

DOOMSDAY SHMOOMSDAY
Sermon for Advent 1C—Luke 21:25-36
LPC, 11/29/09

Have you seen the new movie *2012*? This special-effects extravaganza is based on the theory, disputed by archeologists, that the Mayans predicted the world will end on December 21 in the year 2012. The movie attributes the end of the world to the heating of the earth's core, and supposedly shows, among other cataclysms, tsunami waves breaking over the peaks of the Himalayas.

You'd need a sociologist or a psychologist to explain the market for doomsday movies, but it's clearly there. My theory would be that people go to such movies as a way of processing their fears of death and an uncertain future.

Our tradition actually has quite a lot to say about the end of the world. In the world of religion, the end of the world is called the apocalypse. Literature and theology that deals with the apocalypse is called apocalyptic.

The prophets wrote quite a lot of apocalyptic material. We have an example in this morning's selection from Jeremiah. Of course, most of the prophets, including Jeremiah, lived in times that seemed like the end of the world to many Jews. The Jews were divided into two kingdoms: one, in the north of Palestine, called Israel; the other, in the south, called Judah. At the time Jeremiah was writing, Israel had already been conquered and much of her population carted off and enslaved. Judah literally had the enemy at the gates, and things did not look good.

Jeremiah wrote that Judah would indeed fall and go the way of Israel. Jeremiah, and many of his fellow prophets, also predicted that a descendent of King David's would eventually be raised up and rule righteously over a restored kingdom. We read these passages now in Advent for a reason.

Advent is the four-week season preceding Christmas. Advent begins today. As Christians we read Jeremiah's predictions of a restored kingdom, believing that Jesus, whose birth we celebrate in four weeks, is the restorer of God's kingdom on earth. We believe that Jesus is the savior, the descendent of David, that Jeremiah predicted.

We are, of course, living in a schizophrenic time frame. In Advent, we await the coming of Jesus at Christmas, as if it hasn't happened yet. We also know that Jesus' birth has already happened. Indeed, Jesus was already born, and lived and died 2,000 years ago. We know a lot about what Jesus said and did during that already completed lifetime.

One of the interesting things Jesus talked about was the end of time. Jesus talks about the end of time as something that is still going to happen. In other words, Jesus' coming does not prevent the end of the world from happening. In fact, Jesus sometimes talks as if his coming accelerates the end of the world.

In today's selection from Luke, Jesus first he predicts widespread destruction: '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 Jesus says that this end is in fact immanent: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until things have taken place."

One thing Jesus does not do, in fact, never does, is promise that bad things won't happen to his followers. Jesus never promises freedom from death and desolation.

Jesus does promise redemption: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We hear that word redemption in church a lot, but it may not mean a lot to you. It may not seem like something that is worth all the death and desolation. But it is. Think of what redemption means in contexts other than that of religion. The various meanings of redemption include manumission from slavery, the buying back of a pawned possession, the forgiveness of debt, the restoration of something damaged.

This is what we are promised. Jesus promises that whatever enslaves us: sin, inadequacy, chronic disease, oppression from outside or within, will be removed. We will be free. Jesus promises that God will rescue us from whatever pawn shop desperation in our lives has driven us to. Jesus promises that we can stand before God without guilt or shame. Jesus promises our perfection and restoration. These are indeed wonderful promises.

Death and desolation are not the worst that can happen. This was a realization that came to me on September 12, 2001. Remember that I was living in Washington, only 2 or 3 miles from the Pentagon when the plane hit. I felt the earth shake and saw the smoke. Everyone was speculating on whether there might be additional attacks. And I realized that if such a thing were to happen and I should die, I should not die without hope. I should not die without love. I should not die without faith in something greater than the evil of 9-11.

Death and desolation are not the worst that can happen. The worst that could happen is that there is no hope. The worst that could happen would be if Jesus' victory over death and desolation were not assured. But this victory is assured. Jesus coming at Christmas, in history, in human experience, signifies the beginning of the end of whatever evil threatens us. Heaven and earth will pass away, but Jesus' words will not pass away. God's love will win. Doomsday shmoomsday.