungry and heal the sick and visit the prisoner and clothe the naked? Are we going to love our neighbors as we love ourselves?

Of course not. And. Absolutely, we are. We are not global powers, we are not politicians, we are not crafting policy and determining international measures of peace-keeping. And yet, in every small action, we begin to reshape this world. And we believe that is a start. And on our best days, those small actions are enough.

We believe, as David R. Henson writes, "There will be wars, and rumors of wars, and wars that will shake the foundations of the world and your faith in humanity. There will be death. There will be disaster. There will be all manner of things in this life to rattle your soul. There will be worry, anxiety, fear, hatred, racism, injustice, terrorism.

There will be wars and rumors of war, but it is not the end of the world. The world ends not with flames and terror, blood and carnage. That's not what our faith tells us. That's not what Jesus tells us today in the wake of violence and terrorism. He tells us, 'The end is yet to come. Fear not. This is not how the world ends.' The world ends with peace, not violence.

And that is the end of the world we look forward to. The end of this violent world, birthing a peaceful one. The end of an impoverished world, birthing a just one. The end of a hateful world, birthing a world pulsing with love.

Peace birthed from the depths of violence is a holy child indeed, because violence begets violence.

Come, God our great midwife in the midst of our world's birth pangs and labored groans for renewal.

Come, help us birth a new world."<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> David R. Henson, "God Our Midwife" <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/11/god-our-midwife-birthing-peace-from-violence-and-war/>