

"Beginning with the End"

End Times in History and Myth

There is an old legend that when end times come a golden thread will be stretched across the Valley of Hinnom (near Jerusalem) and to enter the promised land you will need to walk across that thread from one side to the other. The legend also gives this assurance: if you should slip or fall your guardian angel will grab you by the beard to keep you from falling. A pleasant thought for people with beards.

We survived the new millennium - remember the Y2K frenzy? – so that we could all be confronted with a raft of “end of the world” movies at theaters. There’s been several about invading aliens from outer space; then we’ve had those movies about global climate change and the disasters that will rain down upon us. Before that we had the Left Behind series. Now we have the Mayan calendar predictions for 2012. By all accounts, the movie 2012 appears to be a smash hit, with one of the largest opening weekend ticket sales of the entire year. I haven’t seen the movie but I just love their website where it says, “Create your end of the world playlist now.” The plot revolves around a belief related to the ancient Mayan calendar that the world will come to an end on Dec. 21, 2012, when mighty storms on the sun generate huge numbers of subatomic particles that then heat up the earth's core, leading to a gigantic climactic apocalypse.

[The Hopi version: To the Hopis, the "people of peace" who live on the edge of Arizona's painted desert, this is a time of koyaanisquatsi, or "world out of balance." Very out of balance. The Hopis say we are living in the final days of the "fourth world," which will be destroyed in a war between the U.S. and "those who possessed the first light of wisdom--China, Palestine, India, Africa." According to Hopi legend, the United States will be devastated by "gourds of ashes" which will fall from the sky and boil the rivers, scorch the earth, and cause an incurable disease. Most commentators believe the reference is to nuclear bombs, and that the prophecies will be fulfilled any day now. Very soon afterward, Pahana, a messianic figure related to the Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl (Kulkulkan in Mayan) and known as the "lost white brother," will return to usher in the new Fifth World.¹]

Whether due to alien invasion, natural disaster, or human folly, the continuing popularity of films and novels looking at the end of the world seems noteworthy. What's up with all of this? Our own Scriptures speak of end times: many of the Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when God would enter the world and bring justice and righteousness to the world. The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, paints a fascinating, perhaps even confusing, picture of our world coming to an end and a new one ushered in by the Lamb of God who sits on the throne: Jesus. The gospels record that during his earthly life Jesus spoke about such things.

Jesus and End Times

In the gospel of Luke Jesus speaks about the powers of the heavens being shaken as the Son of Man returns. The beginning is beginning and it means the end. He speaks of signs in the sun, moon and stars; of distress among nations, and people with fear and foreboding. He refers to an end that appears unavoidable. Hey, this is Advent, the beginning of the Christian year; Christmas is coming. Why start this season with such a frightening image? Some have said that the trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be.

Just what did he mean by earth-shaking events at his return? Some assume that God will finish this world in a destructive wrath that burns everything. [There is a world leader today (Iran) who believes that he must play a part in bringing the end with fiery violence and he’s trying to get nuclear weapons to do so. That’s frightening.] If that is true then why did he say things like, "The

¹Judith Hooper and Dick Teresi, *Would The Buddha Wear A Walkman?* New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1990, 219.

kingdom is among you?" Or, "Go out into this world and preach; baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit?" Did he mean a cataclismic end of the world when he broke his bread and shared his wine in that upper room, telling his followers to share like that all through the world in remembrance of him?

Others tell us Jesus only meant that a new heaven would come and they say things like, "The end will come in four years, or five, surely in the year 2010!" We can spend so much time looking up in the sky for Jesus to come riding down on the clouds, that we miss Jesus when he comes to us in the everyday of the world. By the same token we can so remind ourselves of his presence in the mundane that we take his earth-shattering presence for granted. Year after year, for almost 2,000 years, He has been remembered and He has arrived again. He remains with us still. Yet I wonder how much we do not notice him, especially at this time of year

Jesus spoke not only of a new heaven to come; he spoke also about a new world to be formed. His intent is nothing less than to change the world. A grandiose plan don't you think? We've heard and read about others who had such great ideas. But human attempts to create political and social utopia, heaven on earth, all end badly.

Jesus has a strategy that cannot fail. His changed world will come about one by one in changed hearts, changed minds, and new lives that include God. He knew that by yourself, you could not change the world. A political party won't change the world. But you can change yourself and inspire those around you to change for the better. One way to think of "second coming" is to think of the world finally coming to Christ. The "second coming" isn't the return of a Lord who's been absent, but the breaking through to the whole world of a presence which has been continuous throughout history. (God has always been with his people, and through his spirit can be experienced within any human being, so in terms of returning, a "second coming," maybe it's more to the point that Jesus has never left us.) A world recreated in Jesus and by the Holy Spirit given to us. A world recreated through you and me and others whom we introduce to Jesus. Do you know what you are a part of? Do you realize each one of us is made an ambassador of Christ, who is really the hope of the world?

End Times and Us

Christians have always believed that our present experience of God is incomplete, but will one day be fulfilled. St. Paul put it succinctly: Now I see in a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.² This hope, the hope to see God as he really is, has taken many different forms throughout history. In times of oppression and persecution, there's been a sense of crisis and a nearness of the end; accompanied by cosmic violence which destroys this sinful world so that God can begin again. But at other times, usually in times of peace and plenty, there's been more of a sense of the world growing old, running out of resources, coming gradually to an end. Which is it?

In a sense all of us face a world coming to an end, our world, if you will. We face the end throughout our lives. As it says in our funeral liturgy, "in the midst of life, we are in death." The end comes to us all, we know that. But the end also comes to us with job loss, a transition in living circumstances or living standards, a move, the loss of a loved one, the loss of our ambitions or hopes. Life is about loss.

Though blessed with great influence, power, and wealth during their playing days, many pro athletes struggle horribly when they retire. Possible loss of income, the need to change professions, and the difficulty of maintaining self-esteem off the playing field cause great psychological conflict. Years ago nine-year veteran Steve Watson of the Denver Broncos said, "We all fear the end because we're not sure we can make it out there."³ In the end all is taken from us, even life itself. Maturity is learning to let go of things as we learn what is essential to living.

²1 Corinthians 13:12

³Elliot Johnson and Al Schierbaum, *Our Great and Awesome Savior*, (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Pub, Inc., 1991), 5.

Speaking of letting go of things, especially at holiday time, I heard this one some years ago: Holiday traffic is always crowded and at times difficult. One airline traveler noticed a sprig of mistletoe hanging over the baggage counter at the airline check-in site. The traveler asked the clerk what it was doing in such a peculiar place. Came this reply, "It's so you can kiss your luggage goodbye."⁴

Seriously though, maturity is learning to trust in the promises of God who lost his own Son for our sakes. In God's promises lies our hope for a better future. In fact, without hope we don't really have much of a future at all. Do you know people who have given up hope? Folks who started out young and full of enthusiasm to drink fully the joy of life: in their family relationships, in their job and career aspirations. Then somewhere along the line they lost sight of those goals, they got discouraged, they listened to the negatives around them, they lost hope that things could change and be better, that *they* could change and be better. So they just gave up and went along with the flow, lowering expectations of life, telling themselves this is the way it's meant to be, shrinking their dreams to fit the surroundings, and shrinking themselves in the process. Do you know people like that? After a while, to fit in with all the other folks who have lost hope, they actively resist change for the better, as a way to justify their position.

It is so vital that we hold fast to the promises of God. Hope in God propels us forward.

The End

The apocalyptic (end times) fiction in popular culture says something about the hopes and dreams that many people have for our future. The vision of the future that Jesus offers is quite distinct from what the movies portray. He promises that God has the future in hand and He will be with us.

When Jesus spoke about the end of things he was thinking about a world that would disappear. It is a world we are all familiar with, as though it were the very clothes we wear. It's a world of corruption, misunderstanding, mis-communication, hurt feelings, even murder and war; a world of sin, of jealousy, hatred, greed, pain, despair. Who wouldn't want to end that kind of world? Yet, isn't every story about an end also a story about a beginning? Isn't the last day also the dawn of a new day to come? A last look at the house as you leave, followed by a concern for things that are to come - a look into the future.

When Jesus speaks about the end of this world he is also foretelling the new world to come, for the old must first give way for the new to arrive. That's always the hard part isn't it? I mean, aren't most of us more fearful of losing what we have, however dysfunctional it may be, than we are excited about what we could gain? We know that he speaks of the Kingdom of God in which we too will be changed. (Most often when we talk about change we think about others. Now consider how hard it is to change yourself and you'll understand what little chance you have of changing others.)

Have we become so satisfied with our familiar ways and material comforts that we will not allow Jesus to touch those things? Are there areas of your life, including your pocket book and bank accounts, your calendar and schedule, that are off-limits to Jesus? What aspects of your life might benefit from change? When you change what you do and how you do it, your life changes.

The beginning is beginning, and it means the end: the end to a world of distress and foreboding; an end to your sin. Beginning today, with Advent, it's our time to open the doors for Him and your new life. Today begins the possibility for your new beginning.

How are we preparing for the end times? Are we demonstrating the alertness that Jesus demands of us? Look carefully: Jesus didn't really say, "Watch for the signs!" He said, "Straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). He said, "When you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:31).

Seek first His kingdom, and all else will be given you (Matthew 6:33).

⁴Arizona Highways, 12-93, 54.

