



The End of Trouble

TEXT
Matthew 24:29–31,
36–44

December 15, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

What do you think happens when we die? I think about this a lot, as more weeks than not, I sit with some of you as we sing

Abide With Me and read again, “I go to prepare a place for you.” I have been in that service with many of you. In my own faith, I trust that in the end, there is only God. There are no more wins and losses, no more jobs to do, no more problems to solve. There is only God. And because God is love, God could not bear to let you go. I trust that the love of God will hold us fast. Resurrection is the last act of love.

We think about this more as individuals, but this text invites us to think less on the individual scale, and more on the cosmic scale; the last act of love for the whole of creation. This text is cosmic in scope.

The text begins, “After all the suffering of those days,” and then says lots of crazy things happen. Night skies go dark and Jesus rides the clouds; trumpets blast and the angels are everywhere. The lectionary assigns this story to be read every year on the first Sunday of Advent. Many churches read it on that day.

This is a strange text. The stranger texts are, the easier they are to misread. I think many folks who read these words of the Son of Man coming on the clouds do like Thomas Jefferson did, and just cut these verses out of their Bibles. They say this sounds like craziness.

Others read it like a news report and assume what we are hearing is exactly how the world will end. If you listen to folks who want to tell you how the world is going to end, they never make it sound like good news. A few of the elect get to ride in the air, but for the rest of us, we are “left behind.”

I think both approaches are a mistake. I don’t think it is a news report. But I do think it’s hard to get through Advent without this passage.

Matthew writes, after the suffering of those days. He probably has particular suffering in mind, but he wouldn’t have to. Suffering is the companion of every age. Suffering is the focus of this passage.

From the midst of the suffering, Matthew writes in what biblical scholars call “apocalyptic language.” It is a particular kind of writing that uses bigger than life images to speak truths that are too immense for everyday

speech. But the point is simple: Jesus is Lord. And he will be Lord at the end. When it all comes to an end, there is only God. And if God is love, then that is good news. This passage is not a threat; it’s a word of comfort spoken in the suffering of these days.

But it says the world will end. Of course it will. The world is a creature. It is finite. Like stars and starlings and you and me, there is a beginning and there will be an end. That is the truth of all creatures. Creatures have limits. There’s nothing wrong with being limited, though it can be frustrating.

When I was a kid, I had big dreams. I was going to play baseball for the Atlanta Braves. But the cruel realities of finitude made it clear that I could never play baseball. My problem? Zero talent.

That’s OK. I decided I would be a musician. I bought a guitar. I started writing songs. I had big plans. But the cruel realities of finitude set in. My problem? Zero talent.

Zero talent is how I became a preacher. Not much talent required there. I was pretty young when I had my first thoughts of being a preacher. My father came home and found me in

the back yard. The seat on our swing set was the perfect height for a pulpit. We had a dog and a couple cats. I was preaching to them. They were very attentive, as you can imagine. My father came home and overheard me offering the benediction, and he asked, “Well, Tom, you preaching?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you trying to act like your dad?” he asked.

I said, “You? I’m Billy Graham.” But then the realities of finitude set in. Some say you can do anything you want to do, but that’s not true. All of us are limited. Finitude is not bad. It’s not evil. It’s just limits.

But this text is not about finitude. Jesus is not teaching us that the world will come to an end, as much as Jesus is teaching us that a new world, a new kingdom, a promised day is being born.

You know me, so you know that every sermon I preach is shaped by this promise. You might ask, “Why is this such an important point? Why does this matter today?”

This gets at the core of Christian faith. We are called to live our lives today defined more by what will be than by what has been. It’s not easy. But Christian life is defined by hope. We are called to live toward God’s promised day. Because Jesus is Lord, even in these days of suffering, God’s future can shape us now.

We are not home yet, but because Jesus is Lord, someday, the world will be home. And that new day is being born, bit

by bit, even in the present. Even among us.

This is how I understand it. Every pastor becomes familiar with hospital waiting rooms. What happens in waiting rooms is similar to what happens in other places. People drink their morning coffee and read the paper. People will make phone calls or tell stories. Some will try to sleep in those less-than-comfortable chairs. Sometimes conversations will be initiated with total strangers: “How old is she? 23 months? My granddaughter just turned three in October” — that kind of thing.

It’s all normal stuff, the kind of thing you could witness in any room. But the difference is that in the waiting room, someone is on the other side of that door, and it is the love we have for that someone and the love that someone holds for us that defines every minute. In the midst of the stories and the newspapers and the crossword puzzles, there is always an eye on the door. And when the door opens, everyone stops. Everyone looks. Well, maybe not everyone. Sometimes there is some yahoo who continues talking about this or that, and in the silence that follows the door opening, you hear, “I can’t believe the ref made that call!” or something trivial like that. That guy thinks he is in a room. That person has no idea it’s a waiting room.

I have come to the point in my own faith that I think Jesus taught us that there is a holy love on the other side. And in every moment, even in the suffering of

these days, you live trusting that love calls you by name and will never let you go — not only you, the whole of creation. Trust that, and it changes everything now.

As I reread these words this week, I thought of the folks who gathered this week in this sanctuary to bear witness to the resurrection. Their hearts were split open with grief. These words were written for them.

I thought of Greta Thunberg, *Time’s* Person of the Year. This teenage girl with Asperger’s is a prophet among us. She is living toward a day that is getting harder and harder to imagine, when we will turn climate change around. These words are written for her.

I thought of the folks I worshipped with last month in the bateys in the Dominican Republic. They are on the wrong side of the economy as all the money from the sugar crop they harvest flows into a few hands. They are paid sharecropper wages as capitalism leaves them behind. These words are written for them.

These words are written for the poor and forgotten, for the frightened and the grieving. They are written for the sick and for the abused. And they are written for you and me. For even on days when we might not be suffering, even on those days, we are surrounded by those who are. And the promise is, in the end, there is only God; but God is love, so take comfort.

He says that two are at the wheel — one taken, the other left. Is this literal? Is this judgment? I think one knows she is

working in a waiting room, and the other thinks it's just a field.

A couple years ago, I was in the Newark airport. I arrived to learn there had been a power outage that reduced the TSA checks to one single screening station, which reduced the airport to one line, which snaked and looped and crawled all around the airport in no discernable fashion. It was chaos. Neither I, nor any of the people around me, could tell if we were in a line going to the gates, or just standing in a line going nowhere. I thought, not only am I likely to miss my plane, I can't tell if I'm even in the line to try to catch my plane. I wondered, "Am I in line to nowhere?"

Sometimes life feels like that. Sometimes it feels like everything is falling apart. There are big problems, and people with power seem to be so afraid they have chosen to take care of themselves and forget the rest of us. Facts are ignored. Ideologies rule. Truth is denied, and we wonder if the center will hold. These are the sufferings of these days. And we are not home yet.

But I believe this: In the end, God will be God. Jesus is Lord, and he will be Lord at the end, and then we will be home.

This summer I shared with you this word from Clarence Darrow. He is widely known as the defense attorney for John Scopes in the Monkey Trial of Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. The year before he took a case called Leopold and Loeb. They were two young adults from

Chicago who senselessly murdered a teenage boy. Darrow was pleading with the state not to give Leopold and Loeb the death penalty.

In his eight-hour closing, he said this (I won't give you all eight hours): "Your Honor stands between the past and the future. You may hang these boys ... but in doing so you will turn your face toward the past. I know the future stands with me.

"I am pleading for life. ... I am pleading that we overcome cruelty with kindness and hatred with love. I am pleading for the future; ... for a time when hatred and cruelty will not control the [human heart.] When we can learn by reason and judgment and understanding and faith that all life is worth saving, and that mercy is the highest attribute.¹ *I am pleading for the future.*

That's the message of Advent. We are not just waiting for God's future. We are pleading for it. We are striving toward that day. We can be better and the world can be better. Many have sold out on that dream, but Jesus is Lord and a new world is coming.

I don't know what you think happens when we die. But I trust this. The love of God is a love that claims you by name and will never let you go. I think God simply refuses to grant death the power to pull us from God — not only you and me, but the whole of creation. In the end, God will be God. And because God is love, in the end, the suffering

of these days will be no more, and we will all be home.

¹EdPts, Edward Larson and Jack Marshall, *The Essential Words and Writings of Clarence Darrow* (2007), p. 235

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.