

## **Homily: Sunday After next in Advent**

If you comb the internet, listen to a podcast or even tune into the nightly news, you are bound to hear of all sorts of doomsday scenarios floating around in the world. There's the old Mayan Calendar, there's global warming, maybe we fear nuclear warfare and wonder what some crazed dictator might do, perhaps an asteroid impact, then there's large scale terrorism, and of course there is always a possibility of an alien invasion. All of these scenarios predict the end of civilization as we know it, and possibly the end of all human life.

Some scenarios, such as global warming and nuclear warfare, seem to suggest that we can avoid destruction if we take certain actions, if we are proactive in our efforts. Others, such as alien invasion and asteroid impact, leave us with no available action and offer no hope.

The Bible is not without predictions of cosmic, or at least local, disaster. Such predictions often take the form of what we call "the apocalypse". This type of literature contains strange creatures and wild images. The book of Revelation is a good example, as are portions of the book of Daniel.

There are other predictions of disaster in the Bible that are somewhat less apocalyptic in nature, but are also quite frightening. This morning's lesson from Jeremiah is an example of that.

The prophet envisions a world that has returned to the chaotic state described in the opening verses of Genesis:

"The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep."

Jeremiah uses almost the same words:

"I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form and void; and the heavens, and they had no light."

All living things emerge, in the Genesis account of creation, because God speaks His word. They disappear when God withdraws His breath, which He does when people turn from Him to serve other gods. So, the prophet envisions a world where there are no people, no birds, and no vegetation. A world of nothing living.

A common image in the prophetic writings is one of Israel as the unfaithful wife of God. The Jews were constantly turning to the worship and service of the false gods of surrounding nations and cultures. It is those gods to which Jeremiah refers as Israel's lovers. Those other gods will not save you, he says, when God withdraws His breath from you.

“Though thou clothest thyself with crimson and deckest thyself with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee.”

The world began with chaos, and it will end with chaos. It really doesn't matter if we all die together in a global disaster, or if each of us dies individually over a period of time. “All flesh is grass,” says the prophet, and we are all going to die someday. All the plastic surgery, all the possessions and things that money can buy will not protect us from the judgment of God or from the sentence of death under which we all stand. At some point we will all face death.

Death is a time of darkness and chaos. Everything falls apart. The promise of a new creation in Christ and a resurrection of the body, does not exempt us from passing through that time of destruction, decay, and de-creation. As St. Paul says in First Corinthians, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”

In St. Luke's gospel, Jesus Himself makes dire predictions about the persecution of His followers, the conquest of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Romans. He even predicts great environmental catastrophes, but He concludes by saying, “When these things come to pass, look up and raise your heads, for your salvation draweth neigh.”

It may be that some of the doomsday scenarios that we hear about will actually be played out in our time, perhaps not. In 2020 we have already witnessed things that have caused great destruction. Earthquakes, raging fires, hurricanes, and the deadly Covid-19 virus. One thing that is certain is that each of us has our own doomsday when we leave the old world and enter the new one.

But God is faithful even in death. St. Paul again says,

“If we have died with him [that is with Christ], we shall also live with him. If we endure we shall also reign with him. If we deny him he will also deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.”

The prophets, even as they predict the destruction of Israel in war, also predict her restoration. Even in the apocalyptic literature of the Bible, there is a vision of a new creation in the wake of the destruction of the old. But the new cannot emerge until the old is destroyed. That is why the cross is the central symbol of our faith. It was an instrument of death, but we see it now as an instrument of life.

The God of the Bible is a God of new beginnings. That is why he is also a God of endings. You cannot have a new beginning until the old has come to an end. So, God says of himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end.”

The day of death and judgment is a day we cannot avoid no matter what we do, but it is a day we can prepare for, not by stockpiling food and guns and ammunition in a bunker somewhere, but by laying up what Jesus called “treasure in heaven”.

All of the doomsday scenarios, including those in the Bible, foresee the end of the material world. But none of them predict the end of spiritual realities like love, truth, righteousness, mercy, justice, and self-sacrifice.

The book of Revelation describes a new Heaven and a new Earth that emerge after the destruction of the old heaven and the old earth. Even Jeremiah, who goes on for chapter after chapter predicting doom and destruction, ends up with the promise of a new beginning. And that's really what the doomsday scenarios in the Bible are all about.

People who do not believe see all virtues as being rooted in the material world. When that world passes away, there is nothing left for them. But as Christians, we believe that the spiritual realities I have mentioned are part of the nature of God Himself, and so cannot be destroyed by anything.

It is true, as Job says, that we brought nothing into this world and that we can carry nothing out. But it is also true that the good works we do in this life precede us into the world to come and await our arrival. God treasures them and keeps them for us even as He destroys all that is not in accord with His own nature. The good works we do mean nothing when it comes to the salvation of our souls, but they are rewarded, as Jesus says, and they adorn our lives in the Kingdom of God.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent – the season of new beginnings. Next Sunday we begin a new liturgical year. It is a time to assess where we are in our spiritual lives and lay aside the old ways that are displeasing to God and destructive to our own souls and bodies. Turn away from the false gods of wealth and worldly power for they will not save you in the day of darkness and death. Look to the One who alone is able to save your soul from hell and bring you to new life. Look to Him who comes both as Judge and as Savior. This is a time of endings and of new beginnings.

Advent is a season that reminds us both of judgment and of hope. Judgment and hope go together for all who put their trust in God.

To the only wise God our Savior. Be Glory, majesty, dominion and power both now and forever. Amen

