

The Day the World Ended

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 28, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

“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.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”
(Luke 21:25-36, NRSV)

October 21, 2011 ... It was the most important date in all of history. Why? Because *it was the day the world ended*. Just over ten years ago now. Just as fundamentalist radio preacher Harold Camping said it would.

The previous May, all the saved people were taken up to Heaven in the Rapture, and that was followed by five months of fire, brimstone, and plagues on Earth, culminating on October 21, with the final destruction of the world.

It’s really a good thing that the world finally did end, what with all the failed predictions in the past, courtesy of countless Christian doomsayers and biblical prophecy enthusiasts. Even Mr. Camping himself had been wrong once before when he had placed Judgment Day on September 6, 1994. So he was only 17 years off on the first prediction ... at least he got it right the second time around. Virtually every date-setting, end-times guru of the past two millennia has had two or more public tries at it. At *least* two. As they say, if at first you don’t succeed ...

The urge to keep trying to get the timing of the “End Times” right was long a constant in the fervent soul. But Camping outdid them all. Biblical literalist extraordinaire that he was, he managed to pull off a feat that should never have been possible with his super-literal Bible ... that of apparently disproving the plain, literal meaning of Mark 13, verse 32: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Even

though Jesus himself said that even *he* didn't know when the end would come, Mr. Camping found a way to circumvent all that and get the inside tip straight from the top.

So, there you go. And now here we are.

But that's it, isn't it? *Here we are*. Despite Mr. Camping's certainty that *no one would be here to talk about Advent 2021*, somehow – against all odds – we made it. We weren't raptured. But we weren't "left behind" either. Sincere though he was, Mr. Camping was – like all the others – *literally wrong*. The end did *not* come, though it did for *him*. He died just a few years ago, regretting in the last two years of his life that he had spent so long on a quest that he finally understood was unbiblical to begin with.

Happily, we *are* still here, and today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is meant to be a season of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. In this season, we are invited to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah. We are invited to live again in that space between what *is* and what *should be*. The early Christians knew that the greatest gift of all was worth waiting for. They knew that to re-experience the *longing* for his coming, to explore again the meaning of his birth – through worship, liturgy, song, and changed lives – was important for the soul, as it was a practice of trust and patience.

But patience, we know, doesn't come easy. And modern American culture doesn't make it any easier. *Christmas* doesn't just wait for December 25th. It seems every year, it starts just a little bit earlier. And so, why not just forget about Advent? What's the point? I mean, who really calls this time "Advent season"? It's the *Christmas* season – and isn't the Christmas season the center of some of our fondest memories? Certainly some of my happiest memories as a child are associated with it.

It wasn't always just about getting more and more stuff (though the stuff was nice). The whole season was magical. I remember beautiful church services all through December with family and then of course on Christmas Eve, followed by eggnog with my grandmother by the fireplace. Those were good days. She has since passed on, and so much has changed, but the memories usually put me in a grateful frame of mind.

We must acknowledge that for many of us, this season is also *painful* for many reasons (for me too) – a reminder of what once was and now isn't. But the pain hurts precisely because it is so often rooted in real memories of special traditions and sacred times.

And finally, of course, dare we forget, there is the precious baby Jesus ... the "reason for the season" as we might put it. The story of his birth is the most beloved story of all time, told and re-told more than any other, on display in serene nativity scenes and enacted in cute children's pageants. It's no wonder we can lose ourselves in the beauty and sweetness of it. In a season already awash in nostalgia and sentimentality, the story of the birth of Jesus seals the deal. Bring on Christmas now.

But maybe all this isn't enough to convince you. Maybe there's something about the original idea behind Advent that appeals to you ... the idea that there really could be value in *waiting* for Christmas. To oddballs such as you, I direct your attention to our scripture readings for this morning – Mr. Camping would *love* them. They seem like a most bizarre and unwelcome intrusion into this happy fest. They break the spell of the good ole' days and speak of the *end* of days ... of a time of judgment, of a coming reckoning which no one will escape. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1a). The gospel text speaks of a day to come when "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." But what does all *that* have to do with *this* season?

It's true that Advent for the church has always been a season of waiting for the celebration of the *birth* of Jesus, but it *also* has always been a time of looking forward to the consummation of all things – when Christ returns in glory to claim his Kingdom. What an odd juxtaposition ... looking ahead to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but *also* to the *return* of Jesus at the End of Time! And the contrast could hardly be starker. With the first (the one we prefer to think about), we have little baby Jesus ... meek and mild, laid in a manger ... With the second, we have Jesus Christ – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – who returns in triumph and brings on the End of Days! Real "Book of Revelation" stuff. So ... now we have *another* good reason to jump Advent and land straightaway into Christmas!

Advent ... Is there something that we are missing? Is there something that we are meant to see?

Strangely enough, ordinary people in the Greco-Roman world two thousand years ago would have understood our impatience quite well. In fact, people throughout the Roman Empire celebrated the year-end / new-year holidays in much the same way that we do today. As biblical scholar Richard Horsley has written, it was a great, elaborate festival held in honor of the birth of the Lord and Savior of the world. And it didn't just last a few days, but rather *several weeks*. It celebrated not only the beginning of a new year, but also of a new era – an era of universal peace achieved by one lauded as the Prince of Peace, and was marked by wild indulgence in feasting, drinking, and gift-giving. The poor were the recipients of charity from the rich, so they too could enjoy the festivities and good food – even if only once a year.

The presence of this celebration virtually pervaded public space – there was no escaping it. It was a holiday season filled with elaborate public entertainments, parades, rituals, and ceremonies, presided over by political and religious leaders who knew quite well that such bread and circuses could keep everybody happy ... and perhaps sufficiently distracted. It all sounds very familiar, doesn't it?

Of course, the "Lord and Savior of the world", the "Prince of Peace" lauded in these celebrations at the beginning of the Common Era was not a legendary figure of a mythic past, but a real man ... only he wasn't born in Bethlehem and wasn't wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. His name was *Caesar Augustus*.

Since bringing to an end the devastating civil wars which followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, Caesar's nephew and adoptive son Octavian assumed absolute power in 27 BC. He was lauded as Augustus, the "Great," ushering in the *Pax Romana*, the "Roman Peace," and henceforth was given divine titles – for who but a son of the gods could have achieved what he did? He was eagerly acclaimed as *Dominus* (Lord) and *Filius Deus* (Son of God). He was heralded as the *Savior* who had brought the end of a long, dark night and the beginning of a whole new era for the world. He was praised as the *Prince of Peace*.

It was a peace achieved through conquest and victory, through sheer military *might*. And it brought untold wealth to Rome. And so from these facts was woven a grand imperial narrative, a "script" reinforced every day and in every way, which promised to make the people safe and happy; a great story which presented and reinforced a world not unlike our own ... a world obsessed with the acquisition of more and more stuff ... a world marked by the worship of money and power ... a world in which all things, even *people*, could be transformed into commodities. Not unlike our own world at all, if you think about it.

The script was – and is – a powerful one and has been with us from the dawn of civilization. It has had tremendous staying power. It is the "way of the world" we might say and may seem as all-encompassing as it seems inevitable. The only problem with this script – then and now – is that it *fails*. It cannot deliver. It serves up, in the end, neither safety nor happiness – though all the while, like a drug, it insinuates itself into our imaginations, persisting in its promises, and ever-driving us back into the frenzied pursuit of a satisfaction that will last.

Everything around us conspires to keep us from stopping and deeply considering what is really going on. Everything would distract us from stopping and deeply listening to the witness of our own hearts. Even still, we may live in a state of unease – knowing that something isn't quite right. For somewhere deep down, we *know* that material things don't bring happiness ... that the world as it is, as we *uphold* it, is light years from what it is meant to be. But that still, small voice ... or perhaps better, that gentle *song* ... It's so very hard to hear, especially right now.

There's no telling what could happen if it *was* heard.

The story we tell on Christmas Eve is the story of just such a time. And it changed everything. It's a story of poor, unwed parents far from home, for whom there was no place in the inn, giving birth to a child whom they kept warm in a stable ... in the hay of a feeding trough for animals. It was a birth which came with an announcement – a royal announcement – that the *true* Savior of the world had been born ... the *true* Prince of Peace had come. But the momentous, joyous word rung out not in the halls of power nor in the mansions of the fashionable, but came to those who were called the *favoured of God*: the refuse, the outcasts of that world, who were told that they no longer had anything of which to be afraid – "For I bring good news of great joy for all the people: for to *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord."

But are we – we who are *not* the outcasts of the world – willing to trace out the implications of this? If we still hear this proclamation as just a sweet, sentimental story, then the Caesars and Herods of this world understand the angel's word better than *we* do. Can we face the challenge that this child poses to all *our* assumptions ... to all our comfort and complacency ... to all our ideas of *what* counts and *who* counts? What *is* this story if it's not actually an *alternative script* – announcing an *alternative* savior ... actually an announcement of the *end* of one world, and the *birth* of another?

Perhaps now we can see that the jarring readings of a few minutes ago are strangely appropriate. This story of Jesus' birth is anything but a "sweet story" – it is a subversive call to *wake up*. The old script is revealed for what it is: a *lie* ... Its promises of "security," rooted in oppression ... Its promises of abundance, upheld on the backs of the poor and the vulnerable ... Its promises of material satisfaction, obscuring lonely and empty hearts.

This is what those first followers of Jesus came to see. They lived in a world marked by the worship of power and obsessed with celebrity and with the drive to accumulate more and more. That world had its charms, its seductive lure. It still does. But their eyes opened by the Child, they could never live by that world's script again ... its illusions now being exposed in the light of a new day. They came to see that with the birth of Jesus a *new* world had dawned. A new world was being born.

My friends, that's why we observe Advent. That's why we don't jump into Christmas, for if we do, we are bound to miss its hidden treasure, and that is to miss out on the greatest gift of all. In this season, may we learn the art of waiting and of trust, and be driven by a persevering faith that what *is* and what *should be* will, one day, be one.

May it be so – to the glory of God! Amen.