

Living for the End

Lights are strung on houses with care, retail stores are all decked in red and green, jingles are ringing throughout the shops. It's the Sunday after Thanksgiving and it is indeed "beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go." Everywhere, that is, except in church. In church, the holiday season begins with the traditional Bible readings about ... the Apocalypse. Even before I was ordained, I marveled at how out of step the church was in relation to the larger society during the weeks leading up to Christmas, how during this time of festivity and good cheer, the church is focused on the End of the World...!

Of course, this is not the first time our Sunday readings have focused on Last Things, when Jesus returns in glory to usher in the Kingdom of God. The lessons these past several weeks have been circling around this topic in one way or another. Respectable Christians like us are likely a little embarrassed by these readings and would just as soon ignore the End Times altogether and let it remain the peculiar obsession of religious cranks, fanatics and crazy people. But for some reason, the collective wisdom of Christians past and present seems to be that now is a good time to talk about the end of the world as we know it.

The church does this not, I don't think, because Christians are supposed to be preoccupied with future disasters, that we need to be out with the street preachers shouting, "The End is near!" Nor are we to start a countdown checklist of items to tick off as they happen...an Apocalypse Calendar to go next to the Advent calendar. No, the reason the church has it that we should focus on the End now is because knowing what the end looks like helps us live more fully, more faithfully in the here and now. Knowing where it's all headed, we can better make sense of our lives and understand what we are supposed to do in the present moment.

You see, in seminary and graduate school, the subject I was focused on wasn't Biblical interpretation or systematic theology, though I appreciated those too. What most interested me was moral theology, Christian ethics, understanding how to be Christian, what are the ethical implications of the Gospel. But whereas most moral theologians are concerned with constructing and critiquing grand ethical systems, I found the greatest wisdom was offered by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre observed, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question of 'What story or stories do I find myself a part?'" Put simply, you can't know what to do until you know what story you are in.

That may sound like an odd statement. It's not altogether clear how the stories we see in the movies and read about in books have to do with how we live in the real world. But of course MacIntyre wasn't talking about the little fictions we entertain ourselves with, but the larger stories about the world, the stories that we tell ourselves and are a part of, the "metanarratives," to use the fancy academic term. These metanarratives, these grand stories, frame our perceptions and help us make sense of the events in our lives and in the world.

Consider that there is a plethora of facts that present themselves to us each day, and there are an infinite number of ways to interpret them, to sort, categorize and evaluate them. Every action, every possible cause, produces an exponential branching of effects—far too many to contemplate, consider, or take into account. The world is simply too complicated to attend to and navigate in, in the absence of an overarching framework, something that puts those facts together in some semblance of order, in a way that provides aim and character, which are the defining features of story.

And so story, more than anything, is how we make sense of the world. Story shapes what we believe is true, what we believe is good and right, what is important, what actions we see as being within our capacity, and what goals we should strive for. Story is how we understand what is going on in the world and how we fit into it.

So, then, what story or stories are we in? Well, there are many stories that have been suggested: stories where we are the heroes, stories where we are passive spectators, and others where we are victims to larger forces outside ourselves, or within us. There are stories that see progress marching inexorably forward and stories that recall us to former times, when things were simpler and sweeter. There are stories about how the world we see; stories that say that the world we see and hear and touch is all there is, nothing else exists, and stories that say the material world is only an illusion, not real.

And then there's the story of the Bible, a story, which the church insists, is best understood by starting at the end and then working backwards. In this story, God is victorious. He triumphs over the forces of destruction and annihilation, over sin, death and the devil, in order to reconcile the wayward world back to himself, healing our divisions and diseases, and putting the world to rights. The end is a kind of "reboot" of creation, restarting with in a new heaven and a new earth, having wiped out all the moral malware and spiritual viruses and fatal errors of the former world.

That's how the story ends, the finale, and working backward we can see how we get there, how that end comes out. It begins long ago in an obscure corner of the world, with an otherwise unremarkable man named Abraham,. He was a herdsman in ancient Mesopotamia before God calls him and promises to make a great nation out of him, a nation that will bless other nations. Then, over the course of many centuries, God shepherds Abraham's offspring—his children and grandchildren and their descendants, the Israelites—through many trials, tribulations, and setbacks—through slavery in Egypt, disunity in the Promised Land, through kingship battles and civil wars, apostasies and abuses of power, conquests and exile.

Through these centuries, the "cast" of this story expands from Abraham and then winnows down, expands and winnows down again, until the story narrows down to one man, Jesus of Nazareth, whom we are told is not just a king or a prophet, but the only begotten Son of God. He is God incarnate, the narrator become part of the story, who comes to reveal the ultimate plot, where it was all headed. And he invites people to live that end now, to enjoy in the present the kind of world God will bring about in the future, what he calls the Kingdom of God. We don't have to wait until the last chapter, when Jesus comes back. We can enjoy the resolution of the drama now, living in the world as it will be in the end when God brings all things into harmony and peace.

But because this kingdom, this promised reality, is already but not yet, available but not fully present, those who are living for the end will seem out of place, out of time, because they are. They are not acting according to the story as it appears right now, but as it will be. And so they come up against those who are stuck in the present, who don't understand the plot, where this is all going, who are attached to the way things are and fight against their renewal and renovation.

But the point of knowing how it ends is not to give us cause to feel superior to those who don't. There are no spoilers in this story, as it has been in the public domain for two millennia now. Rather, the point is that, because we know how it ends, we don't need to fear the end, don't need to worry or fret or get anxious about how it's all going to work out, or get worked up over the drama of the subplots and side stories that we live in, or, worse, think we have to make sure all the wrongs turn out right. Indeed, we may never understand how the hardships and injustices we face will be redeemed. But we can trust that they will. That's the point of Jesus talking about the End here, letting us in on the plot—to assure and assuage us not to be afraid.

It's like how I read the last book in the *Harry Potter* series. As soon the book was first published, I bought a copy and did something I never do with a novel—I read the last chapter first. So, I knew who was going to survive and who wasn't. I then read the rest of the book from the beginning. But because I knew the ending, I wasn't worried about the fates of the heroes. I could just enjoy the story as it played out, seeing how the tension was resolved, confident that good would win out in the end.

That is what Jesus is doing when he tells us of the coming celestial upheavals and earthly distresses. He isn't telling us to make us afraid or anxious. He's telling us this is so that we *aren't* afraid when dark clouds gather and the earth moves under our feet and everyone else is running around like the sky is falling. Even when the foundations of the world are shaken, and our assumptions and securities are rent from us, we have no need to fear or freeze up, because we will know what it is. We will know it's not the beginning of the end, the destruction of everything, but the end of the beginning, the conclusion of the story that began millions of years ago in the Garden, and the beginning of the new story which has us once again living with God and walking with him in the cool of the morning. Jesus wants us to know that all the upheaval, the overturning of the things we trust in, that signals not the end but the birth pangs of a new and better world. Our redemption is at hand, we are told. Jesus is on his way.

Now, when Jesus first told his followers about this, they expected to see these events very soon, in their lifetime for sure or at least in the next generation. That of course didn't happen, and so Christians have ever since been expecting Jesus' imminent return. But, you know, it's hard to stand on tiptoe for two thousand years. So, many Christians who otherwise trust Jesus' promises have been lulled into thinking that the End, if it's coming, is a long way off. And for all we know, judging by the fact that it hasn't happened yet, that could very be true. Though we can't be sure.

But even if we don't know how long the story goes, that doesn't mean that the story will not play out as we have been told. And, more to the point, it doesn't change the fact that, in the meantime, we have a part to play. And to play our part, we must know our lines, what to do, and be waiting for our cues. And so Jesus counsels us to be ready: stand up, raise your heads, be on guard, not

dulled by drink or weighed down by worries. We are to be alert, not just for signs of the End, but for whenever Jesus comes to us in the meantime, whether in word or works or spirit.

We might add one other bit of counsel. Seeing as the best stories involve not just plot but character development, in the story of salvation, we too are called to growth, to grow in grace, as we live more and more in the future Kingdom now.

This then is the church's message for Advent, how the church prepares us for the coming of Christ at Christmas and his return at the end of time: Be alert, we are told, be ready, don't worry about what will come. That story has already been written. But rather we should focus on playing our part with all the commitment and faithfulness we can as actors, always keeping in mind the story we are a part of, and remembering who our true audience is, which is not society or the world or our parents or our bosses or spouses, but the very same God who is the author and chief protagonist of the story. He wrote the story and he is in it with us, to the end, and to the new beginning. Thanks be to God!