

Sermon: If Jesus Invented Christmas
Text: Luke 21.25-38
Date: December 2, 2018
Context: WWPC
Advent 1
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

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.

Luke 21:25

In 1987, the hugely successful American rock band R.E.M. released a single, a song that went on to be a pretty big hit, entitled “It’s the End of the World as We Know It.”

Lyrically the song is a bit of a jumble but it does seem be, at least in part, a commentary on the perilous state of the world at the time.

Of course, whatever was going on in the late 1980s that prompted Michael Stipe and company to write their hit song seems bright and sunny and innocent in comparison to the state of the world right now.

And in case you’re wondering, or in case you’re worried, I’m not going to detail why things feel perhaps even more apocalyptic now than they did in 1987.

What I will say is a point we’ve made before. We’re not the first people to feel like it’s the end of the world as we know it, and neither were the members of R.E.M.

Jesus appears to have felt this way too.

There’s no getting around the fact that the text I just read is a hard story. Maybe even the hardest of all the stories in the New Testament.

“. . . 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, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Those are very disturbing words, which is why it's surprising that they come to us in a sermon, one of the last Jesus gives.

Emotionally and theologically it falls on the opposite end of the spectrum from the sermon on the Mount, one of the first sermons Jesus gives -- and one which we looked at just a few weeks ago.

In some ways it's hard even to call it a sermon. We think of sermons as proclamations of the Good News. And this appears to be anything but that.

So, what then do we do with this hard story, this unsettling sermon?

Well one of the first things we do is to refrain from reading it literally.

Marcus Borg, the late, great Biblical scholar, once said that to *not* read the Bible literally is to take it much more seriously.

This passage is a perfect example of why this is so. *Truly I tell you*, Jesus says, *this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.*

Except that this generation did pass away and none of those things happened.

So, what's going on here? If what Jesus says is easily proven not to be literally true, then what are we to make of this sermon?

The truth is we don't know exactly what to make of it. Maybe Jesus was aware that his own time on earth was drawing to a close, and that it was not going to come to a pleasant end. How could it?

From the moment he was born in that manger, he represented a threat to the status quo. And the status quo doesn't like to be threatened. And when it holds all the power -- when it has soldiers and chariots at its command -- it's going to extinguish any and every threat to that power.

And now, late in his life, as he's getting ready to head into Jerusalem to confront that power, maybe Jesus knew he was about to face his own personal apocalypse, and these dark words just came flooding out of him, a kind of autobiographical stream-of-consciousness confession.

Or maybe -- and the scholarly consensus is that this is more likely -- maybe the authors of the Gospels were letting Jesus speak a word of hope to a people whose world had already come to an end in a ruinous heap.

When this story was first written down, the Temple of Jerusalem had recently been destroyed and the Romans had taken possession of Jewish homeland. For the Jews of that time, that had to feel like a world ending event.

So this story that sounds so hard and so ominous to us, might have sounded like a word of hope and promise to them. *When you see these things happen, know that the Kingdom of God is near.*

What could be better than to know that what looks like disaster is about to result in victory?

But that was then. And this is now. And to us it's still a hard story. Which is why--ironic as this may sound--it's the perfect story for the first Sunday in Advent.

Yes, we love the stories to come, of bright shiny stars, and sweet little lambs, and swaddling clothes and mysterious magi.

And over the course of the Advent season our children are going to act them out for us, as we make our way to that manger in Bethlehem.

But like all the stories in the Bible, the stories about Christ's birth are not meant for children, or at least not just for children.

Because all of these stories are about the world as it really is, beautiful and vulnerable and threatened with ruin. And -- here is the Good News in all of that -- they are about the length to which God goes to meet us in that world.

Gabriel announces this great and glorious Good News to an unwed teenaged girl, with no voice. It's also such scandalous news that it threatens to ruin her life. But this marginal, voiceless peasant girl claims her voice, and embraces her role in God's love-based insurgency into our world.

Later, when the time comes for the child to be born, another set of angels announces this news to a group of marginalized workers out in the fields. If you were retelling that story today, these shepherds would surely be migrant laborers out picking winter vegetables somewhere under a hot sun.

Maybe they're here illegally. Maybe they don't even speak English. The God of Advent does not care. This story is too big for that. The God who is coming into our world does not care about the limits that ordinarily govern that world.

The Magi arrive in Jerusalem, tie up their camels outside the gates, and go in search of the child whose birth this star they have been following has heralded for their whole journey. Which is lovely, except we sometimes forget what happens next.

When they disclose the news of this birth to Herod, he freaks out and he sends out literal death squads to find this threat and extinguish it.

Which in turn forces Mary and Joseph to flee for their lives. Where? To Egypt where they live as outsiders and refugees.

And now a story that starts in scandal and in crisis, a story that was first announced to a marginal peasant girl and to a group of unwashed, smelly shepherds, now this story threatens to end in apocalypse.

And you know who can relate to it? You know who must feel like it's the end of the world as they know it?

The refugees who are currently detained on our southern border. If you don't think their story sounds hauntingly like that of Mary and Joseph, then you're not reading the news, or you're not reading your Bible, or not reading both.

Because it is hauntingly similar. They are fleeing for their lives, seeking shelter and safety in a country that is not their own.

And you know who else can relate to it?

The people in California whose homes appear to have been devoured by a great and terrible fire monster, right out of their worst apocalyptic nightmares.

And now, also, the people of Alaska, where the roads started cracking open and swallowing cars as their drivers made their way into town to shop for Christmas.

Yes, we love the beauty of this season, but neither Advent nor Christmas were ever meant to be a sentimental celebration because we don't live in a sentimental world.

We live in a hard world, where bad things often happen to people who are least expecting them and who least deserve them.

So what would Christmas look like if Jesus had invented this season, and not Hallmark and the toy makers? Where might we find the one whose birth we are preparing to celebrate if he were alive and at loose in this beautiful and vulnerable world of ours?

Surely he'd be in the midst of those refugees, feeding them, tending to their wounds, making sure they feel loved and safe and welcome -- because he's family once experienced what it was like to feel unsafe and threatened.

Or he'd be in California -- if not fighting those terrible fires himself, surely he would be ministering to those exhausted firefighters who are battling them, and seeking out those who've lost their homes, offering them comfort and hope in the midst of their loss.

Or on an Alaska Airways flight to Anchorage to begin the work of rebuilding -- not just rebuilding cities, but rebuilding hope among people whose lives have been shaken to the ground by these earthquakes.

And you know who else can relate to these hard stories? I'm guessing some of you can.

Because the truth is that 2018 has been a bit of a nightmare in many ways. The national news has been flat out terrible. And at times it has felt like the end of the world as we know it.

The nations have in fact been distressed. And maybe we haven't fainted with fear, but we've known more than a normal share of grief and anger.

So, heads up! Be alert. Keep your eyes and your heart open because, just as Gabriel promised, God is coming into our world. And there is simply no stopping that.