

“It’s the End of the World as We Know it”

Someone wandering in off of the street expecting a Christmas service will be quite disappointed today. This is true not only in Episcopal churches, but also Catholic, Lutheran or any church that has a liturgical tradition. The world outside these walls is in full swing with Christmas, mostly in order to sell more things to people for gift giving. The church, however, is focused on preparing for Christmas. Thus we are in the season of Advent.

There are a number of clues that we are in Advent for the observant worshiper. The easiest one is the Advent wreath which we just started lighting today. Another easy one is reading the bulletin which tells you that it is the First Sunday in Advent. Less obvious are the readings. We begin Advent with readings that foretell the second coming of Christ. As we await the birth of the Christ child we also await his coming in Glory.

It is not unlike the New Year or a birthday. As those dates approach we look backward at what has happened in the preceding year, but we also look forward to what is to come. We look back at the good and the bad, the challenges and successes, the failures and the missed opportunities of the passing year. We look ahead to opportunities, new ventures, hopes and dreams for the year to come.

So today in the gospel lesson we look ahead with Jesus to a coming age. We look to a new era when Jesus’ reign is over all the earth and not just localized in the hearts of some people. What Jesus was looking toward is what theologians call the eschaton. The eschaton is, to quote a song by R.E.M., “the end of the world as we know it.”¹ The concept of eschaton or the end times is different from that imagined during the Cold War. Then we thought that the total destruction of the world by the two super powers or a war started by a rogue power would lead to all-out war and the complete destruction of the earth.

The eschaton in Christian theology is the end of the world as it is. That is a world that is run by super powers such as Rome. These are earthly kingdoms, principalities, and powers that rule over the earth, but do not rule as God would have them rule and certainly not as God would rule. The eschaton that Jesus speaks about in today’s gospel is the coming of a new age of God. In the Old Testament it is called “The Day of the Lord.” It is the day that God comes into the world and returns its right order. That would be the order of the world in the Garden of Eden before sin and death entered the picture.

If that sounds scary don’t let it. All we need to do is look to two books, the bookends, if you will, of the Bible—Genesis and Revelation—for help understanding what this new world will be. These two books show us what

¹ “It’s The End of The World” by Bill Berry; Peter Buck; Mike Mills; Michael Stipe, R.E.M. “Document” ©1987

God's rule looked like in the Garden and what God's rule will look like in what Revelation calls the "New Jerusalem."

In Genesis one of the key phrases that is often overlooked because of what happened subsequent to it, is the scene right before God discovers that Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. At that time Adam and Eve, "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."² We later hear God call out for the couple. What we learn from this little scene is that God spent time with the humans in the garden. We can even infer that God liked spending time with them. Indeed, God was accustomed to taking walks with the humans in the garden in the cool evening breezes.

When we look at the Book of Revelation we learn another aspect about God. Twice in Revelation we hear about the world restored after the eschaton. In Chapter 7 one of the elders describes those worshipping God. The elder says, "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."³ Later in chapter 21 as the New Jerusalem descends from heaven a loud voice says, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

What Jesus foretells in this portentous passage from Luke is not a doomsday scenario from Hollywood or pulp novel. The end is the end of evil, darkness, sin, war, xenophobia, hatred, disease, and all of the "isms" that plague human beings. The end of this world is the dawn of a new world of justice, freedom, peace, and joy. It is a world where God will wipe away every tear. Not one of the angels but God will wipe away our tears. And like in the garden God will dwell with us.

On this first Sunday of Advent that is what we look for. It is why our first candle on the Advent wreath is the candle of Hope. It is hope for a new world where "all is well and all is well and all manner of thing is well."⁴

Let us look forward to the birth of the Christ child, but let us also look forward to the birth of the new world of God where we will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike us, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd, and he will guide us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

² Genesis 3:8 NRSV

³ Revelation 7:16-17 NRSV

⁴ Dame Julian of Norwich, *Showings*.