

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, December 6**  
**Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36**



**First United  
Methodist Church**

**DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD**

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Before “Saturday Night Live” there was “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.” Before that there was “The Second City,” and at about the same time, “Beyond the Fringe.” “Beyond the Fringe,” a British satire group that included Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore, and Alan Bennett -- in 1961 they imagined “The End of the World.”

They are huddled together on the top of the mountain:

“How will it be, this end of which you have spoken, Brother Enim?”

“Yes, how will it be?”

“Well, it will be as ‘twere a mighty rending in the sky, you see, and the mountains shall sink, you see, and the valleys shall rise, you see, and great shall be the tumult thereof.”

“Will the veil of the temple be rent in twain?”

“The veil of the temple will be rent in twain about two minutes before we see the sign of the manifest flying beast-head in the sky.”

“And will there be a mighty wind, Brother Enim?”

“Certainly there will be a mighty wind, if the word of God is anything to go by.”

“And will this wind be so mighty as to lay low the mountains of the earth?”

“No, it will not be quite as mighty as that; that is why we have come up on the mountain, you stupid nit, to be safe from it. Up here on the mountain we shall be safe . . .”

“When will it be, this end of which you have spoken?”

“Aye, when will it be, when will it be?”

“In about thirty seconds’ time, according to the ancient pyramidal scrolls . . . and my Ingersoll watch.”

“Shall we compose ourselves, then?”

“Good plan, Brother Pithy. Prepare for the End of the World! Fifteen seconds . . .”

“Have we got the tinned food?”

“Yes.”

“And the tin-opener?”

“Yes.”

“Five – four – three – two – one –zero!”

(All chanting) “Now is the end – Perish the World!”

(Silence)

“It was Greenwich Mean Time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Well, it’s not quite the conflagration I’d been banking on. Never mind, lads; same time tomorrow . . . we must get a winner one day.”

The end of the world . . . people have imagined it coming ever since the world began. And it was in the front of the minds of the people of Jesus’ time . . . a time of wars and rumors of wars, with subjugation by the Romans, with corruption in the local government, with arrogance in the temple, with people hungry in the streets. The people cry out, “The world is going to Hell! Come, Lord Jesus save us from destruction!”

We can offer the same litany of problems today. We can name our last century of continuous warfare – World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the wars in Central America, the Invasion of Grenada, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now do we add Syria to the list?

I remember one moment when I felt that there was peace in the world. It was in 1999 when Sally and I were in Berlin visiting her sister and brother-in-law who lived there. The Berlin Wall was now an historic site to visit; Check Point Charlie was a museum. The Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche, the bombed out church at the heart of Berlin, was united with Coventry Cathedral, a bombed out church in England, in a ministry of reconciliation. I was walking in the open marketplace on a sunny Saturday, feeling free and safe. The only “cloud” in that idyllic sky was that I had to check

out the flea market for my wallet, since I had my pocket picked on the bus the day before. So much for the “peaceable kingdom.”

It is unsettling that the Church’s liturgical calendar would have us hear now this passage from the Gospel of Luke that takes place just two days before Jesus is crucified. During Advent we are supposed to be focusing on his birth, and yet here he is telling us about his death and the tumultuous things yet to come. It does have the effect, though, of keeping us from reducing the coming of Christ naively to the warm and fuzzy birth

of a baby, “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” For here he is, telling us that no matter how bad things will become – and his arrest, trial, humiliation, and crucifixion are going to be devastating and disorienting to his disciples – this is not the end but the beginning. “Stay tethered to my word, go deeply into my love, and you will find new life on the other side of the crisis.”

“Do not be afraid,” he tells them. “There will be people who will come, predicting the end of the world and that they are your savior. Pay no attention. This temple where we are, so grand a structure, will be destroyed. I, too, will be destroyed before your very eyes. But that will not be the end. You will get to know me in a deeper and more profound way and my words will last forever.”

So, here we are 2000 years later quoting him. Which words are so deeply rooted? There are so many parables, so many aphorisms, so many metaphors, so many teachings. Delve deeply into our rabbinic tradition, Jesus teaches, and it all comes down to two laws, “Love God and love your neighbor.” Hold tightly to the root of my teaching, he pleads, to its radical nature, to the root down deep, and it will get you through what even looks like the end of the world. Publicly and privately – yes, in the public domain when there are wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes and famines and floods, but also when there are the private hells we will face that drive us to our knees, not out of devotion to pray but because we are too weak to stand on our own two feet. When we have no words to utter, Jesus’ words of God’s love inherent in creation will suffice.

A poem by Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things:”

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sounds  
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
Who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Go deeply into the heart of God’s creation to find rest that sets us free . . . what to do when despair for the world grows in us and we wake up at every sound in the night, afraid of what might be. Jesus tells his disciples not to skim across the surface of life, tweeting and twittering as they go, not to be scared to death, not to seek escape from the trials of life, and not to drink oneself into oblivion, but to go deeply to find the peace inherent in creation.

“Going deep” . . . a term I remember from playing touch football as a kid in Menomonee Falls in our neighbor’s backyard every Saturday afternoon at this time of year. I usually was the youngest and smallest, so when we got into our huddle, Terry Schmidt, the quarterback (Terry was always the quarterback because it was his backyard, and his football, and he was the only one strong enough to pass it all the way to the lot line), would say, “John, you go down five steps and turn to the outside. Sandy, you cut across the middle and I will look for you. Phil . . . you go deep, and I will fake it to you.” So, I would go deep, run all the way to the neighbor’s yard, and then I would trot back to the huddle and go deep again, every play every Saturday.

Well, the difference between Terry Schmidt and God is that God will not fake it to us but will give us life, abundant life, even in the midst of tumult. It is that gift of life, in spite of everything, it is the “resting in the grace of the world,” as Berry puts it, that sets us free.

“Pay attention,” says Jesus. “Do not be dulled by anxiety. Do not miss out on life because you are scared to death.”

If we live in a world where every bird is a sparrow, that we have not taken the time to learn the difference between a nuthatch, a finch, and a chickadee, then the world is flat and boring. If we live in a world where food comes in a can or a frozen box and we do not know the rhythm of cultivating and planting and nourishing and harvesting, then our world is artificial.

If we live in a world that is no wider than the circle in which we travel each day, if our world does not include people of other cultures and languages of other accents and customs of other lands, then our world is too small.

If we live in a world where there is no time to ponder, no room to imagine, no permission to be receptive rather than reactive, no time to “lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds,” then our world has shriveled to become an inconsequential marking of time on earth until we die. In fact, we already have died spiritually; now we are just waiting for our bodies to catch up with our souls.

If we live in a world where we are afraid to feel pain and hurt, including that of others, if we can no longer love because our wounds are too great, if we shy away from acts of justice because we might be punished or acts of mercy because we might be inconvenienced, if we refuse to acknowledge our own frailty and sinfulness because it threatens our self-confidence, if we refrain from doing what is right because we do not want others to ridicule us for being a “do-gooder,” if we are too busy to hear the sounds, see the colors, feel the textures, smell the fragrances, and taste the spices of God’s world, if we are just too weary to go deep, then we are dead to the world.

Jesus says, “Live, live now! Do not be afraid even when there are terrible disorders in the heavens and disruptions on earth. It always has been that way. Accept God’s gift of life, of eternal life right now. ‘Eternity’ is not a measure of length, but of depth.”

The birth of Jesus signifies the timeless call to plumb the depths of God’s love, to have a life before we die. “Do not let your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life,” he says. “Be alert.” Go deep. Amen.