
The End of the World as We Know It

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All Saint's Episcopal Parish, San Leandro, California - December 3, 2017

Scripture

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil--
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Qui regis Israel

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand,
the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.
And so will we never turn away from you;
give us life, that we may call upon your Name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they 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.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at

cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Sermon

My friend Jeremy recently told me a story about a radio station in his home state of Nebraska. The station was 101.9 The Edge, located in Omaha and it was known for its excellent selections of alternative rock. It had quite a powerful transmitter, broadcasting at 100,000 watts, and on nights where the conditions were right, you could hear it over two-hundred miles away in his hometown of Hildreth.

No other music genre could complement the teenaged angst of the 1990s quite like alternative rock. Whether through the hoarse vocals of Kurt Cobain and others who rose to stardom out of the Portland grunge scene, or the lively and energetic lyrics of Green Day with their Bay Area “buck-the-establishment” punk rock community, many Gen Xers and Millennials, then and now, found ways to express their dissatisfaction with the world through the lyrics and beats of alternative rock.

But in the spring 1998, something utterly unexpected happened at 101.9 The Edge: on the afternoon of April 10, through the radios of countless Nebraskan teens and young adults, the four count intro snare beats to the R.E.M. song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” began to tap out their familiar rhythm. Then Lead singer Michael Stipe and back up vocalist Mike Mills began to call out their rapid-paced list of horrors of the mid-80s and 90s:

*World serves its own needs, listen to your heart bleed
Tell me with the Rapture and the reverent in the right, right
You vitriolic, patriotic, slam fight, bright light
Feeling—pretty—psyched
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.*

The song's lyrics drift from deforestation, to the death of ideas and book burnings, to plane crashes, the selling out of government, and war; concepts we seem to be still dealing with over 30 years after the song was written. The chorus continued, declaring once again the end of the world as we know it, and finally faded out. And then, unexpectedly, the song began to play again, once, twice, three times, and over and over for hours. No voices of DJs.

No commercials between songs. Calls placed to the radio station went unanswered. No answering machines, no voicemail. Just REM with their anthem of the end of the world as we know it.

What may have sounded like an apocalyptic scenario to those tuned in to 101.9 that afternoon, turned out to have a more mundane, and definitely amusing, origin: the station was changing formats the next morning, and as an angry send-off to the new station owners, the DJs, producers, and staff, now out of a job, rather than stick it out on their last day, stuck it to their soon to be former employer. At 3 pm, they started the music, set it to repeat, locked up, and left the building until the new staff took over the next day.

Apocalyptic texts can sometimes feel like this. Out of the Biblical narrative comes this terrible imagery of the end of the world. The sun will cease to give light. The moon will darken. Stars will fall from the very heavens, and all of creation will quake. When we read these texts, we're left spinning, seeking answers.

We turn to scripture and say, "Hey, I have a questi..."

"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT!"

"Uh, yeah, I got that part, but I have a quetio..."

"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT!"

"No, seriously, I heard you the first time. I really need to know about..."

"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT AND I FEEL FINE!"

"Yeah, I *KNOW*. I, *HEARD* you, I *GET* that...but I *DON'T* feel fine!"

If you pay attention to the scripture lessons at the change of liturgical seasons, you may have noticed a pattern to the beginning of each Advent. As each new liturgical year begins, the authors of the lectionary present us with a Gospel message that is apocalyptic in nature. And there is good reason for this. These pieces of scripture calls us to turn inward, to watch, and wait, and look for the impending Advent of Christ: not just a return to the first Advent at his birth over 2,000 years ago, nor simply to a future vision of Christ returning to us at the end of things, but to the ways that Christ reappears to us daily in the cacophonous tumult and in the quiet mundane.

This year, however, as we begin the scripted rituals of an American Christmas: a chaotic capitalistic revision of our sacred season, so often devoid of the introspective, liminal waiting into which scripture and tradition calls us, the world seems to be dangling out further on the precipice of cataclysm and apocalypse than it has in living memory. The specter of nuclear war appears more real than it has since the cold war, as our president wantonly and

impertinently tweets out threats and juvenile insults at an unstable North Korean regime. Wealth inequality is so great that Robert S. McElvaine, professor at Millsaps College and historian of the Great Depression era, warns that the tax bill just passed this week has put us into a “sprint...toward an economic cliff” reminiscent of pre-depression regulations.¹

When we're in moments such as these, we're often left with a sense of hopelessness. We turn to scripture for comfort, but at first glance, these texts offer little sense of promise or redemption. The world is literally falling apart around us and so often like, the lament of both the psalmist and the author of Isaiah, we wonder where God is and why we feel abandoned.

We know the good works of God, we have seen them in the past, we have felt the comfort of the nearness of Divine grace, and yet during those apocalyptic moments, we feel alone, and our questions and concerns go unanswered. The end of the world as we know it feels near, we wait for God, and we call out questions, we demand in astonished wonder to know what it is that God is calling us to do.

At first glance, the prophetic texts that begin each Advent seem to offer little to anchor ourselves to, as the world spirals out of control, but a closer inspection of the text opens up a world of comfort in this liminal place of anticipation and waiting. Christ calls us to keep awake. Especially in times that feel apocalyptic, there is no time to sit on the sidelines and take a nap. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, reminds us of our spiritual gifts and directs us to use them as we wait for the ever revealing Christ. We are called ever more urgently, ever more boldly to serve others in the name of Jesus, to live into the fullness of communion with each other, and to usher in with great joy the Kingdom of God, so that this human chapter of greed and war ends, and a Divine, hopeful vision of grace and compassion begins.

It may be the end of the world as we know it, but by living fully into the life that Christ calls us to live out, of preaching the Gospel through or words and through our lived acts of justice and compassion, truly we'll be just fine.

Amen.

¹ McElvaine, Robert S., “Perspective | I'm a Depression historian. The GOP tax bill is straight out of 1929,” *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2017, accessed December 01, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/11/30/im-a-depression-historian-the-gop-tax-bill-is-straight-out-of-1929/>.