

Sermon for Proper 28 year C
Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
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Isaiah 65:17-25 | Canticle 9 | 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 | Luke 21:5-19

As the church year draws near to the end of ordinary time, we begin to see in the lectionary the glint of Advent out of the corner of our eye, that season in which we look forward to Christ's coming into the world, both his humble coming in the manger in Bethlehem, and his Second Coming in great glory. Luke's gospel strikes an ominous tone: the destruction of the temple, wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines and plagues, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven, persecution of the saints. In my youth I was raised in a religious tradition that assumed an apocalyptic ideology. Looking at the world around us with its wars and rumors of wars, we believed that we were indeed living in the last days, that the Great Tribulation was imminent, we knew that The End was near. We expected that we would soon find ourselves in the world described by William Butler Yeats's famous poem "The Second Coming." The year was 1919 when Yeats wrote:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Though Yeats was writing in the wake of World War I, his vision could have just as easily applied to the beginning of the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak, or to any number of eras in human history. Indeed, since the earliest days of the church, one of the most enduring beliefs has been that The End is *near*. In making a quick scan of apocalyptic predictions on Wikipedia, I found over 160 predictions of specific dates on which the world was supposed to end, spanning from the year 66 to September 25, 2022. Now don't worry, let me put your mind at ease—the world didn't end. It's safe to say that those predictions were miscalculated. We're still here. You still have to fold that laundry that's been sitting in the basket for a week. But all this does lead one to wonder about how human beings are so fascinated by the prospect of doomsday.

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul addresses two main themes: 1. the false teaching that The End was already upon them and 2. Christians who refused to work and were therefore burdening the community. Many commentators see a connection between these two themes. They knew that The End was near. And if the world was about to end anyway, why would one bother to work? Paul condemns this attitude in the strongest terms and encourages Christians to "not be weary in doing what is right." He warns against letting the fear or excitement of the Second Coming distract us from the work God has given us to do. Yes, we believe that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again." So, what do we *do* with that? When the world faces the strain and anxiety of a center that cannot hold? When wars and insurrections appear, when the nation becomes increasingly divided, when plagues strike and persecution comes? Jesus tells us that it is in these moments, that we are given the opportunity to *testify*, and he assures that he will give us words of wisdom to do just that. And does the

world ever need your testimony right now. For it is in worst of times that the world most needs to hear good news. And amidst it all, scripture has indeed given us good news today.

Isaiah sings: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth... rejoice forever in what I am creating: Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” Over and over again, when we worry and fret over the fact that “The End is near” God shows up faithfully and gives us instead a beginning. Christ will come again. Christ *does* come again. And again, and again. He comes again and again in our hearts, again and again in the Eucharist, again and again in the church, which is his body. In a world in which we cannot seem to hold onto our center, Christ instead holds onto us. Every time we reach an end, God revives in us a new beginning, a new heaven and a new earth. And we as Christians testify to this new heaven and earth simply by living out our faith in small, everyday ways. In raising our children, in loving our spouse, in coming together to worship, in feeding the hungry, in offering a kind word—all these small individual moments are the widow’s mites that fill the coffers of the Kingdom of God to an outpouring of abundance.

You, Thankful Memorial, are approaching an end of your own. This is to be your last Advent with Mother Leyla as your priest. And when she leaves it will be the end of an era, of a fruitful and remarkable partnership between parish and priest. And it will be the *beginning* of something new, something yet unseen. And I have no doubt that whatever new thing God is creating in you will be marvelous and worthy of rejoicing. For I have seen in you a people who do not grow weary in doing what it right. I have seen how in dark times you testify to the light. In countless ways great and small you are a people created as a delight. Continue in the good work you are already doing: take care of one another, nurture your children, love the family God has entrusted to you, shine in this community. Isaiah assures you that you shall not labor in vain. And as you step into the time of transition, know this: The *Beginning* is near.