

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Sunday Next Before Advent

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.²

“. . . I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled. I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the LORD, and by his fierce anger. For thus hath the LORD said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end. For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black: because I have spoken it, I have purposed it, and will not repent, neither will I turn back from it. The whole city shall flee for the noise of the horsemen and bowmen; they shall go into thickets, and climb up upon the rocks: every city shall be forsaken, and not a man dwell therein. And when thou art spoiled, what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life. For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail, and the anguish as of her that bringeth forth her first child, the voice of the daughter of Zion, that bewaileth herself, that spreadeth her hands, saying, Woe is me now! for my soul is wearied because of murderers.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first thirty-first Verse of the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before

him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

There are all sorts of doomsday scenarios floating around today. There's the Mayan calendar, there's global warming, there's nuclear warfare, there's asteroid impact, there's large-scale terrorism and now cyberterrorism, and there's even an alien invasion scenario. All of these scenarios predict the end of civilization as we know it, and possibly the extinction of all human life.

The Bible has some doomsday scenarios of its own, and some of them are really scary, like the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages with their strange creatures and wild images. Others, like today's Old Testament lesson, are no less scary but not as grotesque.

The prophet Jeremiah envisions a world that has returned to the state of chaos described in the opening verses of Genesis: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." The prophet uses almost the same words: "I beheld the earth, and lo, it was without form and void; the heavens, and they had no light."

In Genesis, the Spirit of God, whom we call "the Lord and giver of life", hovered over the primordial sea, and from it life emerged. But in Jeremiah's vision, God has withdrawn his Spirit, and as a result all created life has vanished: "I looked, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled."

The world began with chaos, and it will end as it began. But in all of the Biblical scenarios of the end of the world, there are two elements that are lacking in the secular ones. The first is judgment. The second is hope. Those two elements endow the predictions with meaning.

The withdrawal of God's spirit and the resulting destruction that Jeremiah envisions comes about because Israel has turned from the worship and service of God to the worship and service of the gods of the surrounding nations and cultures. Those gods, and the nations they represent, are the lovers that Jeremiah refers to when he depicts Israel as an unfaithful wife:

"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. They will seek thy life."

And this is true for us as well as for Israel. The false gods of the world will not save us. The culture that surrounds us pursues pleasure

and eschews discipline. The culture that surrounds us puts its trust in money, in technology, and in politics. Those gods will not save us, and the people who serve them will despise us. They will have no respect for us and will drag us down with them to destruction if we abandon our true love to try to make ourselves attractive to them. God has already condemned them.

The second element of the doomsday scenarios in the Bible is that they offer hope to the faithful. Jesus describes the coming conquest of Jerusalem and its destruction by the Romans in frightening, almost apocalyptic terms, and then He says, “When these things come to pass, look up and raise your heads, for your salvation draweth nigh.”

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.

The God of the Bible is the God of new beginnings. The creation is a new beginning. The Exodus is a new beginning. Easter is a new beginning. But before there can be a new beginning there has to be an end. The old must go away. The chaos must be vanquished. The Egyptians and their gods must be destroyed. The Messiah must be crucified before He can be raised from the dead and exalted to glory. Every beginning is also an end and every end is also a beginning.

And that is also true of each individual as well. St. Paul says, “That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” What he means is that you can’t get to heaven unless you die. So we do not fear death, and we do not fear the end of the world as we know it. The sadness of leaving the old is swallowed up by the joy of entering the new. At least that is true for those who have faith in the justice and mercy of God.

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. 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.

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

² *Jeremiah 4:23-31 (KJV).*

³ *St. Matthew 25:31-46 (KJV).*