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Birth Pangs of a Star

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Scriptures: Mark 13:1-8

Advent begins in two weeks and once again our lectionary takes us into apocalyptic territory as we move towards and into that story of stories we call Christmas. It is the wisdom of our cycle of seasons in the church that when it comes to Advent, the time of waiting and hoping that leads us to unexpected, miraculous joy, we need to be shaken out of our customary thinking. Mark's Jesus does exactly that, doesn't he, with that litany of impending disaster. Imagine. Jesus has just come out of the great Jerusalem temple, a huge complex of buildings resplendent with gold. Herod's Jerusalem was no backwater provincial town. He had spared no expense to make it a fitting capital for himself and the result must have instilled awe and respect for his power. Jesus then does the most curious thing.

Jesus seems to see beyond the gold and finery, the walls so thick they could stand for the ages, to a corruption underlying the whole system of religious-political accommodation. When he talks of throwing down those buildings, he's speaking of upsetting the order of things – the business as usual way of government, church, and economy. The disciples don't want him talking this way in public! This isn't a message that will sell, they were probably thinking. No one wants gloom and doom and threats of war. Jesus doesn't relent, however. He tells them this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Birth pangs. That's a phenomenon women experience in child birth as their bodies respond to the imminent birth of a baby. It's a pain that comes with the natural stretching and widening that accompanies natural childbirth

and as such it's as old as the hills. Without a woman going through this in some way, shape or form, none of us would be here today!

Why does Jesus use that phrase, do you suppose? From the disasters he speaks of earlier, there doesn't look like much to hope for in the future. But birth pangs lead to new birth. Perhaps Mark's community was living through a time of travail just then. False prophets were offering messages – I don't know, of doom or gloom, of hellfire and brimstone, or even of false hope, pie in the sky – and to withstand them they needed to get through it, stay the course, and keep their eyes on the prize.

What do you suppose was the prize? Could it have been anything less than the transformation of their world? The coming realm of a God King who would treat the people with fairness, rule justly and with compassion. Anything but the tyrannical Herod and his Roman overlords. Something new was set to come to birth – it had to be – given the Christian witness that Jesus had been crucified for what he believed in and the way he acted, and yet had risen, was experienced to be – of all things – alive. Something worth waiting for. Something worth working for. Something that would provoke, and inspire beauty, harmony, love. Something that would begin, not as Mark's gospel remembers, but Matthew's, with a star. A beautiful star. High in the heavens.

It got me thinking about how stars are born, and I found this image.



It shows, if you will, a star nursery, a nebula called Sharpless 2-239. Astronomer Phil Plait in his blog for Discover Magazine calls it “a sprawling stellar nursery about 500 light years away in the direction of Taurus.” Isn't it breathtaking? He says that within its web of light, dark and colour there are over a dozen stars forming inside it, several of which are “young”, only a few million years old. He says that since “stars like our Sun will merrily fuse hydrogen into helium for billions of years, this is like seeing a human baby when it's less than a month old.” Phil Plait has a great way of writing about astronomy with a sense of humour. He also explains that “like babies, these stars eject material [out] from both ends, called bipolar outflow, twin beams of material (typically called jets) and screaming out of these newborns at several hundred kilometers per second in opposite directions. (Mums and Dads out there I'll take your word for this occurrence ratcheted down a few notches in your own children!).

Phil Plait says it's these jets of material slamming into the dense surrounding material, compressing it, heating it up, that causes it to glow. Two jets are present, although apparently we can see only one, tending to the lower left and headed, he says, more or less right towards us in the photo. The star causing all the commotion is the red blob at the apex of the fanned structure; it's called IRS5. The pink colour comes from warm hydrogen gas, and other colours coming from elements like oxygen, nitrogen and sulfur. We can only see this because of how active the process of birth is – otherwise it would all be obscured by the dark material that surrounds them.

Astronomer Plait ends his article about the birth pangs of stars with these words: “I love looking at pretty astronomical pictures as much as the next person, but what gets to me is that these are far, far more than just snapshots of the cosmos. These are telling us stories; complicated, wonderful, deep stories of the complexity and history of the Universe, which in turn will certainly yield insight into the birth and evolution of our own Sun and planets. By looking *out*, we look *in*, and find that the farther we voyage, the closer to home we get.”

I couldn't agree more. I think the point of Jesus' apocalyptic talk of overturning the world as his contemporaries knew it was to get them to look out, to look in. I remain skeptical that Jesus himself knew the travail he was about to endure at the hands of the Romans and some of his own people, but Mark knew. Mark wants his people to remember that Jesus, the Christ, is with them through the times they feel persecuted because of their faith. He wants them to keep the faith, to remain hopeful, that no matter what gets thrown at them, God is yet at work delivering them into a new realm being born – a new realm that is worth waiting for, and working towards.

Friends, could it be that the sign of this new realm coming would be a star, newly born, in an ancient night sky? For that story we will have to wait a while yet. But perhaps even here in our church, right now, something new awaits to be born. But in the wake of Christ, revealing all that God hopes and intends for us, how thankful we can be for the One who brings us to birth each and every moment of our lives. Amen.

Credits: <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/badastronomy/2011/12/02/the-gorgeous-birth-pangs-of-young-stars/>

Photo: <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/badastronomy/2011/01/19/a-new-old-view-of-an-old-friend/#.VIPOEoQ-Db4>