

It's the End of the World As We Know It

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Mark 13:24-27; 32-37

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It is easy to be anxious about this life. We have plenty of reasons to be afraid. The economy, our jobs, retirement income, disease, earthquakes, hurricanes, broken relationships, government ineptitude, public ineptitude, hunger, war, poverty, death all raise a tight feeling in the pit of our stomachs.

I remember as a young father in Sunburst, Montana, having a series of nightmares about nuclear attack. We had moved from the suburbs of Los Angeles into the middle of fields containing nuclear missiles. In my dreams I hid Vickie and the girls from disaster and death. I would bundle us up and hide us in the furnace room because it was in the center of the house and was asbestos lined. It was a foolish solution to an honest worry.

My children love the excitement of terror movies but I see so much terror in the life around me that the movies make me want to hide under the couch. Real people do real frightening things. Dateline had a piece on so-called Christian folks sneaking into Jerusalem for the coming of Christ at the end of the millennium, folks who might try to hurry the apocalypse along with murder and terror. And then there are the terrorists of 9-11, of Palestine and Israel. Every generation and every nation has folks who are absolutely convinced and concerned that the world, as we know it, will soon end in disaster and seem bound to hurry it along.

And in fear we can do foolish things. I have a friend who cashed in on his company and bought some land in Arkansas, built a house, barn and workshop so that by the year 2000 he would be self-sufficient and secure from the coming Y2K collapse. But there is no security. Y2K didn't get him, but maybe a heart attack will, and if not a heart attack then cancer, and if not cancer then a burglar. And if not a burglar then... His world, our world, no matter what we do, no matter how we prepare or hide, will end. We are Job and no matter how good we are disaster finds us, maims us, kills us.

The Buddhists tell the story of a mother whose child died. When the Buddha came to her town she went to him and asked him to bring her child back. The Buddha instructed her to go to each home of the village and from homes that had not known death, to bring him a grain of rice. The mother, hopeful, went from home to home to home searching for any home that had not suffered. She returned to the Buddha with no grains of rice. Every home she visited had known suffering and the end of their world.

The world will end. Every world will end. Our worlds will end. We live under constant threat of death. I know this is a gloomy outlook. But if you know someone who has escaped

tragedy, if you know of someone who has managed to be so good, or so right minded, or so holy, or even so lucky as to escape life's anguish and death then you can prove me wrong and I will be glad of it.

The sermon title is taken from an R.E.M. song. The lyrics of the verses say everything I have just said and then the chorus says:

It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it.

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.

How could anyone feel fine about the end of the world?

The answer is Christmas. Christmas promises that into the midst of our Job like lives God comes. Jesus says, "In the suffering (we) will see "'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. THEN he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." We know that this baby comes to us wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. We know that God is with us, because our worlds, by the time we are 30, have ended a hundred times and in each ending God has come and made a new world.

When we read the newspaper and listen to news shows, we see God present, transforming our world. Wars are, in fact, on the decline. Hunger in Woodinville is being met with generous folks stocking the food banks. Violent crime among us is on the decline. Human rights are a part of national policy and human rights groups exist in even the most horrendous nations. Natural disasters have become events of international compassion. French doctors go into Turkey after the earthquakes. Methodist engineers go into Central America after the hurricanes. Our military gives more humanitarian aid than it engages its weapons. Whether it is friend or foe, we go to the aid of the one who cries for help. President Clinton once said that it is the obligation of the wealthy nations to assist their brothers and sisters and no one argued.

I know we are not perfect and that sometimes our fear overrides our compassion. And I know that the world has a long way to go to be all loving and just. But I also know that love and justice are the long term winners of history. Gandhi once reminded the British, that every despot falls under their own evil. Every disaster has yielded to the ingenuity and determination of good people to live on. Every failure is an education to success. It is not suffering that rules life, but the grace of God's compassion. Suffering is the interruption and teacher, grace is the rule. Our God is the God who finds life and victory in every death. Our God makes Christmas come.

One of my favorite hymns is number 707. It is composed and the lyrics written by Natalie Sleeth. Her husband Ron, a well

known preaching professor at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, suffered a long illness. And Natalie, of course, suffered with him. Shortly before his death this hymn came to her. And when she shared it with him he asked that it be sung at his funeral.

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the four weeks we prepare ourselves to celebrate that God came to not only live among us, but to be one with us. With the birth of Jesus is the truth that God feels what we feel, suffers what we suffer, laughs at our jokes and weeps at our deaths. The one thing God does not do that we do is lose hope in love. Jesus' faith always remains confident in God's care. Jesus, born in a manger to poor working class folk, to a young mother whose pregnancy was unplanned and untimely, and raised in a town known for its failures, trusts God for every end of the world to be the beginning of a new world, a world with greater compassion and more thoroughly just.

A loving friend gave me for my birthday a small book by Mary Engelbreit titled "Don't Waste the Miracle. Early in the book on a left page it says, "There's a miracle in Christmas." On the facing page is the picture of an angel carrying a sign much like the prophets of doom, only this sign says, "The beginning is near." Christmas is the new beginning of every world ending.

As an Advent exercise I invite you to do the following; for the next week watch for God's mysterious resurrections. For as Jesus says;

About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only Abba. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

Keep awake for we do not know when Christmas will come. Read your newspaper; watch the news, not for prophecies of doom, but for prophecies of grace. Look for signs of Christmas coming in a new peace accord; in a new mission to the poor; in the candidates political promises; in your healings, in the ways of those who love you.

Keep awake when at work for signs of grace that will sneak into the day. Keep awake when in prayer for soft voices and an army of angels that come to you and comfort you. Keep awake for

all around us are the signs that "the beginning is near," a better world, a God made world of compassion and justice; and when you see God's mystery before you know that Christmas has come and will always come.

What I say to you, I say to all, keep awake for God is coming any time now and "It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine." Shalom and Amen.