

## November 29, 2009: THE END OF THE KNOWN WORLD

Luke 21:25-36; Jeremiah 33:14-16

Eileen Parfrey -- Springwater Presbyterian Church

We aren't the only people in history to think the world will end, nor are we the first to make some assumptions about the date and time. The Mayan calendar is getting a lot of buzz these days for predicting that the-world-as-we-know-it will end on December 21, 2012. Which means that Christmas shopping will be moot that year, so plan ahead. Supermarket tabloids to the contrary, it doesn't appear that the Mayan calendar intended to predict the end of the world. The calendar completes a cycle on that date, so flip the page and start over. Sort of like what the western world does every year on January 1, what the Church does four Sundays before Christmas every year. New cycle, start-over.

But sometimes that figurative page flipping can *feel* like the end of the known world. Change hurts. It may be necessary, but it throws things out of whack, makes it seem like chaos rules. Change happens all the time, from things as innocuous as re-arranging the sanctuary pews to things as catastrophic and life-changing as marital status or jobs. Whether voluntarily or through loss, change is stressful. On a personal level, change may shift a reference point or signal the death of a dream. When change happens on a national scale, it truly feels like the end of the known world. It's no wonder the health care debate is so emotionally-charged. Here's a theological perspective on change: Jesus didn't come to preach personal salvation, he came to preach God's kingdom—change on a cosmic scale. To quote a friend, our problem with change is, "We keep trying to make the kingdom come without changing anything."

I don't know if you are familiar with computers, but I use mine a lot, and I have discovered a disconcerting trait. Periodically, "someone" puts unsolicited updates on my system. It shows up when I return to find that it has shut itself down and rebooted. It's nothing I've asked for, someone at internet headquarters decides my computer needs to change. This mysterious, unasked-for change is bad enough, but to make matters worse, when I open and then close existing documents, even if I haven't changed them, the program will ask if I want to change them, because of the unsolicited changes. I can always say no, but I've learned it's easier to trust the program. My resistance is like praying, "thy kingdom come" and meaning, "Give us a safe operating system, but don't update it for new virus threats." It's "Thy kingdom come, but not if it's an inconvenience to me."

Skype is another change I haven't been able to wrap my head around. Skype is a way of speaking to people long distance using your computer. For free. All you need is a computer and the willingness to download the Skype software into your machine. I've only read about it, but from what I understand, what makes Skype work is that it isn't located in a *place*—it resides in all the users' computers. When you download the software, you effectively agree to let some of Skype's information be stored in your computer—say, the phone numbers for people whose last names begin "Par-." I'm not able to give you the technical details of this, but I feel a theological analogy coming on. What makes Skype work—and able to provide its services free to its users—is that it's in *no place*, it's everywhere. Its flexibility and almost limitless capacity to communicate is made possible because every user contributes their capacity, whether or not they are actively using it.

What if we thought of that as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. What if we understood that we are repositories in the here-and-now for portions of Divine love and justice—not all of it, only as much as we're able, but because we don't carry all of it, we can carry some of it. If this analogy between Skype and God's kingdom holds, maybe we could think "redemption" means we are how God loves and does justice in the here-and-now. Incarnation.

I don't pretend to understand how Skype works, but I think I can glimpse an analogy when I see one. The events Jesus describes in his apocalypse are for the purpose of *redemption*. All that judging and chaos are for *everyone*, and that's good news. Grace doesn't exempt us from the distress, but it does give us freedom from both indulgence and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> There is dread in Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*.

apocalypse, especially for those who have opted for indulgence and anxiety. But there is also promise. Redemption is near.

Earth returns to chaos at the coming of the New Human Being. Celtic spirituality reminds us that chaos is that out of which God created, the place of God's deepest creativity and fecundity. And now, into *this* chaos God speaks a new reality, and redemption is the result. Here's the catch, though. This redemption isn't a private lifeboat—I'm saved, you're not. This is God's reign, which means transformation, healing and wholeness, for *all* life.

At this time of year, apocalypse sets the stage for our waiting. We anticipate and trust, just as I must when the computer arbitrarily updates my programs without my asking. What we anticipate is the coming of the New Human Being who will show us how to be ourselves, how to live into who we were created to be. We anticipate and trust that there will be newness. We *wait*, but we do not wait with nothing.

During this season of waiting, we will be seeing a lot of spirals, the universal symbol of transformation—on your bulletin cover, in the liturgical art on the ceiling. [begin passing out the spirals—each take one and a pen/pencil] A spiral is the visual symbol that our journey is not pointless (it is centered on something). A spiral visually tells us that our journey will seem to go over the same territory over and over. But this is a journey going somewhere, and because it is, it is a journey of transformation. Each week during Advent, we will take a few moments during the worship service to add a personal spiral to the liturgical art. Today's texts point to change and our dread of it, the sense of judgment. God is indeed changing things, and it may be *me*. Remember my friend who said, "We keep trying to make the kingdom come without changing anything"? What do you dread? What needs changing in you? Perhaps you can consider that judgment is good news for you. Write this on your spiral and then place it in the basket on the communion table (we'll hang the spirals during the week—so high no one will be able to read yours or recognize the handwriting).

The good news of judgment is that at least we know what to throw out to make room for transformation. God's purpose for change is redemption—of *all* life (even us).

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