

In the end, God

Rev 1:4b-8, 5:11-14

A sermon for Christ the King Sunday

This Sunday, Christ the King Sunday, marks the end of the church year. The church calendar is something made up by tradition, but we do ask about the end. When is it? This is called apocalyptic, which means revelation. We are familiar with the term “apocalyptic” because in 1979 the movie “Apocalypse Now” became a huge sensation.

In looking back to the 1950's and 1960's, the American clairvoyant, Edgar Cayce, gained a kind of celebrity status for his predictions about the end, and he predicted the world would end in 1998.

In 1969 Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, warned of the end of the earth due to overpopulation. We forget how popular it was. It sold over 27 million copies. When his prophecy didn't come true, he recalculated and wrote more books.

About 1995-2000, people started thinking about Y2K and the end of the century. What would happen?

In 1997 the Hale-Bopp Comet appeared and was visible to the naked eye for about 18 months. As it came close to the earth, 39 people, who were part of the Heaven's Gate cult in San Diego, committed suicide in order to be included in this coming of the end.

Between 1995 and 2007, the 16 volumes of the *Left Behind* book series about the Rapture and end times sold 65,000,000 copies. Churches of all denominations had to respond to that apocalyptic fervor.

In 2008 a book about the end came out. It was titled, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to 2012*. Combining ancient Mayan prophecies with New Age religion, it claimed that on August 8, 1987, there had been a harmonic convergence of the planets. That convergence initiated a 25-year grace period during which everyone was to get right with the universe. The end of the grace period would happen in 2012 and that would be the end of the world. As the title says, it's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to 2012*.

What do we say about all of the above?

Nothing new here.

Church history is full of apocalyptic predictions. A few examples: In 1148 an Irish Bishop, St. Malakey, put out a list of popes that were to come. He said there would be 112 popes. And the current pope, Pope Francis, is the 112th pope. What do you know; it must be about that time!

You know about the Black Death which decimated Europe from 1348-58. At least 40% and maybe 50% of the people died. They thought of this as the end of history.

At the time of the Reformation there was Nostradamus. He made all sorts of predictions that have been totally discredited.

In 1741 a Lutheran named Johann Albrecht Bengel pointed out that the end, if you calculated according to the Book of Daniel, is coming in about 100 years.

About 1830 John Darby, an Anglo-Irish Bible teacher, invented the whole business about "the Rapture." Nobody had thought of it or mentioned it before, except a "prophetess" a few years before him.

In 1843-44 an American Baptist preacher, William Miller, stirred up thousands of people with his predictions about the end. Many of his followers sold their property and went on mountain tops to wait for the end. After his predictions didn't occur as expected, his followers dispersed but eventually regrouped and became the Seventh Day Adventists.

One could go on and on. One academic book on the history of apocalyptic movements is several inches thick.

Apocalyptic thinking, however, is not just a Christian phenomenon. Communism is a kind of Christian heresy, an end-times utopian movement.

During WWII allied nations air-dropped soldiers and supplies on the island of New Guinea. Natives, who had had no exposure to modern tools and technology were shocked by the cargo, that is, the weapons, supplies, and soldiers. Some of the natives formed what came to be called cargo cults. They would perform rituals using wooden rifles they made, rituals in which they would imitate the behavior of the soldiers in the hope that the heavens would once again open and drop cargo in their midst.

Finally, apocalyptic thinking is also found in other religions. A few examples: Zoroastrianism goes back to 7 and 8th centuries BC, and it is still alive today. In Islam the Shiites, representing 15% of Muslims, are apocalyptic, as are Hasidim Jews.

Those who study this, psychologists and sociologists, call this mindset "millennialism." It occurs for individuals and for groups in times of upheaval, conflict, and fear. Apocalyptic fervor is simply a sociological, psychological response to trauma, according to this kind of study.

Two great temptations. Out of all this there are two great dangers, two temptations. The **first temptation** is to ignore all this because nothing is going to happen. After all, what's real is that life doesn't work that way, in millennial ways, in apocalyptic ways. We've all seen cartoons of a wizened old man with a placard which warns: "Repent. The end is now." We feel superior. We laugh. We are modern, smart, above it all. Or so we think.

In fact, apocalyptic thinking has simply become mainstream today through secular prophets of climate doom. We aren't aware of how pervasive it is and how caught we are in it. Bjørn Lomborg, noted Danish climatologist, wrote recently: "Reasonable conversations about climate change are rare, but they'd be more common if political elites dropped their **apocalyptic** language" (WSJ 11/11/2021).

Scripture points to the end and reminds us that it comes like a thief in the night:

- Matt 24:43: "If the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming he would have watched and not let his house be broken into."
- 1 Thess 5:2: "When people say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them . . . and there will be no escape."
- 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief."
- Rev 3:3: "If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you." 16:15: "Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!"

A similar message is conveyed in the story of the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13) and in the parable (Luke 12:16-21) about the farmer who had a good crop and said: "I'll build more barns." At the end of the parable it says: "You fool! Tonight your life is required of you." At our peril we say that the end has nothing to do with us.

The second great temptation is to be preoccupied with end-time predictions and fixated on looking for signs and interpreting alleged signs. When you stop to think of it, life is uncertain and fragile. When we think of all the ills our flesh is heir to and how thin the veneer of civilization, it's no wonder people either get caught up in apocalyptic thinking, or are tempted to become like the ancient Stoics or modern cynics and just withdraw. After all, one way or another, catastrophe comes, and so does the end.

Being preoccupied with predictions is not the way to go. As Matthew 16:4 reminds us: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah." The "sign of Jonah" = "the cross and resurrection." And nothing more. No added signs in schemes, dreams, timelines, or human events.

What do we as Christians say to this? What is the gospel? It is about the defeat of sin, death, and the devil, as Luke 10:18 states: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." The Last Judgment happened on the cross, as John 19:30 states: "It is finished."

It can be summed up in the earliest Christian creed, found in 1 Corinthians 12:3: "Jesus is Lord." Lord means the God who is God of all things. He is Lord of everything that happens in my life, in your life. He is Lord of history, and he made himself Lord of history by coming into our history, dying and rising again. He is Lord of the universe. He made it and he is ultimately the One who is Lord of it. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 8:6: "There is one God, the

Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." (Also Romans 10:9).

We then can say with Paul in Romans 8:31-32: "What shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

And the seal and guarantee for you and me is our baptism, as it says in Romans 6:5: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

On this Christ the King Sunday, as we look at the summing up of everything that has happened from the first of Advent last year and where it's all going, we know that "yes," we are fragile, sinful, broken human beings, but because of him everything is different, and we can confidently live in him.

There is no better way to herald Christ the King, the "firstborn of the dead, the ruler of kings on earth" (Rev 1:5), the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8), than with the words of Revelation, Chapter 5 (verses 12-13), remembering how they are sung in Handel's Messiah:

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and power to be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen."