

**SERMON FOR YEAR C, ADVENT 1**  
LUKE 21:25-36  
BY TOREY LIGHTCAP  
SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
NOVEMBER 29, 2009  
"END"

Everywhere I've been lately –

The store, the car, the house, the church –

Everywhere I've been, I've been singing this little song by the group REM:

*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.*

I'm not sure what REM had in mind when they wrote that tune

(Looking at the lyrics doesn't help much),

But you can hear the underlying concern of all of today's lessons laid out pretty clearly.

To Luke, who's probably seen things destroyed by the Romans,

And to Paul, who's writing to the church at Thessalonica,

And certainly to Jeremiah,

It looks like the end of the world –

Or, we might say more accurately, the end of the world seems like a handy scenario

From which to deliver their points of view.

Unfortunately, mainstream consumerist Christian culture today is just *fascinated*

By the phantasmagoric, end-of-the-world, large-scale destruction

Of the planet and her peoples.

Tim LaHaye, who made a bundle selling the *Left Behind* books,

Has stunted a generation of budding Bible scholars,

And has recently signed a deal allowing him to do it all over again.

His new series of books, ironically titled "The End," is worth a bundle to publishers,

But for us it won't be worth the paper it's printed on.

Until I became an adult Christian, a maturing Christian, I saw The End coming every night.

See, religion was used as a wedge to keep me in my place,

To control my activities and my thoughts,

And there was no better way to accomplish that than to put into my head

That The End was coming soon!

There would be a trumpet blast,

And Jesus would ride into Weatherford, Oklahoma, on a cloud and come and get me

(*That* much I knew – I certainly was not going to be left behind),

But on the way up to Heaven, Jesus would probably turn to me very casually

And ask me what exactly I thought I was doing last Thursday afternoon

When I cheated off my neighbor's paper and then had that one other thought

And then went off and ate a bunch of candy before supper.

It's all well and good for Torey's name to be in the Lamb's Book of Life  
(It certainly beats the alternative),  
But if that name has margin notes and red check marks beside it,  
Or if you can tell that it used to have gold stars next to it but they got pulled off,  
*That's* trouble, too.

Because as sure as there was a place prepared for me by Christ himself  
(I always pictured Jesus making up beds and running the vacuum) –  
As surely as he went before me to do that,  
A “Problem Child” of God doesn't get as nice a room as everyone else,  
And people will wonder what you did or didn't do.  
And I was furthermore sure that at some point they were going to spool up  
The Film of My Life on movie night  
And I would be thoroughly examined afterwards in front of Heaven  
And asked point-blank why I watched so much television.

So I was frightened.  
I was saved, but I was scared.  
The preacher said, “You gotta be on the lookout,”  
For “You know neither the day nor the hour.”  
“The Son of Man is coming in power and great glory,  
And we shall be his acceptable and loving bride.”

That's towering and disempowering talk to an eight-year-old  
Sinner-in-the-hands-of-an-angry-God.  
No wonder I made Eagle Scout: One must be for ever Prepared and on the lookout.

So. How does one go from dreading the end of the world  
To whistling about it while picking out the produce at the grocery store?  
How is it that *iii feel fiine*?  
How can any responsible person listen to today's lessons  
And not approach them with absolute dread and trembling?

Well, for starters and most important of all,  
The Love of God is bedrock.  
Love was the reason that turned the universe; made the *world*; made *us*.  
Love creates, builds up, nurtures, redeems, and sanctifies;  
It does not destroy, as surely as Christ himself did not destroy,  
But rather raised the dead and healed the sick.  
The televised predictors of doom don't seem to remember  
That one of the greatest of the prophets, Isaiah,  
Painted the end of the world as the conclusion of a long striving,  
The wolf laying down with the lamb, “the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”  
“They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,” Isaiah wrote,  
“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
As the waters cover the sea.”

Now *there's* a provocative image that goes to the heart of it:  
God's warrior-bow in the clouds, sparkling over the head of Noah and his family,  
Standing on dry ground – the warrior's bow for ever retired and sending no more flood,  
For even the waters themselves are “full of the knowledge of the LORD.”

For still another thing, the Bible is context-specific.  
That's a three-dollar term that means that you absolutely must read Scripture  
With an eye for *who* wrote it,  
*When* it was written and what was going on at the time,  
*Whom* it was written for,  
And what *conventions* or *styles* of the day were used to write it.  
The Church doesn't do a good enough job pulling back the curtain on all that information,  
And we must change if we are to survive.  
So we shall.

For another, we have to see that The End, as it were, is for ever and always in play.  
Did you know that today is New Year's Day in the Church?  
The First Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new year for us,  
Which itself is the third year in a three-year lectionary cycle –  
Meaning that as surely as we have come to the end of something,  
... Even so, we haven't. And that had ought to give us pause.

Things end and things begin all the time.  
The earth turns; spring follows winter, and the green blade rises from the snow.  
Life follows death follows life.  
Cycles are constant.

I have not foreseen the end of the world, whenever and however it should come to pass.  
The end of time and time-keeping is not our business –  
Not ours to fret over.

All I can do is tell you what Will Spong said.  
He was a crusty old man, a wizard with words, and a right fine priest.  
A man had come into his office and was fretting to him about The End of the world,  
About Heaven and Hell, reward and punishment.  
He listened until he had enough,  
And he looked at the person sitting opposite him, and loved him.  
He said, "Friend, all I know is that God has always taken care of me,  
And I have no reason to believe that's ever going to change."

The End, my friends, is not our province. It is God's.

Our province is mission. Service. Heart. Communion.  
Our province is help and comfort and To Be Christ in a world in desperate need of it.  
Our province is to take seriously the words of Jesus:  
"As you did to the least of these, surely you did to me."  
Our province is to hear Christ saying, "The poor will always be with you,"  
And to respond to *that* fact.

Brothers and sisters, as I have matured I have learned that faith  
Is less and less about getting it right, and more and more about getting it wrong:  
About being able to mess up and keep going in spite of myself.  
My faith is no longer built on scare tactics or seeing The End everywhere I look.

If we're to be ready for any thing,  
That something is primarily to serve, learn, worship, and love,  
And to leave the things that are in God's hands right there,  
Where you could never control them even if you wanted to.

This may sound like a message of giving up on a New Year's Day –  
A day that could be filled with resolutions for taking action.  
It's not about giving up.  
It is simply the hope and prayer that we not Play that Game any more,  
But instead dwell in that place of peace which itself is the heart of God.

Hear the words of this poet. His name was Czeslaw Milosz.

On the day the world ends  
A bee circles a clover,  
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.  
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,  
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing  
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends  
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,  
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,  
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street  
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,  
The voice of a violin lasts in the air  
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder  
Are disappointed.  
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps  
Do not believe it is happening now.  
As long as the sun and the moon are above,  
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,  
As long as rosy infants are born  
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet  
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,  
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:  
No other end of the world will there be,  
No other end of the world will there be.

Let us pray.

*Lord Jesus, you yourself taught us: Do not fear; only believe. May it be so. Amen.*