

THE END IS NEAR

Jesus said, "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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:25-28)

You'd think the end of the world would be no laughing matter. And yet it's the subject of endless jokes and cartoons. It's long since become a cliché to depict some wild-eyed prophet of doom holding up a sign reading, "THE END IS NEAR," or some such. There's the cartoon showing a guy walking down the sidewalk with his "THE END IS NEAR" sign, followed closely by another guy holding a sign that reads, "THE END." Or the one where the guy is wearing a signboard that reads, "ONLY 32 SHOPPING DAYS TO DOOMSDAY." Or how about this one, which I find particularly timely during this fraught period of pandemic, political upheaval and climate catastrophe? A guy in a COVID mask has his sign reading, "THE END IS NEAR. A woman, also wearing a mask, runs up to him and cries, "Oh, thank God!"

The prevalence of such jokes, particularly now, suggests the end of everything is not far from anyone's thoughts, consciously or otherwise. Indeed, it's *never* been far from anyone's thoughts. My mother used to terrify her four children with grim forebodings about the coming nuclear holocaust. This was during the height of the Cold War, when children were drilled to duck under their desks at school in the event of a Russian attack.

By the time the Cuban missile crisis rolled around in 1962, I was old enough to realize my mother's fears were not entirely delusional. The Kennedy Administration discovered the Russians were bringing missiles into Cuba. They ordered a naval blockade. This could be construed as an act of war. No one knew how the Soviets would react. For days we waited to find out whether the world would come to an end. I was 15 at the time. I didn't know whether I would live long enough to get my driver's license.

The Cold War gradually receded from my mother's doomsday calculations. They were replaced by Y2K, the worldwide computer meltdown that was supposed to occur at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000. By now my mother was in her eighties, and her dark imaginings were aided and abetted by my younger brother. He persuaded her to withdraw lots of cash from her bank account and to stock up on nonperishable food items before the arrival of the new millennium. Now that my mother has passed on, my brother has replaced her as the family doomsayer. Periodically, the rest of us get e-mails urging us to invest in gold as a hedge against the coming world financial collapse.

There's nothing new about any of this. The circumstances change, but the underlying dynamics remain the same. The world as we know it is about to come to an end — indeed, it always seems to be coming to an end. You need look no further than Jesus'

statement in this morning's gospel reading from Luke. And I quote: "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."

People take these things literally, even here in Connecticut. May 19, 1780 was remembered throughout New England as "the Dark Day." There was no eclipse or storm approaching, yet the sky blackened at midday. Birds fell silent in the trees. The unnatural gloom persisted, and the full moon failed to shine as expected that night. God-fearing New Englanders were aware of certain biblical signs and portents. They described a time when the sun would be darkened, and the moon would not give its light, and the stars would fall from heaven. Seventeen eighty — right in the midst of the American Revolution — was already an unsettled time, what with wars and rumors of wars, another biblical portent.

Many believed Judgment Day was at hand. However, Col. Abraham Davenport refused to be moved. He was a member of the upper chamber of the Connecticut General Assembly, which was then meeting. Although the House had adjourned in panic, Davenport insisted that his colleagues remain in session. "I am against an adjournment," he declared. "The Day of Judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought." Candles were brought, and the upper chamber continued its work. Only much later was it determined that the skies over New England had been blanketed by smoke from a massive forest fire in Ontario. If only they had weather satellites in those days!

For end-times enthusiasts, Holy Scripture works like a medical encyclopedia in the hands of a hypochondriac. The Book of Revelation lays out a step-by-step process for how and when this will all go down. And didn't St. Paul say "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now?" Can't you hear the groaning? Five million dead from a global pandemic, the world burning up. Didn't Jesus himself talk about wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, famines and earthquakes — and all this just the beginning of the birth pangs?

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut, a fourth-generation free-thinker, had this to say about the state of the world: "If God were alive today, he would have to be an atheist, because the excrement has hit the air-conditioning big time, big time." Indeed, it has. The end is near, the end is always near.

Yet let's revisit this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke. Here's how the passage ends. Jesus tells his followers: "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In other words, all that stuff about fear and foreboding coming upon the world and the powers of the heavens being shaken, that's not bad news, because it means the Lord is coming. That's good news — at least it's good news if you welcome his coming.

With Jesus you must listen closely. He cautioned his followers not to be alarmed by wars and rumors of wars, or other signs and portents, because this was *not* the end. He warned them that false prophets would try to lead them astray. So what are we to make of his statement that “this generation will not pass away” before the Messiah comes? Perhaps we may find a clue in the answer he gave to the Pharisees who asked him point-blank when the kingdom of God would come. “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,” he told them, “nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” It’s in the midst of us! The midst of us! In the midst of pandemic, political upheaval and climate catastrophe, right here, right now, always.

Notice that Jesus speaks in the present tense: “the kingdom of God *is* in the midst of you.” This may suggest why he once said the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night. It’s not something you will see announced on the evening news or on Facebook. It’s more like one day we will wake up to discover the kingdom of God has been here all along — right here, right now, always. So the next time someone tries to tell you the end is near, that’s your reminder that God is already here.

Amen.

#