

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Sunday Next Before Advent

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

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 in the world. There's the Mayan Calendar, there's global warming, there's nuclear warfare, there's an asteroid impact, there's large scale terrorism, and there's 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. Others, such as alien invasion and asteroid impact, 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 “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,⁴ 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 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 makeup, all the 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.

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 I 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 that some of the doomsday scenarios that we hear about will actually be played out in our time. It may be that they will not. 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 “treasure in heaven”, as Jesus said.

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

Secularists 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. It 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. That is what the prophets tell us.

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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).*

⁴ *In Hebrew, the word ruach means both “breath” and “spirit”. Breath, of course, is the most basic sign of life, so when God withdraws His breath from something, He removes both His Spirit from it and takes away from it the breath of life. Ed.*