

Closing Time

^{NRS} **Luke 21:25** "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.²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Well, happy new year. It's the first Sunday of Advent the season we prepare for the coming of the Christ child and the season that officially kicks off the new year on the church calendar.

I was going over my notes a little while back, and I noticed that in the five years I've been with you I've never once followed the lectionary during Advent. For folks who are new, the lectionary is just a three year cycle of readings that a lot of churches follow- it tries to give us a broad selection of scripture and not just the pet texts of your pastor. And up until this year we follow the lectionary pretty faithfully- except for Advent. During Advent I've always been teaming up with the art and music folks to explore the season from a more thematic side- last year we saw the season through Mary's eyes. The year before that we talked about wonder, we talked about the wonder of the Christ child. And before that we did the dreams from Matthew's Gospel. And so on and so forth.

I've always really liked this- I've liked thinking of this season in a more thematic way, a more creative way. But, if I'm to be entirely honest with you- this isn't the only reason I tend to go off the lectionary reservation during Advent. To be honest I just don't like the texts in Advent a whole lot. See, the lectionary in this season doesn't just focus

on the coming of Jesus as the Christ child, something that makes PERFECT sense during the Christmas season. But it also highlights the texts talking about Christ's second coming with all the bits about the sun turning to blood and clouds filling up with frog spit and just anything pointing to the end of the world. And to me this is about as Christmasy as bucket of sun tan lotion.

But this year since we've been doing Access and going through the Bible book by book this year, I thought why not do the lectionary for Advent? And what a great idea! What's the first Gospel reading? Why we hear all about cosmic signs and world distress and heaven and earth passing away.

Merry Christmas, Ken. Ho, ho, ho... ☺

If it were it up to me, this is about the LAST text I'd probably pick to talk about during Advent. It's probably one of the last texts I'd pick to preach on period, really. And I wondered to myself about this, this week- about why I'm so negative about apocalyptic, end of the world texts like this. And I came up with several reasons.

First off, the folks who have REALLY liked these parts of the Bible- well there's no two ways of putting this- a lot of them have just been nuts. Take the Heaven's Gate people- anyone remember those folks? A guy named Marshall Applewhite read the Book of Revelation one too many times and wound up formulating a belief that the end of the world was coming in 1997 brought about by the comet Hale-Bopp. He talked his entire group into believing a space ship carrying Jesus Christ was trailing behind the comet and the only way for the ship to pick them up was by committing suicide together, which they

did. It's an awful story- and if it wasn't caused by these weird, apocalyptic, end times texts in the Bible, these texts certainly made it a LOT easier for tragedies like this to happen.

And then there's the complete opposite end of the spectrum from folks like Applewhite. These are the folks who also love these texts but don't use them to do crazy things, but use them to justify checking out from the world. There are a lot of brothers and sisters out there taught that since Jesus is coming back and everything's going to get wiped out- well why care about anything then? In the book *White Teeth* there are these folks from the Jehovahs Witness- and they're just staring at a clock waiting for Jesus to return. They aren't doing anything crazy- they're just staring at the clock doing nothing. If you know the R.E.M. song "It's the End of the World As We Know It", the song is about this kind of passivity. The song starts out with the typical apocalyptic "That's great it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes an aeroplane". (And I have to admit to you that I'm actually glad I looked up the words, because I swear as long as I've been hearing this song, even though it made no sense to me, I've always heard the line as "Virgin snakes" instead of "birds and snakes"... I'm not really sure what I thought was very end of the worldy about virgin snakes, but that's what I heard.) But anyway, at the heart of the song, what I would say is the climax, Michael Stipe sings: "Offer me solutions, offer me alternatives, and I decline." And what he's giving voice to is this attitude of apathy texts like this can engender- like why try to get involved, why try to change anything if it's all just going to be destroyed? This isn't an engaged faith- this isn't doing justice and loving kindness. This is just laziness with some Bible verses attached.

But this thinking is out there. The church I went to in high school, a group of us would always go to the Great Wall, this hole-in-the-wall Chinese restaurant after church. And one Sunday I was in line behind my pastor, Jim Collie. And these guys were ahead of us in line and they talking like this, they were kind of making fun of do-gooders who wanted to change anything, because, as they put it, the rapture was coming and who was going to care then? Now Jim just liked to mess with people, and he interrupted them and said, “Oh, didn’t you hear?” And they looked at him kind of funny. “Didn’t you hear? The rapture already came- and we’re what’s left. Didn’t you know?” Needless to say I found that a LOT funnier than those two guys. 😊

So, in general these apocalyptic, end-of-the-world, texts like this- they’ve caused so many problems, they make me nervous. And they do for most Presbyterians. This is pretty much why most of us just really don’t talk texts like this. We treat them like we do our relatives we’re embarrassed of- we just kind of sit them at the far end of the table and avoid them and kind of hope they’ll go away, all the time knowing they probably won’t.

And yet, whether I liked it or not. This week there it was, there was the Gospel of Luke sitting there on my desk all week with Jesus talking about cosmic signs, and international distress, and the end of the world as we know it- I thought just throw in some virgin snakes and it’d be perfect. But, unless I wanted to chicken out, there was no way around it. And so this week I did the only I knew to do- I read it, and read it, and kept reading it, hoping something good would finally come.

And do you know, it probably was the fourth or fifth time I read the dang thing that I started to see something I hadn't really noticed before. I saw that yes, Jesus *does* talk about the end of things here, he talks about heaven and earth passing away, he talks about turmoil and distress in the world, and people fainting from fear, but as attention grabbing as all this is- this isn't all that Jesus says, and it isn't even really the point. The point is not what is being dismantled and taken apart and swept away- the point is that things are being cleared away to make room for something new. And not just something- but someone. "And behold," he says, "Behold, you will see the Son of Man coming in clouds and glory." The Son of Man is a character that shows up in the final layers of the Old Testament, and it's a term Jesus uses for himself. What he's saying is that yes, things are going to be cleared away, the world as we know it is going to change- but it's not for the sake of destruction but for renewal. The point here isn't the negative, the stress isn't on everything being wiped away- it's on this extremely positive image of Jesus coming to set things right.

See, this is why he talks about the fig tree- he says when you see a fig tree start to leaf out, when you see those green shoots you just know it's Spring and that summer and good days are just around the corner. Well, this the same, he says. When you see these disturbing things, when you see decline and turmoil, when you see the world as you know it passing away, he says, don't give up hope, he says. In fact it's the opposite- lift up your head, because it's when the world as we know it begins to pass away that this kingdom he dreams of, the one that's like a wedding feast and everyone's invited not just the rich, the one that's like a father scanning because he loves not only his well behaved son but his black sheep, too- it's when this kingdom begins to have a chance.

And when I thought about it like this, I realized that the reason we've gotten apocalyptic texts like this so wrong is that we've been so focused on the end of the world as we know it- we've missed that the end is only preparing the way for a new beginning.

And this is something we know is true in our own lives. Just as you have to clear land before building something new on it, we have to let go of what is old and gone and past before we can really move forward. Sometimes, until we let go of yesterday- the fresh energy of tomorrow simply doesn't have room to be born. Thinking of R.E.M. this week got me thinking of another song, one by Semisonic called "Closing Time". The very last line goes: "Closing time. Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."

And that's, I think, the best way to hear these kinds of apocalyptic words from Jesus. He is talking about closing time- time for the tired old ways of the world as we know it, to pass away. But only so that from this beginning's end will come a new beginning, a fresh start.

Last week I friend of mine told me she was visiting with her brother and his family. And after dinner they put on some music, and her five-year-old niece just announced to the family that she would be dancing. And for the next half hour, which is like 3 lifetimes in the attention span of most five-year-olds, her little niece just moved to the music and the whole family sat entranced in the after dinner quiet of the evening as this little girl leaped and spun to Schubert.

But then, the next night, being a holiday weekend, they were together again. And her niece had them put on the exact same music, and she tried it again. But this time it wasn't the same, this time the family was more scattered, there were dishes to clean, and the little girl herself just wasn't feeling the same way. And she got frustrated- it was the same music, the same house, the same people. Why wasn't it like the other night? Why wasn't it like before?

And of course the answer is that everything wasn't the same- it was entirely different day, a new day. And the old had passed away. And no amount of grasping after it, by playing the same music, or picking the same time of day, would bring it back. And while that particular beginning's ending was frustrating to that little girl at that moment- the good news was that while that a thousand, ten thousand new beginnings, are already on their way- countless moments that she can't even imagine just yet.

It's Advent and Christ is coming, and the heaven and earth of this morning are passing away- whether we're ready or not. If the question of Christmas for a lot of us is what do we want to get- I believe the question of Advent is what do we need to let go of?

Beloved, what do you need to set down? What do you need to clear away? For Behold, the Son of Man is coming and the kingdom of God is near. **Amen.**