

“Advent Living” GPPC 12-3-18
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

How does it all end? How does *the* story, our story, the world’s story, time’s story end? We’re fascinated by these questions, aren’t we?

Hollywood, bless its heart, loves to make *comedies* about the end.

“This Is the End” is a 2013 movie about six friends who’ve gathered at a house for a party just outside L.A. Alas, the end of the world comes and they are trapped in the house with each other, but running out of food, water, and booze. What to do!?

“Seeking a Friend for the End of the World” not only stars Steve Carrell and Keira Knightly, but it’s a comedy, love story, and end-of-time movie all in one. There you go!

And then there is the 2009 flick “Zombieland” It stars Jesse Eisenberg, Woody Harrelson, Emma Stone, and Amber Heard facing the evil zombie hordes but fortunately armed with shotguns, baseball bats, and chainsaws. Need I say more?

There are also serious movies about the end. Many of them such as “The Road,” “The Day After,” and “On the Beach” have to do with

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nuclear war. “The Day After Tomorrow” addresses the end of the world via disastrous worldwide climate change. (Especially delicious is a scene in the movie when Americans stream across the border into Mexico while fleeing deadly subzero temperatures in the states.)

When it comes to *the end*, particularly popular are movies and books in the “Left Behind” series written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Some of you may know and enjoy this series. So I want to be careful and clear that what I’m going to say is not an attack on you but a critique of the “Left Behind” series itself.

LaHaye and Jenkins claim they base their series on the Bible and Christ, but what they’ve created is actually opposed to the biblical message and the teaching and life of Christ. They lift a few verses out of biblical and historical context and fashion Christ and the end as a horror movie for the world, not the triumph of God’s love. As one scholar puts it, “God has been idolatrously remade: vengeful, arrogant, xenophobic, obsessed with power, unforgiving. When Jesus strides across the valley of Armageddon, his white robes are red to the knees with blood: his enemies explode at the sight of him.” (Deborah Smith Douglas, “Beyond All

Worlds: Our End and Our Beginning” in *Weavings*, Nov/Dec. 2006, 19.) The followers of Jesus meanwhile revel in observing this pain and annihilation.

But Luke presents us with a radically different picture of the end, doesn’t he? In Luke’s gospel, Jesus describes the end. He says, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

This is not normal language used for ordinary events. “We saw signs in the sun, moon, stars, roaring seas, people fainting, the heavens shaken. And then afterwards we went to Panera for lunch.”

No. What’s described is terrifying and cataclysmic, the prelude to the end of time. And Jesus says his return at the end of time will not be ambiguous or subtle. “Is that you again, Jesus?” No. It will be clear, overwhelming, and cosmic. Sun, moon, and stars that some people might have worshiped will instead be co-opted as signs of Christ’s coming. The wild seas that terrify the people will instead be enlisted as servants of Christ to declare what’s coming. Of course, the people of the

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world will be petrified as they see the powers of the heavens, (and everything else they've mistakenly relied upon) shaken.

So is now the time when Jesus starts mowing people down and blowing them to bits?

Heaven forbid!

Instead, Jesus says they'll see his return “‘coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” Notice there's nothing here about getting even or nuking anybody. In fact, the followers of Jesus are told, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” So the instruction from Jesus to his followers is not merely “Don't be afraid;” it's actually, “Be confident. Your redemption, your freedom from all that enslaves you is coming near.”

When the end comes, however it comes, we're not to be scared; we're to be confident, because our freedom from sin, evil, and death is being completed. And a new world is breaking in. As one Bible scholar puts it, “The ‘redemption’ that is promised is not a private lifeboat to save a few privileged folks while everything else is destroyed. Rather,

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redemption is equated with the coming of God's reign, which spells transformation, healing, and wholeness for all of life." (Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, 253.)

This is wonderful news, isn't it? The best news.

But then Jesus keeps talking. And starting in verse 34 he tells us how we're to live into Advent (the word means "coming"). He tells us how to live while we wait for his coming, how we're to live in response to the good news. "Be on guard..." he says.

Our congregation is fortunate to have two excellent Parish Associates, retired Presbyterian clergy, Kit Schooley and Fred Beck, who volunteer their services around here. We're grateful for them, and for the variety of pastoral perspectives they bring to our congregation. When pastoral intern Sarah is not leading the pastoral prayers, these two partners in crime often lead those prayers, each with his own distinctive style.

I've noticed that Fred, who is the Zen master of calm, likes to use a phrase in his pastoral prayers. In a mellow voice he will say something like, "Loving God, awaken us to your possibilities of peace." Or

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“Loving God, wake us up to know your peace.” I think that’s what Jesus might be speaking of here in Luke when he says, “Be on your guard...” He’s saying, “Keep awake, awaken to God’s presence and God’s expectations.”

Jesus says be on guard, awaken so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of life. And the Greek word for “dissipation” means debauchery or carousing and drunkenness, or even a hangover.

Not a bad reminder as we move into the holidays, right? Jesus does not forbid drinking alcohol, but he does warn about the abuse of alcohol and how it gets us into trouble. And by extension we could ask what other things we might abuse—drugs, food, our sexuality, social media, money, gambling, the Internet, shopping. What are the things that when overdone or misused get in the way of our relationship with others and with God? And how might we turn away from those destructive behaviors?

On the other side, Jesus also doesn’t want us “weighed down” with “the worries of life.” And most of us have worries, right? Maybe we

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worry about paying the bills, or about our health, or our loved ones, or our church, or our country, or the environment, or an addiction, or about school, or some sin we've committed, or about not being good enough or popular enough, or about facing death. Maybe you can list some other worries.

But as we await his coming, Jesus says he doesn't want us weighed down by out-of-control behaviors on the one side or worry on the other side. After all, he says, we don't know when time ends. It will be a surprise. And we don't want to be caught in the trap of wasting these precious lives given to us, even though all of us waste our lives to some extent, because we are imperfect people who are loved perfectly by God.

So Jesus suggests a strategy. "Be alert." Awaken. And pray, because God's love is unconditional, but we will still all "stand before the Son of Man." We will all give an accounting of how we've used our lives for God's glory. So how we live matters. In other words, you and I matter. And because God loves us completely, God takes us seriously enough to judge how we live our lives.

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So be alert. Awaken. Turn away from destructive behaviors and attitudes and worry that waste our lives. And instead trust. And pray.

How might you and I be about Advent living? Is there some sin, some destructive behavior or attitude we might pray for God to help us to let go of? Is there some worry that's keeping us up at night that we might instead pray about and entrust to God? Would you like to deepen your spiritual life with a renewed emphasis on prayer, study of the Bible, worship, and service? If you'd like some help with that, I'd be honored to assist, and I'll bet that Fred or Kit or Sarah or Kim would be happy to help too.

Thank God we know how the story ends. Not with a whimper. And not with a bang either. The story ends with the victory of God's love for all the world, and each of us gets to write a line in that story with our lives. What will we write? All praise be to God--Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal