

The End of the World As We Know It, Part 2:
Mark 1:1-8 and 2 Peter 3:8-15a
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Preached December 4, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

In my haste to get us to last Sunday's video part of the sermon time, I neglected somewhat setting up for you the season of Advent, at least from the perspective of the texts used this year. Each year has its more specific emphases even while generally following a similar path through the Old Testament prophecies, expectations of the second coming of Christ, John the Baptist, and the annunciations to the New Testament characters. This year, in the texts from Year B of the Lectionary, as I sat down to map out the season's sermons, I observed something of a pattern that I thought I would share with you. Hopefully it will serve you in your preparation for Christmas. Perhaps it may even mirror your own experience so far in your life with Jesus Christ, because even as we remember the first coming in historical birth of Jesus, and look forward to the second coming on that unpredictable "day of the Lord," there is also a third coming that is important, and that is the coming of Christ into each one of our lives, our hearts, our loyalties. And so, without further ado, here is, in the season's language of "coming," the lay of the land:

Week one: Come! (Please!)
Week two: Will be Coming
Week three: Is Coming Like This...
Week four: Coming Anytime Now
Christmas Eve: Arrived

The texts for the first week, last week, speak to the longing in the hearts of God's people for a return to the best days of their divine relationship. The OT texts acknowledge their sins and failures and seek anew God's favor. The NT texts anticipate God's answer to these same, but now latter-day desires, for Jesus has already come once with a foretaste of the Kingdom. His second coming will fulfill the longing of all people, and bring an everlasting peace and justice to the new creation. It will be "the end of the world as we know it," as I began to share with you, a theme we will continue throughout the whole season.

In week two, the texts advance the drama of Advent, moving us from an abstract kind of longing and seeking of God's presence/return to actively expecting it (although on God's timetable!). In the midst of the active waiting that characterizes the season, we are called to live righteously, as a foretaste of when "righteousness is home" once the new heaven and new earth have come. We are to make straight the paths of our lives, so that when Christ does come, he may find the way soon and easy.

In the third week, there is a movement towards "dreaming" of God's favor and Christ's coming; some envisioning, some "putting on flesh" to a more vague notion. Isaiah elaborates Israel's more specific hopes for freedom, the ones Jesus will proclaim again in the fourth chapter of Luke. We will hear John say that Jesus is already among them, yet unrecognized; come, but still hoped for and expected.

The expectation is now palpable; we can see it, and hear it, and taste it. There is no turning back.

In the fourth week, what has been longed for, then expected, then dreamed about, is now developing, spiritually, and literally, in Mary's womb. It is both an idea and a human being gaining steam, months from true revelation, mere miles away from its ultimate destination of the gentiles, yet still to be realized in the second coming as well. The palpable dreams are nearly tangible realities of mind, body, and spirit, not to mention history. In all of that week's passages, there seems to be but one more breath to draw, and then exhale, before all comes to fruition.

Longing, expecting, dreaming, developing. And then comes Christmas Eve, and the light enters the world.

On this second Sunday then, we have heard the prophecies of Isaiah about making straight the way of the Lord, and heard them echoed again in the beginning of Mark's Gospel. We've been introduced to John the Baptist, and reminded again that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. The Messiah "will be coming," we are now expecting it, and with that news comes the reminder to be ready, to be prepared to receive him. In Isaiah, we hear that the mountains will be leveled and the valleys filled in to make straight the Lord's path, quite a transformation of our landscape. In Second Peter, once again, the language is quite apocalyptic, with the heavens passing away with a loud noise and the earth being dissolved with fire, a chaotic scene we can barely imagine. But don't let all those

scary images keep you from seeing what should be seen: that when you strip away all that stuff, what you are left with is the Messiah come home, righteousness come home, as it says in Second Peter, the Messiah at home in you, and me, and the whole world. Yes, there will be chaos and confusion, but the winds of the hurricane will soon pass over you and you will come to its center, that eye where everything is disturbingly calm, and then you will be carried along with the hurricane, in its eye, and not be overcome by it. Our scripture and our faith make us confident, expectant, that we will pass through wind and water and trials and tribulations to end up in that place of peace, those new heavens and that new earth. That will be the end of the world, as we know it. And we will get there, John the Baptist says, and we will get there, Second Peter says, by preparing the way of the Lord.

If that sounds to you like we have something to do with the hastening of the coming of the Lord, making it happen, you may be right. Or you may be wrong. God only knows God's timetable and God's reasons. But both of our texts tonight call us not to a passive waiting for the Messiah's coming, but to an active preparing for it. John the Baptist preached repentance, the turning away from sin. Second Peter advised "leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God." We are called to act as if the end had already come to the world as we knew it. Jesus' coming marks the end of the world we know, which is to say, our daily reality. The world as we know it must change,

it must become different, because it is filled with “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” a good news we are called to prepare ourselves to receive, making straight the way to our hearts and lives. It is not that God will only come if we have things straightened out, but that if we have ourselves in some semblance of order, when Christ comes, will receive so much more. Let me put it to you this way.

You decide to throw a dinner party for some friends. What do you do? You get ready! You see, we welcome people into our homes by preparing for them the way; sending directions, leaving the porch light on, maybe tying balloons out front. We greet them at the door, have appetizers ready, wine chilled, centerpieces for the table, little candles lit in the bathroom. We prepare the way for them because they are special to us, because we want to create an environment for them that reveals something of ourselves and in which we can discover them more fully. If they arrive tense and uncertain, getting lost on the way, or having to wait for us, in what kind of mood will they be for a meaningful interaction, for us to fully know them? So too it is with God, that our preparation paves the way for a deeper relationship with God, whether it is during Advent, or the rest of the year, or that day that will come like a thief in the night. Waiting, in repentance, holiness, and godliness is that preparation to receive the Messiah, to end up in that eye of the hurricane. In that waiting, we are transformed ever more deeply.

Some of you may have seen one of my favorites movies of all time, a little number called “Big Night” that came out in the mid-nineties. Big Night is about a

big night in the lives of two brothers who own a failing Italian restaurant on the Jersey shore in the 1950s. Their big night involves waiting for the arrival of the great Italian singer Louis Prima, whom, they have been told, plans to visit their place and revive their fortunes. You see, an endorsement by a star like Louis Prima would put them on the map. And so the fussy chef Primo, and Secondo, his socially climbing brother and the restaurant's manager, do everything they can to create the perfect meal for Louis Prima, going to elaborate lengths and spending all of their savings, inviting just the right guests and choosing just the right wines. And then the big night arrives, but no one knows the hour of their messiah's coming. Louis Prima doesn't arrive in time for the delicious appetizers. He doesn't arrive in time for the savory soup. He doesn't arrive in time for the astonishingly beautiful main courses, or the music or the dancing or the joy that this wonderful meal is bringing to the people who *are* there. In fact, Louis Prima never arrives. The brothers have been duped by their rival into believing he would come, so that their restaurant would fail, and they could come to work for the rival. And chaos ensues in their lives, and the brothers fight, but they also realize that they pulled off their big night, whether Louis Prima arrived or not. And in one of the most moving scenes I've ever seen, the film closes with this long, uninterrupted, nearly wordless take: as dawn breaks, Secondo silently cooks an omelet. When it is done, he divides it among three plates, giving one to Cristiano, their waiter, and taking one himself. And Primo hesitantly enters: Secondo hands him the last plate. They eat

without speaking, but lay their arms across each others' shoulders as they do so.

The eye of the hurricane. Brothers at peace. The end of their world as they knew it.

Please don't let the fact that their "messiah" never arrived, that he was a fiction, cause you to miss the point. The lives of these two brothers were profoundly transformed by this experience of waiting, and preparing, and even repenting. It was not an easy wait. In fact, it was agonizing. The "big night" turned out in a way that no one who attended could ever have imagined. That is just what God will do. Despite all the images of the Messiah in the Old Testament, there is the surprising Jesus in a manger, and the surprising Jesus healing the sick instead of brandishing a sword, and the surprising Jesus hanging on a cross in humiliation. But we will miss all of what that means if we are too impatient to wait, and too busy to prepare, and too delusional to repent. You see, in our waiting for the divine, divine things will happen. You can expect that, and it will mean the end of your world, as you know it. And that is a good thing indeed. Amen.