

---

## *The End is Always Near, and so is the Kingdom of God*

[Click here for the podcast](#)

**The Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**A Sermon at The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**29 November 2009**  
**The First Sunday of Advent - Year C**  
**Luke 21:25-36**

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

--Luke 21:25-26

If Jesus were speaking today, he might add to these words about the end times. He would say, "Yes, people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." But he would also say, "People will be fascinated with it!"

"People will be fascinated with foreboding about the end time. People will investigate strange calendars from the ancient Mayan civilization. They will believe that, since one Mayan calendar ends in the year 2012, then the world itself will end in 2012. They will make movies about it, and they will call the movie "2012."

"People will create nuclear weapons and then live in fear that the nuclear weapons will fall into the wrong hands, or go out of control, and the earth as we know it will be destroyed. Fathers and sons will struggle together in the ashen aftermath of destruction. Someone will create a movie describing these future events, and they will call the movie, "The Road."

There are always signs in the stars, the sun and the moon, or whatever we use to calibrate our lives. Ten years ago, Jesus would have been saying something like this: There will be signs in our computer programs. Our computers made no provision for the second millennium. Y2K may very well bring on the very end of the world; electricity will go dead. Airplanes will fly aimlessly through the sky.

In 1999, Jerry Falwell was telling his followers in Kingsport, Tennessee that he believed the second coming of Christ would occur in about ten years, because the antichrist was probably already alive on earth somewhere. (In fact, 1999 was the year said to be forecasted by Nostradamus as the end of the world.)

There is always someone, somewhere, predicting the end of the world. And it doesn't really matter whether they call themselves religious or not! It seems that when human beings ponder our existence in the world, we also ponder the end of our world, too. Whatever we use to measure ourselves--like calendars or computers--and whatever we use as our standards of well-being--like nuclear security or even environmental stewardship--become signs that we will one day die. Everyone has some sort of religion; and every religion, of whatever sort, tells us that we will one day die.

I am amused, for instance, by certain secular leaders of the environmental movement (a movement which I support!). That

movement has become a religion for many these days, a sort of caring, but secular, religion. Some elements of that movement, too, are fixated on the end. They see global warming as the very end of civilization as we know it. Or peak oil as the very end of civilization as we know it. Or water scarcity, or whatever. And, of course, they may be right.

We human beings are destined to ponder the end times, no matter what religion we are, and no matter what we use to calibrate or measure our lives.

Signs in the sun and the moon and the stars have always been with us throughout human civilization. There were signs in the sky at the end of the first millennium. Chronicles from the Tenth Century A.D. tell of meteors falling in England which would portend the end of the world. Some folks thought that the winter solstice at the end of the first millennium would be the end, when the night was longest, and the days the shortest. Others thought it would be Good Friday, in the Spring.

Today in the Church is First Sunday of Advent, the day we mark as a transition from one year to the next, a new liturgical year. For many centuries, Advent was a two to four week joyous season of preparing for the Nativity of Christ. But the penitential nature of this season of Advent probably emerges from the 900's AD, the end of that first millennium. As the end of the millennium approached, Advent became a season of fasting and penitence, waiting for the end of the world.

And, as we know, the end of the world has not occurred. At least, not yet.

Yet, for some lovely and eccentric reason, the Christian Church, in particular, produces in each generation those persons who are fascinated with predicting the end times. As some of you know, one of my favorite stories is that of William Miller, in the 1830s. William Miller was probably affected by this great Leonid meteor shower of 1833, and so he calculated the end of the world. He used first the old Archbishop Usher dating system of the world, believing that the earth was created in 4004 BC (and, specifically, in September of 4004 BC). Then he calculated certain numbers in the Book of Daniel and decided that the second advent--or coming--of Christ would occur April 3, 1843. The date came; nothing happened. Miller recalculated the date. That date came; nothing happened. Did his movement disintegrate?

No, not at all. Some of his followers chose a further date instead, October 22, 1844. There were signs in the sky; a comet was there. But the day came and passed with no second advent; no end times. The resiliency of our human fascination with end times is incredibly strong. One of his followers, Ellen Harmon White moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, and worked out an entire system of adventism and health (the word "advent" means "coming"). Her movement still exists today as the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

Yes, good things often come from our fascinations, naive and silly as they are. One of the early converts to Adventism was a vegetarian named John Kellogg. He is generally acknowledged to have had some rather strange ideas about health; but he also became superintendent of the Adventist Sanitarium in 1876, which later became the Battle Creek Sanitarium. As a part of his health regimen, he urged the consumption of cereal for breakfast instead of the oily hams and meats of the time. So began the Kellogg Cereal Company.

One of the patients at the Battle Creek Sanitarium was a man named C.W Post. Post had disagreements with Kellogg and so started his own company, the Post Cereal Company. That was about a hundred years ago. Today, the United States would be incomplete without the breakfast cereal industry. Maybe it all emerged because someone thought Christ was returning in 1844.

Maybe they were right. But listen again to what Jesus did say, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations ... When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

He was saying more than just the end is always near. He was saying that the kingdom of God is near. Yes, we are always observing the end of something. But, for Christians, the end of something always means the beginning of something else. Here, even at the end of our liturgical year, we are actually preparing -again- for the coming of Jesus and his kingdom.

The most important words that Jesus speaks, when he ponders the end times, are the words, "Be alert." "Be alert at all times," he says. Those are words for the spiritual life, no matter what season we are in. "Watch." Look at the stars and world

around you; look at the movies and signs. Be attentive to the people and the attitudes around you.

On any one day of our lives, something is ending. And something is beginning, too. Something is dying, but something else is being born, being invented, being developed.

When we are aware, alert, to these changes - these endings that are also beginnings, then the kingdom of God is near. This, I believe, is why Jesus mentions a curious parable right in the middle of his speech about the end times. It is a parable about trees and about growth, and about how the kingdom of God is always near.

"Look at the fig tree," Jesus said, among his words about the end times, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

Comments? Contact Dean Candler at: [SCandler@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:SCandler@stphilipscathedral.org)