

Bishop Jeffery Lee
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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The End

In the file where I keep such things I have a letter informing me that the end of the world was to take place on December 4, 2012 (Why is it always December?). The letter was from someone named Reverend Ed. It was an impassioned letter, littered with quotations from the Bible, asking me in the most serious tones about the state of my soul. Was I right with God? Because, the letter asserted, the end is near. Just look at these Bible prophecies being fulfilled before our eyes.

Now, can you tell, this sort of thing drives me crazy? It makes me want to run for cover into the arms of people like Ron Reagan Jr. who I hear on the car radio with some regularity asking me to join The Freedom from Religion Foundation. People like Mr. Reagan point directly to people like my friend, Reverend Ed as examples of why religious faith can be not simply delusional but dangerous. And I am sympathetic to some of their arguments. It's hard to see substantive differences between the dire predictions of apocalyptic preachers like Reverend Ed and the rantings of militant fundamentalist preachers elsewhere in the world.

But unless I missed something, December 4, 2012 has come and gone and the world is still pretty much the same as it was. And in a way, that's too bad.

I saved Reverend Ed's letter. I have remembered it. Because, you see, I believe Reverend Ed is right. I believe the end is near. Your end is near and so is mine. The knowledge of the end of all our personal worlds is nearer than any of us can stand – at least for very long. That knowledge is there, just below the surface. We know the end is near. And for the most part, the knowledge is too much for us – and we hide. It is, after all, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Fantasies about geo-political fulfillment of Bible predictions – apart from representing a real misunderstanding of what prophecy was and is – I believe that the biblical doom peddlers are just another smoke screen, another place to hide from the real knowledge of the real end. Because the end is not about some gold lamé Jesus appearing in a million watt spotlight over the eastern horizon. The real end comes in ways that cannot be romanticized out of significance: in stock market plummets and lost jobs, in despair-inducing politics, in failed marriages and broken promises, in unfulfilled dreams and dashed hopes. Finally, in the inescapable realities of our own bodies and their decline and death. The world around us comes to an end in these darkening, shortening days of the year when even the fields and the trees seem to die. And I believe we are all confronted with all the ancient anxieties of our race about that – will the sun come back and bring us life again? We know the end is near, and we are afraid. God knows.

But the Christian faith has the audacity to speak of hope, even joy in the face of that fear. And it is a tough hope and profoundly realistic one. And we need it now more than ever. In the gospel today, Jesus warns about those who will try to bypass the painful reality of things as they go very wrong. And whose life is free of that reality? All our lives go wrong at some time – sometimes terribly wrong. Beware, says Jesus of those who will promise that they can fish you out of your humanity. They are false prophets.

The readings this morning all remind us that there is no way out of our human condition with its limitations and suffering. But that if we will only walk by faith, if we will only risk believing that God has entered our suffering and suffers with us, then we might come to that joy that is deeper and stronger than any fear. That hope is at the heart of the faith of this church of ours. We are not here in this parish to be fished out of our humanity – with all its pain and possibility – no, we're here to discover the depths of it.

That's what the Christian life is all about. That's why in a couple of weeks we will kindle our Advent lights on an evergreen wreath as the earth heads for the darkest days of the year. That's why we share this simple food of the Eucharist in a world that divides people by wealth and class and color and all the rest. That's why we give of our substance in an American Express world of conspicuous consumption, a world that tells us we can buy our way of our end. That's why we have a cross and sing Alleluias – even and especially at the burial of our dead. That's why we bring new Christians to the water of baptism and sign them with that cross.

Jesus' words this morning must have been terrible to his first hearers. He's talking about unimaginable terrors – the kind of terrors we know all too well — images from Ukraine or Gaza or the agonies at our own borders. Jesus was teaching as he sat on the Mount of Olives, looking across the valley to the temple, that center of the world for faithful Jews. And he says, even there in God's house the time is coming when people will not be able to find God... even there.

And that is good news too. In the face of the end, in the face of our deepest, most ancient fears, hope is not to be found in the temple. Religion will never save us. Thank God. If you put your faith in religion, in the church, or the clergy, or the pope, or a bishop, or Reverend Ed, or Ron Reagan you are again going to be cosmically disappointed. I guarantee it. Your fears will still have you. No, in the face of the end, in the face of our fear of it, real hope is never going to be found in religion. Our only hope is in the Crucified One, Jesus himself. Jesus is the new temple and we are in him. We have been baptized not into a religion but into a whole new way of life. That's what it means to be baptized, to be the church. Not the institutional trappings. The only purpose for clergy and budgets and buildings and pledge cards and all the rest is to create a place, to ensure the means by which people can discover that Jesus Christ is their life and their hope. And the worth of any church as an institution must be assessed by how faithful it is to that task. If we are not inviting people to discover a relationship with Jesus Christ then there is simply no excuse for us.

The only excuse for all this is that we have good news to share. Even in the face of these troubled times, we have been given the best news there could ever be — we've been given this news to share in a world dying to hear it: Jesus Christ is alive. He is with us. Right now and for ever. And because of that we need never be afraid ... of anything, not ultimately. Jesus Christ is the source of our life, our beginning and our end.