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The Text: Matthew 24:3-8

Key Texts: “...see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet... **ALL THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS.**” (NRSV). V.8 “All these things are like the first pains of childbirth.” (GNB)

Larger Context: The Gospel according to Matthew, written primarily to the Jewish Christians of the first century, tells the good news that Jesus is the promised Savior through whom God fulfills God’s promise to the Hebrews of the Old Testament, as well as to the people of the world.

Smaller Context: In our specific text, we note that the Disciples are concerned with and worried about the end of the age/their generation. In other words, when will the suffering and hardship in the world be over and God’s kingdom arrive? When will the Temple and Jerusalem fall?

Title: ????

Ear Catcher: The story of growing up in Cordele: When troubles in the community or the larger society were newsworthy, I would hear this text often referred to as a “**warning order**”: to get ready for the Jesus’ return to those who loved the Lord or who were “saved.”

The Problem: We are living in troubled times. We are living in times when fear is the order of the day. We are living in times when the fight for political power motivates those in power to change the rules of the game, in the wink of an eye, in order to benefit their interests and well-being. We are living in troubled times—I dare say—when our religious institutions (and in particular, our established churches across denominational lines) are dwindling as social and moral agents, as voices for the “least of these,” as well as potential safe havens where their wounds are *tended to*—taken care of.

In recent weeks, we bore witness to the political gridlock along partisan lines regarding the newest Justice appointed to the United States Supreme Court. One individual, **Dr. Christine Blasey Ford**, confronted her pain openly, honestly, humbly and courageously, helping open the door for many women and men to begin telling their stories of the pain of being sexually violated. On the other hand, the other individual, **Judge Brett Kavanaugh**, revealed someone in a state of

developmental arrest—in denial, afraid, petty, entitled and at times downright immature— “do you like beer, Senator, or not?” **WE ARE LIVING IN TROUBLED TIMES!!**

In my own beloved Peach State, lawsuits have been filed charging voter suppression in highly populated minority communities across the state, in the most historic state election in Georgia’s history. In Jefferson County, Georgia earlier this week, a group of about 40 elderly African American senior citizens, loaded a bus to go to vote when the City Manager had the bus stopped and told them that they could not vote. **These are, indeed, troubled times.**

Carl Jung: *“The goal and meaning of individual life—which is the only real life—no longer lie in the individual development, but in the policy of the State, which is thrust upon the individual from outside and consists in the execution of an abstract idea which ultimately tends to attract all life to itself. The individual is increasingly deprived of the moral decision as to how he or she should live his or her own life, and instead is ruled, fed, clothed and educated as a social unit. The rulers, in their turn, are just as much social units as the ruled and are distinguished only by the fact that they are **specialized mouthpieces** of the State doctrine. They do not need to be personalities capable of judgment, but thoroughgoing specialists who are unusable outside their line of business.”*

WHERE THE STATE ATTEMPTS TO BEAT THEM DOWN, WE MUST HELP HOLD THEM UP!!

Jesus says, “see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, BUT THE END IS NOT YET ...ALL THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS!!”

The dam finally broke with the news that hundreds of Catholic priests in Pennsylvania had sexually molested young boys for years on end...women assaulted as well. **We are living in some troubled times.**

The breaking up of families at the southern border in the name of national security, with suspicion of girls being used for sex trafficking gets little coverage...we are living in some troubled times.

See that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet...ALL THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS!! All these things are like the first pains of childbirth.”

Several years back, many in our own beloved organization began to cry out: ***if the current trend continues—generating our main revenue as a membership base organization—AAPC is going to run out of money. We will experience our own famine.***

We began to see an aging membership and fewer younger individuals joining; the underground rumbled, signifying that the nearby earthquake had begun to fiscally and numerically trigger the birth pang reality: **that we must act, sooner rather than later.** And many across the association continued to act with tireless efforts and energy—because they heard Jesus say: **BUT THE END IS NOT YET!!** The old wineskins are breaking at the seams, leaking the precious wine that has taken more than 50 years to ferment. What will we do? How will we stop the leaking of this precious wine?

See that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet...ALL THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS!! All these things are like the first pains of childbirth. Well, let's take two or three steps.

First, by working definition, the word ***pang*** means ***“a sudden feeling of mental or emotional distress or longing”; “a sudden, brief, sharp pain or physical sensation”; a “spasm.”*** As the wonderful pastoral counselor and psychotherapist that Jesus was, his empathic attuning to those intimately close to him, allowed him to say to them, perhaps with a “non-anxious” presence: **“see that you are NOT alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is NOT yet...”**

The recognition that when almost everything around you is looking bleak and perilously pessimistic—especially when something or someone has an affectionate attachment to your heart, the initial emotional spasm and sharp pain hits me in the gut and turns me inside-out with all sorts of questions that are emotionally distressful and could bring with them a bitter taste in my mouth—or it could equally bring hope, joy, and optimism to my heart, because I am beginning to see now that the end is NOT yet.

Second, as we hold onto our composure and balance, recognizing that **“the end is NOT yet,”** Howard Thurman, offers some wisdom for our critical reflections. On the organizational as well as the individual level, Thurman suggest that **We must accept our fact; we must accept our fact. And perhaps the emotionally healthy organization is one that is able to hold the tension between its self-fact and its self-image.** As we make this new discovery about ourselves,

consolidating with ACPE—our new wineskin, now this fact **must be integrated into the image** that we had of ourselves before we discovered this new self-fact.

As the reality sets in deeper that we are becoming a new wineskin—AAPC/ACPE (Self-Fact)—one that will develop its own identity over time **through a process of integration into a new standing organization (Self-Image)**—today, we of the current AAPC must reorder and redirect our relational, interpersonal and spasmed psychological predisposition to a new optimism, even as some of us continue to grieve the loss of certain aspects of the old wineskin—***And, the end is NOT yet!***

Finally, if indeed **the end is not yet, and I believe that it is not, then what?** It seems to me that Jesus understood that while the Disciples were embroiled by their interest in the physical structure around them and that they had become so overwhelmed by their existential ***“birth pangs,”*** they had to move onward.

It seems to me that Jesus understood that it was the time for them to direct their attention, their energies and their focus to what matters **now**, rather than giving their anxiety power to dictate to them whether they were living in the end times. By so doing, they would miss the real action. **And the action is the moment!**

Therefore, it then seems to me that living in this twenty-first century—and not the first century—now is the time for us to remain **open-hearted in transforming our fears into action.**

Now is the time for us to embrace our new opportunities even as we cannot see the end.

Now is the time for us to accept our evolving new self-fact and engage in an integrative process of the old self-image that we had of ourselves before we knew this fact.

Now is the time for us to embrace our grief as a friend while we simultaneously accept our new self-fact—that we cannot and will not look like the best of the AAPC of old—but that those of us who are standing today, in this place and at this time,

we will rise up and work to make our new wine and wineskin live on in its new container—**because *the end is not yet.***

We will rise up to opportunities today and to continue sharing our individual and collective voices in a world that needs what we have to offer—**because *the end is not yet.***

We will rise up with a new wineskin that continues to educate, to create holding places and spaces that promote healing and wholeness—**because *the end is not yet.***

We will rise up in a world that is full of chaos and confusion to help our clients feel the fullness of their humanity—**because *the end is not yet.***

I am reminded of these words from Howard Thurman's *Meditations of the Heart*:

Myself, A High Priest of Truth:

I will make of my life a High Priest of Truth.

I will make of my talents, whatever they are, a High Priest of Truth. This I do when I use them to enrich life, to render life more human, to make life more gracious and personal than it would be otherwise. I recognize that my talents may be special endowments, or they may be the result of the advantageous path along which my life has come from the beginning.

I will make of my remembering a High Priest of Truth. I purpose in my heart that I shall not use my memory to store up those things that fester, poison and destroy my living, my life, or the living and life of others. I shall make it my study to preserve my soul in balance and liberty. I will use my memory to store up the excellent things of my experience. In this way I shall lay up treasures in Heaven.

I will make of myself a High Priest of Truth. I will recognize the supremacy of the Ideal of Godlikeness to which more and more, by his (God's) help, I will give myself. Despite the number of times I fail, despite all the limitations and inadequacies which beset me, by God's strength I will make of myself a High Priest of Truth.

I will make of my life a High Priest of Truth

Because the end is NOT yet!

Amen and Namaste