

Second Sunday of Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
<i>Response</i>	Show us thy steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Peter 3:8-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:1-8

The second Sunday of Advent for year B in the season of Advent takes us to a little bit of a departure from the ordinary content of the second readings, because normally the second reading is going to be from the letters of Paul. But as I've mentioned elsewhere, it's not *always* the case that it's from the Pauline letters. Sometimes it's from the other apostolic letters in the New Testament. And in this case, we've got a reading—a very powerful and important reading—from 2 Peter, the second letter of Peter chapter 3, verses 8-14. And in this passage, the Church continues Her traditional Advent emphasis on eschatology...on the doctrine of end time and the doctrine of the end of the world.

And in this case, the Church pulls one of the most explicit passages from the New Testament about how the world will end and also that the world—that we know it now, this visible world—when it ends, will not simply be dissolved but that it will be renewed and that there will be a new world, a new creation...or to use the biblical language, a new heavens and a new earth. So let's look at this very important passage from 2 Peter chapter 3 on the end of the world and the new creation. So 2 Peter 3, verse 8-14 says this:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not

wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.¹

Alright, so what's this describing here? Well, this is clearly a detailed description of the end of the world and the beginning of the new world, the new creation. And there are several elements to Peter's teaching about eschatology in this passage that demand our attention. The first one is the question of what is famously in modern times been referred to as the "delay" of the *parousia*—the apparent delay of the final coming of Jesus and the coming of Christ in judgment at the end of time.

And so there's a debate about exactly how widespread this was, but there is very clear evidence in the New Testament that Jesus' teachings on the imminence of His coming—the fact that He's coming soon—led some Christians to believe that it would happen within their own lifetimes, within the first decades of the early Church. For example, at the end of the Gospel of John, you might recall that it tells us that some of the brethren—some of the believers—when Jesus spoke to the beloved disciple and says:

“If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (John 21:22)

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

I'm sorry—when He said that to Peter, the rumor spread that the beloved disciple wouldn't die until Jesus had returned. So it kind of reflects an implicit assumption that the *parousia* is going to take place within the lifetime of the apostles. So as the decades pass...and the thirties pass, then the forties pass, then the fifties, and now you're getting into the sixties, which is when Peter is martyred (sometime in the mid-sixties). Some Christians appear to have been saying, "What happened to the promise of the coming of Christ?"

And so in this letter, in 2 Peter, it's addressing that question by pointing out that first and foremost that God does not see time the way that we see time. He doesn't see it from the same vantage point. So he says:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 Peter 3:8)

Here Peter is actually quoting from a psalm—a very Jewish thing to do if you want to make a statement, a theological statement, you quote from the book of Psalms, which is very familiar. So if you go back to Psalm 90, verse 4-5, he's taking the language of Psalm 90, and if you want to understand how he's using it, just go back and look at the context. In Psalm 90, verse 4, it says:

For a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream,
like grass which is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Okay, so what's the point there? That although a thousand years might seem long to us, from God's vantage point—from the perspective of eternity—it's like a watch in the night. It's like a couple of hours. That's the different watches they would have throughout the night.

So what Peter is doing is basically relativizing the vantage point of people who think God is slow. So yes, several decades have passed since the death of Jesus, but to God several decades are like the blink of an eye. It might seem long to us, but it's not long from the perspective of eternity.

So that's the first point that whenever we feel...or whenever human beings experience, it seems like God is taking a "long time" to respond in whatever situation it might be, it's important to keep in mind that God looks at time from a vantage point that's very different from ours. So what seems so long to us is nothing to Him.

The second point that 2 Peter is making here is that God is not slow about the promise but that the reason—this is very important. The reason the second coming hasn't happened yet—the reason the final judgment hasn't happened yet—is not because God is slow, but because He's patient with humanity. He's forbearing with us, because He doesn't want anyone to perish, but He wants everyone to reach repentance.

So the second doctrinal point is fascinating here that 2 Peter is making...is that the apparent "delay" of the *parousia* is actually an act of mercy on God's part. It's a sign of God's patience, because the more time He gives humanity, the more time there is for individual human beings to repent and be saved. Because once judgment comes, everyone at that moment, that judgment will be definitive and final. There's not going to be any chance for repentance after the end of the world or after the final judgment. The judgment that's rendered on the last day is definitive and irrevocable. It's irreformable, so to speak. So whereas now, as long as we're living in time, people have a chance to repent and to turn.

Now of course the qualification is there that if the end of *your* world happens, i.e. through death, you have the particular judgment to make. So that's also going to be irreformable and definitive. But here Peter is speaking collectively about the apparent *collective* delay of the judgment of all humanity and the end of the world.

Okay, third...with that said, as soon as he mentions the apparent delay, he also hastens to add the teaching of the imminence of the end, which is one of the basic

teachings of Christ that you see in the Gospels, and it's throughout the apostolic proclamation. There's always this tension between the fact that the end is near but that we don't know exactly when it's going to happen. So he says:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...

In other words, it will be unexpected, and you don't know exactly when it's going to happen. But when it does happen:

...the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

Okay, this is very crucial. Over the years, I've had a number of students be confused by the language of "the heavens and the earth." Because when we use the word "heaven," we tend to use it to refer to the invisible realm in which God dwells—this kind of ineffable, indescribable, invisible, purely spiritual realm in which God is and to which our souls enter after death, for example. So to talk about heaven or the heavens passing away seems like that ineffable, invisible, spiritual realm is going to somehow be dissolved or destroyed.

That's *not* what the New Testament is talking about. The New Testament, when it speaks about the heavens or the earth passing away, it's using standard Jewish terminology or biblical terminology for the sky—the visible sky, the visible heavens—and then the visible earth. So it's the earth and sky, the stars and the elements of the land and the water. So it's just Jewish imagery for the cosmos...what we would call the universe. The heavens can include both what we would think of as the atmosphere of the earth—the sky, the blue sky that we all love—but it also includes the realm in which the stars and the planets dwell, what we would include the galaxies of the cosmos. But the whole visible universe in Jewish Scripture (and other Jewish writings) is called the heavens and the earth. So it's a way of describing collectively the cosmos. So when it says:

...the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire...

...it's talking about the cosmic destruction of the visible, known universe. That's the imagery there. Or to put it in modern day parlance, it means the end of the world. That's what 2 Peter is describing here.

And what's interesting about this is that although Peter doesn't say when the end of the world or the end of the earth is going to happen, he does say *how*...which is through fire. So the world will be burned up with fire. And this is an important biblical motif that you see running throughout.

In the book of Genesis, the known visible world is destroyed by means of water, through the flood—through the cosmic flood in Genesis 6 to 9. God promises never to destroy the world again with a flood, but in the end, there will actually be a greater destruction. It's not just going to be the earth that's flooded; it's going to be the heavens *and* the earth, and the mode of destruction will not be water but will be fire. This is the end of the world.

Thankfully, Peter does not leave them there. He says, “Okay, so if that's going to happen, what's the Christian response to the doctrine of the end of the world?” And he says:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness...

So this is really crucial for us to understand—that eschatology has a moral implication. Eschatology is not just cool speculation about what's going to happen at the end of the world, what's going to happen to humanity, what's going to happen to the cosmos. It has a moral imperative, and that is: if the world is going to end, if this is true, then it follows that Christians should live lives of piety and holiness.

So you hear a lot these days about the universal call to holiness. Well, one reason there is a universal call to holiness is because the universe is going to be destroyed. And so detachment from the visible, material created realities of this world is a reasonable response to the revealed truth that they're all going to pass away. And

what holiness is in its essence...the word “holy” both in Hebrew and in Greek—*hagios* in Greek, *kadosh* in Hebrew—means to be “set apart.” Set apart from sin is the negative connotation, but set apart for God—that’s the positive connotation. You could also describe it this way: set apart from this world—you live in it but you’re detached from it—and set apart for the world to come, for the new heavens and the new earth. That’s our home. That’s where we belong. That’s what we’re heading toward; that’s what we’re living for. That’s the essence of holiness, according to 2 Peter chapter 3.

So holiness is a response to Christian eschatology. And if you wonder why does there seem to be a diminution or a diminishment of holiness in our contemporary secular context...well, one of the reasons is that secularism comes from the word *saecula*—it means “this age” or “this world.” And by definition, people who live in a secular context live for *this saecula*, this world, and not for the world to come. They don’t set themselves apart for some greater future reality. They attach themselves to—we attach ourselves to—*this* world and its pleasures and its delights and its beauties and make them our end instead of making the world to come.

This is why secular people don’t rest on Sunday. You look at Sabbath, you look at early Christianity—Sunday rest, over and over again, the early Church Fathers would talk about Sunday rest as a way of honoring the first day. Sunday is the first day of creation in Genesis 1, but it’s also the eighth day. It’s the day of the resurrection. It points forward to the new creation. So every time a person rests on Sunday, it’s a way of anticipating the new heavens and the new earth. It’s a way of anticipating the new creation, which begins on the day Jesus rises from the tomb on Easter Sunday.

So if you really believe Jesus rose from the dead, and if you really believe that His bodily resurrection is a foretaste of a new creation, then you should live that way every single week, reminding yourself this world is passing away and there’s a greater world coming.

And you don’t have to take the word of Peter for this in 2 Peter, you can...he’s getting it from—I mean, you do, because it’s revealed in Scripture. But it’s not a

novel idea. This is from the book of Isaiah. So the greatest prophet of the Old Testament that Jesus quotes over and over again—Jesus Himself quotes—in Isaiah 65, verse 17, God says:

“For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.

Isaiah 66, same thing, verse 22:

“For as the new heavens and the new earth
which I will make
shall remain before me, says the Lord;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.

So this is Jewish eschatology. The Scriptures revealed in its greatest prophet that this world, the former things, they all pass away, and there will be a new heavens and a new earth, as Peter says:

...in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. (2 Peter 3:13-14)

So notice, the upshot of this reading is that we are waiting for the new Advent. We're waiting for the final Advent. We're waiting for the new creation, and therefore we need to strive to live lives that are blameless and that are holy...that are pious and that are zealous. Zeal—where does our zeal come from? It comes from the hope of a new creation—not just the faith to trust that we've been forgiven for sins. That's the mystery of redemption. But the mystery of the new creation should move us to hope for the things that we don't see but are still to come.

And this aspect of the new creation, over the years as I've been teaching...it's one of my favorite things to talk about, because it seems to me—and perhaps I'm wrong, but I think I'm not—but a lot of modern day Catholics are weakly formed in eschatology. Or if they do know eschatology, it's a little bit of a truncated view.

So for example, one traditional catechetical formula for teaching about eschatology in the twentieth century was the emphasis on the four last things. A lot of young Catholics used to learn the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. And that's very good. If you know that, you're doing better—you're definitely getting better catechesis than I did when I was young. But that's an incomplete eschatology, because heaven can be understood just as the invisible realm to which my soul goes to experience beatitude after death. Same thing about hell, except the other way. Judgment is the final judgment, and death is my own particular end. But there's no cosmic dimension to the traditional summary of the four last things. It doesn't tell us what happens to the world in which we dwell.

So years ago, I did a Bible study called *Life After Death: The Seven Last Things*. And we looked at death, judgment, heaven, and hell...but we also looked at purgatory. We looked at the bodily resurrection, *and* we looked at the new creation. There's a whole section in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the new creation. The new *Catechism* from 1992 emphasizes this cosmic dimension of Christian eschatology. And so I'll end with a quote from the new *Catechism* about the new creation. What does the Church teach about this? It says:

At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign for ever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed... Sacred Scripture calls this mysterious renewal, which will transform humanity and the world, “new heavens and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1)...

And there the *Catechism* is quoting explicitly the reading for today, 2 Peter chapter 3, verse 13. What does it mean?

The visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed, “so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should

be at the service of the just,” sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ.²

That’s the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1042-43 and 1047. I don’t know about you, but the first time I really grasped that teaching, it was a shock to me. It was a surprise to me...the idea that the universe would somehow participate in the glorification and the resurrection of Jesus in the transfiguration of the cosmos into a new heavens and a new earth as a whole other dimension to what the Christian hope for the world is.

And I think, actually, in our own day and time, when the environmentalist movement is such a powerful force on a global scene, it’s important for the Church to say—to make clear—that there is a sacredness to the world and that the earth (and the cosmos) has an ultimate destiny in Christ and in the resurrection. So in other words, when Christians talk about the end of the world, it isn’t that God is going to take creation, which is good, and destroy it and then throw it into the garbage pan of history. No. It’s going to be—in 2 Peter 3, according to 2 Peter—it’s going to be burned in order to make it new. So the destruction leads to renewal. Death leads to resurrection, and that’s what we’re remembering and what we’re preparing for in this Advent season.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1042-43, 1047