

Sarah Kretzmann
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If you remember the children's fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood," you will undoubtedly recall the conversation at the end, once the wolf has eaten the grandmother up and is lying in her bed laying a trap for Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf lures the little girl to his side and, thinking the disguised wolf to be her grandmother, she exclaims, "Grandmother, what big arms you have!"

"All the better to hug you with!"

"Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

"All the better to hear you with!"

"Grandmother, what big teeth you have!"

"All the better to eat you up with!"

And with that, the evil wolf eats the little girl all up and the story ends. It is a dark story, complete with a foreboding moral and a violently abrupt ending.

Every single time I hear this morning's Gospel, I think of Little Red Riding Hood.

At this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is beginning his last week alive. He is already in Jerusalem where he will be crucified, the church leaders are closing in on him fast, the Roman officials have their eyes on him...his days are literally numbered. Jesus isn't making it any easier for himself, either, by sitting in the temple and publicly using the widow's selfless generosity to point out the hypocrisy of church leaders. As Jesus comes out of the temple, with heavy and profound thoughts on his mind, he sees his disciples wandering around, marveling at the architecture.

"See what a big building this is, Teacher!" they exclaim.

“All the better to worship the one true God in,” you can almost hear Jesus reply.

“See what big stones there are!” they exclaim.

“All the better to throw down at the end of time!” is Jesus’ answer.

And you can almost picture their faces, changing from wonder and awe to complete confusion and alarm. Once again, Jesus kills the party. But he doesn’t care, because in a week, the party is going to kill him. And he’s got a lot to say before that happens.

So they make their way to the Mount of Olives, to the very place where Judas will betray Jesus in less than a week...and the disciples are still confounded by Jesus’ comments about the Temple being destroyed. Jesus has already predicted his death three times, but they have no idea how soon these things are going to take place. They think they have more time. They think that scary things—like Jesus’ death and the end of time—are years and

years away, distant things, certainly nothing to immediately be concerned about. But Jesus' remark about the Temple being destroyed alarms them, and so they sit down with him on the Mount of Olives and literally have a come-to-Jesus meeting.

“Tell us, Jesus, when is all this stuff going to happen?” Their hearts pound as they wait for his answer.

Finally, Jesus replies, “The beginning of the end will be when there are wars and famine. When these things take place, you will know the end is near.”

Hardly a consoling answer, the disciples think, as the Roman army is preparing to march its way into Persia and Britain, and as the Jews are conspiring to organize a revolt against their Roman oppressors...and there are famines everywhere, death from starvation is not an unusual thing. Jesus

isn't pointing to the future, he is describing the present! The disciples think to themselves, "And so it begins."

Fast forward 2000 years to modern times and we also live in a time with wars and rumors of wars and famines...In those 2000 years, the world has seen over 2000 major famines. One famine alone in China, lasting from 1959 to 1961, caused over 15 million deaths. Another famine in Bengal at the end of the 18th century, claimed 1/3 of the country's entire population—10 million people, dead! And there has not been a single year in these 2000 years where the world has been at peace...every single year for 2000 years, some war has raged somewhere on this globe. So, like the disciples, we think to ourselves, "And so the end has already begun."

Has it already begun? Is the end of time right around the corner, as the Mayans predict? How does anybody know when the end is near? We ask the same questions that the disciples asked—they are timeless questions based

on timeless fears. These are scary questions, and we are afraid to even think about them. For some strange reason, when I was a little girl, this sort of stuff used to terrify me. We hated the Russians back then, and when I laid in bed at night, I sometimes cried out of fear that the world would explode in some sort of nuclear holocaust while I slept. My Dad would sit on the edge of my bed and comfort me with the words, “Sarah, I can’t help but think if God created the world, he won’t let us destroy it. When the end of the world takes place, I can’t help but think God will use the same care he used to create the world in order to un-create it.” I found this to be comforting, still do.

And so we see the signs, we know the end of time is coming, we know the world cannot limp on like this forever...whether it’s right around the corner or in another 2000 years, God only knows, but we at least can all agree that sometime God will pull the plug on this grand experiment. So

these must be the in-between-times. We are somewhere in the middle of creation and un-creation. We are afraid of things to come, but we know we cannot go back in time. And the phrase “birth pangs” which Jesus uses in today’s Gospel is the best way to describe that.

I remember the very first birth pang I ever felt, and I remember thinking, “Oh, that’s not so bad.” I remember thinking smugly, “Giving birth is gonna be a piece of cake.” Fast forward six hours, and I am screaming at my nurse, “Just leave and let me die!” For in those six hours, I realized I had no choice but to move forward, to deliver this baby, as the pain worsened and worsened...I could not go back in time to earlier days, as they scrolled through my brain during each searing contraction....sunny days as a little girl tumbling down the Indiana Sand Dunes...innocent days of baking in my Easy Bake oven...days of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy....golden days of childhood...never to be visited again by the new

mother screaming her way through the birth of her first child....horrified by the plain fact that she simply must press on, that she cannot go back. Caught in the in-between-times...the uncreation of childhood and the new creation of motherhood. A terrifying transition.

But this is true of life in general, isn't it? We all know we cannot go back to simpler times, if simpler times ever indeed existed in the first place...we all know we have no choice but to march into the future, blindly, not knowing what it holds. Will the world end tomorrow? We don't know. Will I have a job tomorrow? I don't know. Will my children all be healthy tomorrow? I don't know. Will my house still be standing tomorrow? I don't know. Will my doctor call my tomorrow with news I do not want? I don't know. And it goes on and on, doesn't it? These are the things of life that bring anguish and anxiety and depression and fear...times when we feel

lured by the evil wolf, who licks his chops and wants nothing more than to devour us. And sometimes we even want to be devoured, to finally end it all.

But here's the thing. As any woman who's ever delivered a baby already knows, as soon as the baby is born and laid on her tummy, and as soon as those sticky eyes blink open and those tiny lungs cry out, the pain is all forgotten. Because the child is worth the pain. And I think this is why Jesus uses the phrase "birth pangs" to describe the tough times every person goes through, personally and what the universe goes through, cosmically...because he knows what lies just beyond the grave, he knows who will win the battle between heaven and hell, he knows that the anguish you and I live in each and every day, he knows what happens after time as we know it ends—the knows our collective anguish is not how this human story ends...

...the story of creation doesn't end with a nasty wolf devouring an innocent little girl...the story of creation ends so that God can bring about a new beginning...a second creation....the things of anguish are temporary, just like birth pangs are temporary, even though it seems like they will go on forever, they will not...the womb will contract one final time and the baby will be born...and one day the universe will contract one final time and a new creation will be born, where there is not a single hint or remembrance of the things that once made us cry.

If "Little Red Riding Hood" had a second chapter, the little girl would emerge from the wolf's belly, slay the evil wolf, rescue her grandmother, brush off her gorgeous red cape, and begin a brand new journey.

I pray that you hold on till God begins your second chapter.