

This has been a tough week. Those of you who know Fr. Bill, my predecessor as rector here at St. Augustine's, will feel keenly the sorrow I share in seeing such a gentle, kind, personable soul lost in the agony of Alzheimers' – unable to recognize anyone, or even remember mid-sentence what he was about to say.

Yesterday I was at St. Mark's Cathedral for the funeral of Bob Espeseth – the husband of Cynthia, who's the priest at St. Hilda/St. Patrick in Lynnwood and a good friend – who was killed in a tragic accident a few weeks back.

As Bert Speir said yesterday at the Bazaar, life is fragile, but it takes moments like these for us to be brought back to that realization.

And all of this in the week before Thanksgiving, and with Christmas just around the corner.

The readings have some resonance with where we are – in them we're already preparing for the coming of Israel's hope – a Messiah, but we're not being invited to prepare – in those readings – with the sort of joy that we've all been led to expect is part and parcel of the Messiah's coming. Instead, we hear “gloom and doom”: Daniel talks of “a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence”; Mark chooses to report on Jesus' comments about “wars and rumors of wars”, when he says that “...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

Now “birthpangs” is an interesting image! It's mostly lost on us men! Rachel was telling me yesterday about a good friend of ours down in Kent who asked for prayers for a friend of hers who's seven weeks pregnant and is having such an abysmal time – is so very sick – that the doctors used the word “abortion” (she said “no”).

Before the nursery colors are even chosen, before the crib purchased, before the furniture currently in that bedroom has been removed, before the reality of new life is even remotely present, there is this anguish, that gets covered by that phrase: birthpangs.

That metaphor – “birthpangs” – isn't a new invention of Jesus; that's Israel's metaphor for the coming of the Messiah – witness Daniel's language today. If we'd have had the other Old Testament reading – from Samuel – we've have heard about Hannah, rejected by the institution represented by the priest Eli, whose righteous anger on behalf of God makes her Israel's chosen metaphor for faithfulness. And her gift? A son. Her struggle to hold up true faithfulness is therefore, metaphorically, the birthpangs of God's justice for God's chosen people.

Why is it that we have these stories now? About anguish? About “birthpangs”. I believe it's because the core message is that there's no such thing as an easy journey to joy, there's always a cost. In his book “The Cost of Discipleship”, the German saint and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about costly grace, saying, in essence, that nothing that really has value can be gotten

cheaply, and the same is true with God's gifts to us.

The things we value – the love that binds us together, the people we truly care for, the communities of which we're a part – nurturing these things and entering into their fullness will always require effort and, often, struggle and, sometimes, pain.

What we have is hope. These experiences so graphically and metaphorically described in the readings; these experiences that play out in our own lives with things like Fr. Bill's Alzheimers, or Bob's death, or any of the other countless losses in each of our lives that we could so easily name right now: **they are not meaningless**. There is purpose here, even if we can't see it right now. We can't go around them. We shouldn't forget them. They are making us who we are. They are making us who we are, they are the birthpangs that are heralding something new coming into being.

And so we continue to prepare for the new birth, whatever that new birth is: a new life in a different nexus of relationships; a new job; new meaning in our lives of faith; new life with God – we continue to prepare in spite of the struggles and losses – perhaps because of them – for the gifts that can only come after the birth pangs.

This is the week before Thanksgiving, and Christmas is just around the corner. If we're really to enter into both those celebrations, and to do so with real joy, then it will require some real honesty on our parts that we enter each with a memory of the losses in our lives AND an awareness that they have meaning; that they are, in some way part of the journey that we all share called life, and they are, too, in some very profound and mysterious way, preparing us for the joy we will encounter as people of faith when we hear again the great story of birth and the wonderful promise of rich and joyful life that lie within it.