

“Ready?”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-33

We live in a culture of apocalyptic fervor, a world characterized by extremity and urgency. In politics, parties don’t differ on what’s wrong and how to fix it. No, they’re divided into categories of good and evil. Social issues are rarely a forum for reasonable discussion anymore. They are a fight to the death. In religion, where the idea of the apocalypse originated, some self-appointed expert, every other year or so, names a time and date when Jesus will return, despite Jesus’ explicit warning that “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Each time one of these charismatic figures with their tortured “biblical” calculations trot out a Last Day prediction, there are a number of people who believe them and sell their homes and businesses, only to find themselves disappointed, confused, and penniless when the prediction fails to materialize. Then the glorious predictor discovers much to his surprise but never to his shame, that his math is slightly off. It might be a few more months or so, but just wait a little longer. And the new date comes and goes, and the fevered brain goes questing once more.

Such foolishness is enough to put us off the apocalypse altogether, if it weren’t so enticing. What attracts us to this event is the simple magnitude of it. The lurid hints of what will happen, and the highest stakes possible. The question for us is to decide how we will handle the apocalypse, since it will not stop being part of our daily life.

I think there are four options, only one of which seems healthy, helpful, and holy to me. The four options are ignore it, be a smug self-righteous prig, suffer anxious terror, or make ready with a hopeful heart.

Option #1, ignore it, is a choice that all of us make from time to time. You just can't live every day in acute anticipation of the return of Jesus and the end of time. You'd go nuts, unless you're a smug self-righteous prig, which we'll get to in a few minutes. However, some of us decide to ignore the whole idea of the apocalypse. When you think about how incredibly sick and warped the thinking and talking about the event has become, that's somewhat understandable.

It also makes sense to ignore the apocalypse strictly from the standpoint of precedent. It has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus ascended to heaven, and he still hasn't come back, despite the fact that his original followers expected him to return during their lifetimes, a fact evident to anyone who reads the New Testament carefully. Jesus himself said in Mark 13:10, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place," so the early Christians had good cause to look forward to an imminent return.

However, just because something hasn't happened doesn't mean that it will never happen, and possibly soon. Taking Option #1 – ignoring the apocalypse – involves significant risk. For one thing, it denies the promise Jesus made to return in glory someday, something no faithful Christian can afford to reject.

This brings us to Option #2, being a smug self-righteous prig. I like to call this one the obnoxious option. We've all probably met at least one person who's chosen Option #2. Jesus is coming back, sooner rather than later, probably day after tomorrow, yesterday would have been better. Those who cling to Option #2 are excited that Jesus is coming back because they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are going to be swept up into the air where they will have an excellent view of all the damned sinners – which will be almost everyone else – suffering indescribable torments at the hands of a wrathful God.

The troubling thing about those who embrace the second option is that they tend to harbor a lust for vengeance fueled by the robust idea that they are super-holy and always right. I don't think

there are many if any here who find this option appealing, so let's pray for people who chosen Option #2. May they repent and find humility.

Option #3, suffering anxious terror, is closely related to Option #2, because that's how a self-righteous prig wants everybody else to feel. If you're not just like them in every way, you ought to be horrified at the aspect of Jesus' return. Too often people buy into Option #3. We accept the idea – foisted upon us by others – that the return of Jesus will be bad for us. The world is going to turn into a living hell before it becomes heaven on Earth.

Of course, there is plenty of scripture, especially in The Revelation of John, to suggest that life will get really rough around the time of Jesus' arrival. Today's lesson from The Gospel of Mark spells it out pretty plainly, too. There will be frightful celestial signs, and much more, to herald the return of Christ. However, Option #3 only makes sense if we have either: selected Option #1 and ignored the reality of the apocalypse, in which case we shall be unprepared; or accepted the judgment of those who have choose Option #2.

This leaves us with Option #4, make ready with a hopeful heart. Think of all the things we prepare for. We take out life insurance policies, so when we die our families will have financial security. We hold insurance policies for our homes and cars, in case something happens. A vacation takes meticulous forethought. Just getting through a workday demands looking forward to the future, even if the future is only several hours away. So it's not as if we don't know how to get ready for something, and there's nothing more important to get ready for than the return of Jesus.

The good news is that being ready for the apocalypse is not entirely on us. Paul wrote the Corinthians that “God will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, God's gift of grace is what really makes us ready for the return of Jesus, so our preparations lay principally in receiving that grace, “so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We can receive grace, if we're humble enough to accept it, and when we do, we can anticipate Jesus' coming with a hopeful heart. Consider the joy of this Advent season, as we make ready for the birth of Jesus, his first arrival on Earth. Nothing about this frightens us, because we know that the Incarnation changed the world in a wonderful, beautiful way. Why would we feel any differently about the second appearance of Christ on Earth? What do we expect the final outcome will be?

Yes, when Jesus came, some people suffered, mainly his opponents, and who were they? Kings, emperors, and the religious elite – the ancient version of smug self-righteous prigs – they were the people who found Jesus so distressing. Yet for the poor and outcast, for those who hoped and prayed for a more just and merciful world, for people who needed physical and spiritual healing, to them the arrival of Jesus was felt as a God-send. And it was literally a God-send. This is how those same people will receive the second-coming of Jesus. Do you need healing? Do you celebrate the prospect of God's coming reign of peace, mercy, and justice? Do you feel on the margins, or do you advocate for those who do? If so, what do we have to fear?

We ought to be cheering, begging for it. "Come, Lord Jesus, come" ought to be our watchword, and indeed it is when we pray The Lord's Prayer with sincerity, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven." The apocalypse is the event that will bring the promises of God to fulfillment. Yes, it might be a messy, unpleasant affair, to put it mildly. But is that too high a price to pay for the promise brought to fruition, a promise of real enduring peace in the presence of Christ?

Don't let the twisted ideas floating around about the apocalypse ruin the party for you. Just as we wait for the first coming of Jesus during Advent, so every day can be a mini-Advent of anticipation for the day when Jesus will come again in glory, to finish what he started, to wrap

up the work we continue through the power of the Holy Spirit. What a glorious day, a marvelous day, a day to rejoice, for those who are ready with a humble and hopeful heart! Amen.