"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." You may be seated.

Good morning sisters and brothers. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Our gospel passage from Mark this morning is a hard one. Jesus tells his apostles that great stone buildings are going to be torn down. Natural disasters like earthquakes and famines are going to happen. Wars will happen. In short, destruction is on the way. Where is the "good news" in this?

Jesus' predictions certainly get our attention. Our natural reaction is alarm. Like the apostles, we want to know when and where the calamities will take place. Perhaps there's a way to avoid them.

Here I want to emphasize the significance of Jesus claiming that the temple in Jerusalem would be reduced to rubble. The temple complex was a marvelous sight. Herod began constructing it in 20 B.C. When Jesus made his visits some 50 years later, the temple was just being finished. It was located at the top of a mountain and it was massive. From historians of the day, we know that its white marble was adorned with gold. The inside featured much gold and silver as well as finely polished cedar. Great

columns supported a high ceiling. The structure was truly a wonder. How could such a triumph of human achievement be thrown down? It's not surprising that the apostles were skeptical.

But, Jesus states very clearly in Mark, Chapter 13 that the end of the world as we know it is coming. He says the same thing in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, using almost the same language about disastrous events. We can't ignore this.

There are two points I want to make this morning about Jesus' teaching regarding the end times. The first is that Jesus does NOT want his disciples to spend time trying to figure out <u>when</u> the final days will occur. When the apostles ask him directly – "When will this be and what will be the sign?" – Jesus doesn't answer their question. Instead, he tells them not to succumb to panic and he explains that many catastrophes will happen before the end of time.

In Luke, Jesus says, "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Jesus then warns the apostles not to listen to those who come in his name and exclaim that the time is near. He cautions, "Do not go after them."

It's tempting when we look at our world today with its hurricanes, floods, wildfires, wars, terrorism and escalating violence, to think – well this is it! Now is the time for the destruction of the world. But, Jesus says no. These current events are just the beginning of a process and no one knows when the process will end – not even Jesus himself. Later in Mark, Jesus tells the apostles, "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Jesus directs the apostles not to be concerned with identifying signs and looking for clues to the timing of future events. He advises them to be patient and to endure. Remarkably, he refers to the coming catastrophes as "the beginning of the birthpangs."

That brings me to my second point about Jesus' teaching regarding the end times. Jesus wants his followers to recognize that after all the destruction and terrible suffering, there will be a time of great joy. Think about Jesus' comparison of the coming tribulations to a woman's labor pains.

Women anticipate giving birth both fearfully and joyfully – fearing the pain but anticipating the arrival of the baby. This is true especially with the first pregnancy when fear of the unknown can be pretty powerful. I remember well when my husband Ray and I attended childbirth classes for

the first time. There I got the gist of what my body was going to do, but it didn't give me much comfort. Ray was a little shaken up himself. He flat out refused to read the directions for helping your wife give birth in the car on the way to the hospital. I have to tell you that for me, the pain of the contractions was like nothing I had ever know before and it lasted hours.

I think most mothers will tell you that giving birth is a dramatic experience but, of course, the pain is worth it. However difficult, the birthing of a child is not the final chapter. Quite the opposite. It's the beginning of a brand new life and a new way of living for the parents. So much good follows the pain.

The end of the world will be followed by the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Our gospel passage today is sometimes called the "little apocalypse." The word apocalypse actually means the final revealing of divine mysteries. For Christians, apocalypse refers to the Second Coming – the coming of the Son of Man with great power and glory.

It's not a coincidence that the narrative of the betrayal of Jesus, his crucifixion, and his death on the cross closely follows today's passage in the Gospel of Mark. I think we can find the same message in Jesus' words about the future of the world as we find in the story of his passion and death - from darkness comes light; from death comes life; from terrible

suffering and pain comes the joy of resurrection and rebirth. This is the good news.

As I was preparing this sermon the image of the Phoenix came into my mind. The Phoenix is the magnificent bird of ancient Greek myth. According to the legend, each Phoenix lived for 500 years and only one Phoenix lived at a time. Just before its time was up, each Phoenix built a nest and set itself on fire. After three days, a new Phoenix would rise from the ashes. And, so the Phoenix has become a symbol of destruction and rebirth. Early Christians adopted the Phoenix to represent the terms of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Phoenix was even pictured on early Christian tombstones.

Today's Epistle from Hebrews suggests that Christians have confidence in the new way of living that Jesus has opened up to us. The writer says, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." We can trust that the ultimate end will usher in a new age full of God's justice and peace.

I will close with a prayer composed by a 12th century mystic and visionary named Hildegard of Bingen.

"The power of God extends to the four corners of the earth, encircling every creature in his embrace. We feel him in our bones, in the center of our

souls. In time his work will be finished, the last encircling of his creation completed. Time will have been perfected. The final day shall have arrived. And we shall see at last the perfect power and works of him who was, and is and ever shall be, who is without beginning and without end."

Amen