

# Apocalypse: The End of it All, and All the Endings in the Meantime of Our Time

Sunday, Nov. 13, 2022

## I

Well all right! We got rid of Daylight Saving Time for a while. And now it's virtually dark by around 5:30! So as Advent draws closer, our days grow shorter and our scripture readings grow ... uh ... darker. As does this sermon this morning. But just hang on till the end because the sermon ends on a clear note of hope!

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Now, this morning's scene in Luke is, in fact, the last scene of Jesus' public ministry. So there He is, in the temple – teaching His disciples and others who crowd around Him. Our reading this morning stops short of his words about the cosmic End – the sweep of God's hand to the dying stars, “the Son of Man coming in a cloud.” But it does give us plenty to ponder about endings, on the way to that final End of it all.

What gets Jesus started here is someone's oohing and ahing at the beauty of the temple building: dazzling stones devoted to God. But Jesus whirls around in His tracks and insists there won't be a stone left on a stone – this holy house'll be nothin' but dust in the morning!

So Jesus stands there at the temple entrance and points His finger at the End of it all – and at other endings in the meantime. At shocks and blows and plagues and washouts and death. So even though He doesn't talk about God's hand swatting the dying stars, our passage this morning does give us plenty to think about ... about lots of endings along the way.

## II

Now, when you think about it, every life – your life, my life, history itself – is a story. And every story has an ending, a final page, “a last word trailing off into silence.” An author I read recently talked about the “whole great dance of things” coming to a halt. “The lights'll go out. The whole show'll close down, the door will slam shut.” God may well open another show somewhere else, but the curtain'll drop on this one. 'Cause the play you and I are appearing in is headed for closing.

But as Jesus points out, before this final Apocalypse – this end of it all – there are plenty of “apocalypses now.” Every crisis, every ending, every loss, every death, rehearses that Final End. Mark Twain's supposed to have said that the passages of scripture that bothered him most were not the ones that puzzled him, but the ones he understood clearly.

And I think we do understand Jesus' prophecy here. I mean, don't we? Every temple, every structure, every holy house, is doomed to die. I mean, name any sacred structure – church, denomination, family, friendship, passion, life itself – they all have a span and they all come to an end. They may fizzle out by entropy – a slow, winding-down, whimpering process – or they may die by violent assault.

See, think about it. You and I – products of our nuclear age – may be especially prepared to grasp the image of the sun caving in. An eyewitness to Hiroshima wrote: “On the morning of a clear sky, the sirens had just given the all-clear signal. Then ... a blinding flash cut sharply across the sky. I raised my head, facing the center of Hiroshima. ... And there I saw an enormous mass of clouds climb swiftly into the sky. Then its summit broke open and it took the shape of a monstrous mushroom.”

A physicist blinded by that same cloud later wrote, “Everything seemed so dark ... dark all over. Then I thought, ‘This is the end of the world.’”

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So you and I live on that edge of the world’s end – we breathe the chance of annihilation ... amid Putin’s and North Korea’s nuclear threats in our own dangerous world. Makes you want to start collecting canned goods in the basement and searching frantically for someone – something – you can clutch onto for safety. Makes you want to tune in to the TV to find out what to look for, what to sniff for in the air ... makes you want to buy a canary and watch if it drops off its little perch before you do.

And so we grasp Jesus’ imagery maybe better than the prophets before us. And even if you and I don’t quite grasp the cosmic end of it all – whimpering or exploding or just collapsing – we do know our own end will arrive someday, don’t we? The end of the world is coming ... for you and me. There is no escape. We’ll all face our own “apocalypse now” ... sooner or later.

### III

Well, where is the good news here? ’Cause most endings are sad, and so I think all our endings deserve some mourning. We sit and mourn among our ruins. But through and underneath all this gloom, what is Jesus really saying here, with His images of earthquakes and fires and betrayals? What’s the point of His awful, stunning imagery?

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I think He’s saying that whatever is going on in our history – whatever is going on – is mixed with what’s really going on in God’s vision. ’Cause in the middle of our misery, when you and I see no relief on the horizon, faith can turn its face toward heaven for a glimpse of misery’s end ... looking for the beginning of the age to come.

And the whole creation stands at the window – as we stand – with noses pressed against the windowpane – eagerly waiting for the day of our deliverance. And out of the ashes rise the possibilities of freedom and new life to come.

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Now let’s think: Maybe you’ve known that awful freedom of endings. I have. It may be the terror of losing a job mixed with a shimmer of freedom and release as you start down a new path. Filled with new possibilities. No longer bound by the old system. Thinking, “I’m free!” I am free!

So I think Jesus’ lesson here is that we should hold onto our temples lightly. Cherish but not clutch. Embrace the world without trying to hold it. ’Cause all these things will end.

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But there's freedom and lightness, as well as terror, in such endings. We hear Jesus warning against naiveté: "Don't be misled." He cautions against despair: "Don't be terrified when you face these things." And He exhorts stubborn hope: "Witness, and endure, and finally save your soul" in the end.

So trust that death does not reign, but God does. And grasp a hope and a peace that the world cannot give or take away. 'Cause I think ultimately you and I do live on faith and hope. So know that whatever cloud comes to meet you, your faith will see the face of Jesus Christ.

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So, on this Sunday morning, I leave you not with a prophecy, but a promise. I cannot forecast the world's future. I cannot say whether the gathering cloud we see on the horizon brings a rain of blessings or a firestorm of death. I can't say. But as a preacher of the Gospel, I can ring out its promise to you.

In this season of approaching darkness – in our bleak season, in our dark of night – "Look up and stand up and raise your heads ... and reach your hands to heaven, and shout, "Amen ... and alleluia! 'Cause our redemption is coming near."

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And so shall it be. Alleluia.

Amen.