Sermon Text for October 20, 2013

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 25:1-9, John 16:16-24

“In a little while”

In the past we have found that most of our vacation time has been spent with either my or Stacy’s family. So some years back it felt good to go to a place by ourselves. Rachel was small and Naomi even smaller. We had received a solicitation in the mail to come and see some time shares. They promised to put us up in a hotel for 2 nights, pay for our meals. This was all in Orlando so we thought, why not.

We headed out Sunday night in our station wagon telling the girls that in a little while we would arrive at the hotel. We promised them that they would be able to swim when we got there. Well, 45 minutes into the trip Rachel asked how far it was and we said again only a little while. After saying this for a few times Rachel made the declaration that our “little while” was taking “too long”. We finally did arrive at the check in for the condos and as we got out and filled out the paper work we were told that our hotel was another 6 miles away. Now we were okay with that but the kids had a hard time understanding that there was still a “little while” before we actually got to our hotel and could swim in the pool. Rachel declared this time “too many little while, too long.”

In our Scripture for today we hear Christ and his disciples use this term “in a little while”. Let’s turn now to the 16th chapter as we learn what exactly was Christ’s meaning in using these words as he describes the birth of faith.

Whenever we hear this term in a little while it usually builds a sense of anticipation and expectancy. The African-American slaves in their spirituals give us a sense of their appreciation and anticipation for the future. Their present was so bad, and so painful that in their songs they were able to give us a taste of what it means to put your hope in the future. In the Spiritual: Soon and very soon, I’m going to see the Lord, Soon and very soon, I’m going to see the Lord. Can’t you just feel the reaching out into the future because they knew that the future held an encounter with Almighty God and a righting of all the present wrongs in which they were living.

This same sense of urgency and expectancy for the coming future is seen in the OT. This term “a little while” is used in Isaiah continually to express an anticipated coming break in their current hard life. They were exiles and unhappy with their situation. But we hear in the words of the prophet in a little while God will conquer, in a little while God will deliver. In Isaiah 55 we hear this wonderful proclamation that the day will come when the Word of the Lord will never come back unfulfilled and we get a beautiful scene of what that day is going to look like.

The Old Testament is also filled with the symbolism of a birth and its preceding labor as a metaphor for the very immanent arrival of something better. For the Israelites the present situation was one of pain and unhappiness but soon, yes very soon, in a little while something greater will be. Again in Isaiah we read of the prophesied birth of Emmanuel who would after the painful labor of the mother would be the Prince of Peace.

What Jesus is doing in these verses in John is using this OT idea to teach his disciples. Seven times in these verses John has Jesus and the disciples say “in a little while”. When the disciples hear it they are confused. What does Jesus mean when he states: In a little while you will not see me and then again in a little while you will see me? They can’t know of Jesus’ death and resurrection like we do so of course they can’t figure out what Jesus is talking about.

But to Jesus and to us who are witnesses through Scripture to these events, the meaning is clear. The disciples will not see Jesus in a little while because he will be taken and put to death. But then again in a little while they will see him because he will be raised from the dead and come back into their presence. That is all he is telling them here. You will briefly be in pain and saddened because I will not be with you, but then I shall be with you, in a little while.

Jesus uses this symbol of a woman in labor to explain what is going to happen. I have always seen this scene as a bit comical. I’m sure that John and maybe not even Jesus understood this as comical. But here we have a Jesus who according to most the artists depiction although nobody knows, is a fairly rugged yet gentle individual. He is surrounded in a small room by 12 other guys, most of whom are fishermen so big burly guys. And what are they doing, Jesus is telling them about the symbolism of a woman in labor. I can’t see this happening today a bunch of guys sitting in a cabin in the mountains during deer season, talking about the beauty of labor and its ensuing rapture of the birth.

As if we could relate. Back then the guy wasn’t even allowed to come near the place where the woman was giving birth because it was an unclean area. The man had to stay far, far away. So how could they relate, how could they know what Jesus was talking about?

When it came time for our oldest daughter Rachel to be born we had an interesting experience. We were in Italy and Stacy, Stacy’s mom, and I were in the hospital room. It was about 9:30 in the morning and the doctor told Stacy that she was in labor, she wasn’t sure until the doctor actually confirmed it for her. Well I was ready, I whipped out my watch and went into super dad mode. It’s that mode when after you’ve done le manse class you think you know everything about the labor process. It’s kind of like staying in the Holiday Inn. Stacy would tell me when she had a contraction and then I would time it and so on, you know how it goes. It was about 11:00 and Stacy told me that I better get the doctor because she thought it was time. Well it wasn’t according to my watch. So I told Stacy, now dear according to my calculations you still have a little more time to wait. In a little while I’ll get the doctor, let me time a couple more. Anyway she in her very lovely and diplomatic way stated that she wanted to see the doctor now. I didn’t argue. The waiting was over, the little while had come, and Rachel was born 45 minutes later.

But Jesus uses this image of a woman in labor to describe that the disciples were going to feel an immeasurable amount of pain but then he would come back and their joy would wipe out their pain. John was writing during a time of intense pain for the early church. The early Christians were being sought and killed and they lived with the hope and the expectancy that Christ would come again. Like a birth process we read here in this chapter Jesus telling his disciples, John the Gospel writer telling the early church, and the Holy Spirit telling us that we live in a time of temporary pain. In a little while, soon and very soon, deliverance is coming.

But what is this promised deliverance. What form does it take? What is about to be born which Christ promises the earliest believers? It will be the birth of joy. Joy that will fill the hearts and souls of those who believe in Christ. Not the type of cruel joy which the world had when Christ was crucified, but rather a joy which finds its end and its beginning in Christ. A joy which the Apostle Paul encourages us to have in Philippians 4:4 as he states “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”

Jesus describes the joy to come in this way: “So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, (now this is the key so listen up) and no one will take your joy from you.” Brothers and sisters the gospel message for today is that we have permanent joy in Christ that is far more powerful than the temporary pain we feel living in this world. The pain is real, it can be deep and life altering, but the joy of Christ is permanent and even deeper still.

We are living now in this little while which Christ promises his disciples. We have seen the labor, we have witnessed Christ’s death in Scripture. We have waited a little while, maybe it took us a while to be dead in our sin before we actually tasted the joy of Christ. But we have experienced the birth, the resurrection. We have taken part in the joy of Christ. Nobody, and I mean nobody can take that away from you. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, nothing.

Now some of you may be thinking well I don’t feel the joy. I’m still waiting for the little while to come. I believe in Christ, I have the joy of God in my heart, but the pain at times is stronger than that joy. Well, today I am here to tell you that there is yet another little while to come, in a little while we can rest assured that Christ will come again and there will be a new heaven and a new earth and He will wipe away every tear from our eye and we will live in eternal joy. This is what we are promised today in John 16. With this thought in mind we are now called to live in the joy of the birth, the resurrection, the joy of Christ that no one can take for us. Amen.