

He Is Near, At the Very Gates

In the name of him whom we will see coming in clouds with great power and glory, dear friends in Christ: The *apocalypse* has long been a subject of great interest by many both in and outside of the Church. But in our times it's captured peoples' imaginations like nothing else. Due largely to the influence of popular books and films, one has only to mention the word "apocalypse" and immediately it stirs up thoughts of terrifying end of the world scenarios: the earth suddenly struck by a giant asteroid that knocks the planet out of its orbit sends us hurtling toward the sun, or conversely our world rained upon by thousands of smaller refrigerator sized meteors that level cities and wreak vast destruction. Other visions are of a new virus emerging that causes a pandemic that wipes out all human life, or of a wide spread nuclear war that accomplishes pretty much the same thing except that now everything is dead – all but the cockroaches. For some reason cockroaches survive and get to inherit the earth. But hey, at that point they can have it, right? And then there are the forecasts for the end that cross over into the realm of science fiction like an invasion of aliens from outer space or the increasingly fashionable so-called "zombie apocalypse" in which the living are pursued by legions of the animated undead who seek to feast upon their flesh. Oh, and while these zombies aren't exactly picky eaters, they do seem to have a particular taste for human brains – or as the zombies say it, "Bwaaaiins".

Self-appointed Bible prophecy experts have done much to feed the frenzy of curiosity that surrounds the apocalypse. They write book after book announcing their most recent prognostications for exactly how and (more importantly) *when* Jesus will return and this world will end. And they make a lot of money in the process because not one of their adoring readers seems to remember how all the predictions of their former books were proven wrong. No matter. The intense desire to know what the future holds especially with regard to the end of the world guarantees that if someone comes up with a theory and throws enough Bible passages at it that seem to stick however slightly, there's enough material there for another best seller. And I've got to hand it to them: in this last round of predictions that trumpeted the ominous sounding "four blood moons", in which the end times prophets said that the apocalypse would begin this last October (whoops!), some of them figured out a way to con even more cash out of their duped adherents. They were selling crates of apocalypse survival supplies: things like freeze dried food, bottled water, solar camp stoves, electrical generators, and what not – all at highly jacked up prices, naturally. Really though, how dumb do you have to be to buy stuff like that? If it's the apocalyptic end of the world, what makes you think you can survive it? Why would you want to? The total destruction of this world and everything in it is rather the point. There won't be any survivors.

But even the word "apocalypse" is mysterious and frightening to us. The Bible's final book describes how in the last days the four horsemen of the apocalypse will be unleashed upon the earth. The first is the personification of Pestilence who rides forth on a white horse. He shoots people down with arrows that represent deadly disease. He's followed by War who rides a fiery red steed and swings a mighty sword to take peace from the earth and set nation against nation. Then comes Famine whose mount is black and who leaves mass starvation in his wake. And bringing up the rear is Death himself on a ghastly pale horse. Together these four riders bring God's judgments upon the world. And as frightening as these things are, other visions of St. John recorded in the same book are even more disturbing. So yes, when someone mentions "the apocalypse" our thoughts turn to things that are quite dark and scary.

But, you know? They shouldn't. No, the truth is that what the Bible tells us about what's to come in the future is supposed to comfort and encourage people like us who by God's grace and the work of his Holy Spirit have been given the gift of faith and trust in the Savior Jesus Christ. And that scary sounding word "apocalypse", do you know what it means? It's simply a transliteration of the Greek word for revelation – that is to say, the unveiling of something that had previously been hidden. Well, what about those dreaded four horsemen? Shouldn't we fear them? No, not really; because in case you hadn't noticed, they're already here. They have been since the fall of mankind into sin. Ever since then we've been subject to disease, war, famine, and death. They are nothing new. And that they will continue to reap their bloody harvest in these last days shouldn't surprise us at all. What's coming though, what we are looking forward to, is the day when their work is done, when the trials and tribulations of this age will cease, and the Lord Jesus returns to finish his work of salvation by raising the dead and creating the new heaven and the new earth.

That's what Jesus is describing in today's Gospel. After having told his disciples that in this world they are to expect evil to continue in general and especially directed against the Church in the forms of false teachers, persecutions, and bitter family conflicts – we covered all that last week – after all that tribulation will come the time when the sun is darkened, the moon will lose its radiance, the will stars fall from the night sky, and the powers in the heavens are shaken. But this is nothing to panic about. What it is is the undoing of creation. The universe that leapt into existence at the voice of God will at his command begin to unravel and pass out of existence. To make room for the new order of things the old has to be swept away. "Heaven and earth will pass away", Jesus says, "But my words will not pass away." And when the old is gone, then by his words a new creation will spring into being.

"Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And he will send out his angels to gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." Who will see this? Everyone, for elsewhere we are told that this is when the resurrection of the dead takes place. Every eye shall behold him. And then too will be the division of all people into two camps: the sheep, the faithful righteous, on his right hand; and the goats, the unbelieving wicked, on his left. To the former he will say, "Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." And to the latter he will say, "Depart from me, you wicked, into the place prepared for the devil and his angels."

When will this be? No one knows. Jesus is emphatic about that. In his state of humiliation, that is, during his earthly ministry when he didn't make full use of his divine attributes, even he didn't know when the last day would come. He knows now, you can bet; but he hasn't revealed that to us. Nor is he going to. So, please, save your money and don't waste it on any book by a "prophecy expert" who says he's figured it out. Oh, and while it's always a good idea to have basic survival supplies on hand in case of a disaster, don't bother stocking up for the Last Day. That's not how to be ready for the end.

Instead, Jesus tells us to be on guard and stay alert. Why? Because the end could come at any time. There is nothing else to be fulfilled; no prophetic sign or event that has to happen before the Last Day comes. And that is why Jesus tells us this parable: "It is like a man going away on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the door-keeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows [that is, about 2:00 am], or at first light—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep."

That's interesting: notice that he doesn't say the master may come in the late morning, or at noon, or in the late afternoon when people are usually awake. It's always hours of

darkness when people are normally asleep. And what's especially unusual about that is that in the ancient world people didn't travel at night. They didn't have street lights or lighted highway signs or all night gas stations and convenience stores. When it got dark, you stayed put. It was dangerous to travel at night. But all the times Jesus mentions that the master may come are when you would least expect for him to arrive. Again, it emphasizes that his coming will be when no one expects it – which is why it's all the more imperative that we be ready for his coming at all times.

How? As Jesus says, by staying awake and alert. Now, obviously he means this figuratively. If we who believe in Jesus were never to sleep and get our rest, we'd be like the walking dead and something like the zombie apocalypse would be upon us now. That can't be it. So, what does he mean when he tells us to stay awake?

The answer lies in what he said earlier in today's text about the fig tree and its lesson. In the spring when you see the tree branches getting tender and leaves begin to sprout forth, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place – that is, all the wars, persecutions, and other trials and troubles he spoke about – when you see these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. That is to say, the ongoing evils in this world are to be constant reminders to us that the final coming of Jesus is at hand. If you're the doorkeeper, and he's assigned to us all that task, you are to be ready to open the door to him as if he were right there on the other side reaching out his hand to knock. You are to be ready to receive him *now*.

Why? Because he *is* coming now. He *is* right at the door. That's what we celebrate in our worship here week after week: the fact that Jesus comes to us right now. He comes to us in his Word – his Word that will endure forever. He comes to us in Holy Baptism. He comes to us in the Absolution. He comes to us in his blessed Supper. And by these humble means he cleanses us from sin, he strengthens and sustains our faith, and he builds us up in love and support for one another precisely so that we are in a spiritual sense awake and ready for his final coming.

And no, we don't know when that will be. Therefore we continue to prepare for his final coming by receiving him as he comes to us now. But the day will surely come when after this world's tribulations, the sun will be darkened. And that reminds us of another day when the sun was darkened from noon until about three. On that day our Lord Jesus who had come to save sinners hung on the cross, and suffered and died in our place. Then he came in humility to save. Even now, he comes to us in humility to save. He is always near, at the very gates, coming to us in humility to save so that we will be awake and well prepared to receive him when he comes in glory to judge and to save those who trust in him and long for his coming.

Therefore to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!