

Title: **For the sake of birth not death.**

Text: **Matthew 24: 36-44**

Rev. Sharon Smith

When disaster strikes, our human brain, moves into overdrive.
Even if it is an imagined disaster – we over-function or simply shut down.

This little almond shaped part of our brains called the Amygdalas (one on the right and one on the left) help our bodies process fear by initiating a fight or flight or freeze response to danger or threatening situations.

That is why in our anxiety about the future – we want a sense of security – we want to calm ourselves down and reduce the sense of threat so we can function again.

So, we push for **certainty**.

And Jesus' friends were no different.

At the beginning of Matthew chapter 24, Jesus talks about further destruction in first century Jerusalem.

His disciples gather around him,
anxiously they begin to ask him questions for clarity.

Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?
When, what, who, how, and most importantly - how will it end?
What can we expect?

And in classic Jesus' style, as a masterful wisdom teacher, he tells them stories.

He begins by saying:

'all this is but the **beginning of the birth pangs**'.

It is not for the sake of death or destruction but of **birthing**.

When things are chaotic, when our fear is at peak,

- ◆ when our responses are in high alert – trying to control the situation with a flurry of doing or of thinking;
 - ◆ when the era we have known is passing away;
 - ◆ look these signs of ending **are signs of beginning**;
 - ◆ hope and birthing. The beginning of the birth pangs.
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One of the best teachers of how expectations operate...

Is the lived experience of starting a new relationship – this could be a friendship, romance, a new colleague or work supervisor, or adopting a new puppy or cat.

I remember my first few dates in my early 40's, my re-entry into seeking partnership as a young widow.

I was very anxious to say the least.

I remember being in a panic and I said to my counsellor:

"I can't marry this person, they haven't fully resolved their relationship with their ex, and their work is too consuming (like mine isn't it!) and they don't seem interested in my family in South Africa..."

And my counsellor interrupted me and said very gently,

"Sharon it's the third date. Be where you are. Date three. You are dating!"

I laugh about it now.

But internally I had to let go of the only inner world I knew – doing partnership in a long term relationship and marriage.

Dying to the old paradigm, and attending to something new.

Jesus says:

Keep awake. When you get overwhelmed by the drama of the endings.

Stay awake. Attend to the birth pangs.

The inner transformation of Christ is happening.

It is like a thief - when you least expect it.

It's odd to picture God invading our lives like a thief breaking into a house. The point isn't God is a criminal; scaring and stealing from us when God shows up.

The point is: God's arrival can't be predicted any more than we can predict the next minute.

Nadia Boltz Weber says:

Perhaps that is the good news of Advent:

that we are reminded that Christ has been staking this joint like a thief and is going to break in!

There was and is and will be a break in because God is not interested in our loss-prevention programs but in saving us from ourselves and saving us from our culture and saving us even from our certainties about God's story itself.

God seems to work not through the things we are prepared for, but through the things we don't expect. When something goes well, and we are like wholly jack how did that happen! God is the suspect!

Nadia Boltz Weber, *Accidental Saints*

Jesus' subversive teaching is very deliberately trying to short circuit our grasping, acquiring, clinging, our comparative linear brain and to open us up to a whole new mode of perception (not what we see, but how we see things at work in our world).

Cynthia Bourgeault – *Wisdom Jesus*

The Advent Readings in the lectionary for the next 4 weeks – move us through a sequence of letting go.

James Alison - Catholic theologian, priest and author, puts it this way:

The readings start with an expectation that something is coming that is going to be violent, and it gets less and less violent, and then it ends in something unremarkable”.

A vulnerable baby. Not an angry God.

“Advent is the undoing of our fearful expectation – thinking that we deserve to be met with punishment. Even John the Baptist expected this. But there is no wrath in God, the fear is in us.”

Friends, our inner transformation is at hand.

The fears of failure, success, being alone, feeling ashamed. These expectations are passing away.

There is a birth about to happen.
In you. In me.
So, stay awake.

In a society that lulls us into sleep by its advertisements, Christmas tinsel, jingles and consumerism.

Christ is coming in you, at an unexpected hour.

In this is our hope.
And I cannot wait.

Amen.