

"Lucy," says Charlie Brown,
 "Do you think the world
 will come to an end in our time?"
 Lucy responds:
 "I try not to think about such things."
 "Well," says Charlie Brown,
 "now that I've brought it to your attention,
 what do you think?"
 Lucy replies:
 "When things that I try not to think about
 are brought to my attention,
 I try not to think about them."
 That may describe our reaction to
 today's gospel lesson.
 Some of us will confess to feeling a lot like Lucy
 hearing this text now,
 in the first week of Advent.
 There are a lot of things we begin to do
 to prepare for Christmas,
 but contemplating the end of time
 is usually not one of them.
 We try not to think about it.
 Yet when Jesus offers followers his vision
 of utter chaos, he does it to motivate them
 to stay prayerfully vigilant.
 He warns that he will be taken from them.
 When that happens, they are to be on alert,
 for Jesus to come again.
 This is the great Christian hope for us, as well.
 We begin the season of Advent,
 which is about watching for signs
 that life is about to change radically –
 that Jesus is coming again,
 that Life As We Know It, will change.
 What would you like to see change?
 Some of us dread the natural enemies of life –
 climate change, famine, fire, earthquake,
 wind, hurricane, and flood.

Would it too much to hope for
 that these troublesome realities of
 Life As We Know It
 abate after Jesus comes again?
 I think probably it is too much to hope for.
 God, I suspect, is satisfied
 that the arc of geologic time
 is headed in the right direction.
 Compared with the conditions on this planet
 a billion years ago, things are pretty stable.
 But I do find hopeful signs in the ways
 the world **responds** to natural disasters.
 Take forest fires.
 Not long ago, the right thing to do
 was to put out all forest fires as quickly as possible.
 Today, there is more sensitivity
 to the cycles of nature that depend on
 the occasional burning-away of the landscape.
 The idea of controlled burn
 is taking hold as a way of balancing
 human safety with ecology.
 Thanks to modern communications,
 we can respond more effectively
 to natural disasters.
 The tsunami of 2004 demonstrated the power
 of instant global communication
 to mobilize relief and recovery efforts,
 prompting an outpouring of resources
 at all levels –
 international, national, private, and personal.
 The same with Hurricanes Rita and Katrina.
 The influence of the church in this change
 should not be underestimated.
 Starting Monday, 196 countries meet in Paris
 to finalize a global deal on climate change.
 It's called COP21,
 which is shorthand for the 21st session of the
 Conference of the Parties to the
 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

And the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will have onlookers at the talks. Hundreds of official delegates to COP21 have journeyed to Paris. Alongside them is Rev. Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, Coordinator of Social Justice Ministries for PCUSA. Since 1990 PCUSA policy has been to "Restore Creation for Ecology and Justice." Successive General Assemblies have ratified language such as, "Restoring creation is God's own work in our time," and "God comes both to judge and to restore." Jesus might have said similar words in the Temple. His apocalypse can be heard as a warning in every era, right up to our own, because Jesus knows it's hard to sustain vigilance. Attentiveness to the reign of God prepares believers for the ultimate day of judgment. "Be on guard," Jesus warns, "be alert at all times, praying for strength to meet the time of judgment." There are signs of the emerging Reign of God in the world's response to ecological crisis. In the past five years the most influential nations, notably China and the US, have shifted position. The two countries have an agreement to work together on carbon reduction in crucial sectors of the economy, including transportation and energy efficiency. If we turn to social problems of Life As We Know It – war, genocide, poverty, civil disorder, violence against blacks, homelessness, gangs, public corruption, child abuse, and the like –

there are raised sensitivities to human rights, due process, economic justice, racial equality, and protection from exploitation. These are signs of the Advent of the Reign of God. Still, I fear that it is too optimistic to hope for an end to social ills, given human nature.

What personal evils might we see diminish in the reign of God? Could we hope for an end to greed, envy, addiction, covetousness, violence, murder? For me, those are precisely the changes I hope for in the Reign of God. The world as we know it of greed and power and military security is not divinely ordained. Rather, in Jesus Christ, God ordains a world of service, sharing, and submission to God's will. To foster God's reign, we should be advocating for those God-in-Christ cares most about – the poor, the marginalized, and the sinners. An ancient biblical hope is escape from bondage to Life As We Know It. Some call it salvation. Prior to the coming of Christ, the biblical record of success in achieving salvation is not encouraging. Kings, prophets, and poets all try, to no avail. But with the First Advent – the Christ-child, God With Us – God inaugurates a divine reign. Through the incarnation, God unites with the world at a time and a place of rampant social injustice: the Roman Empire in the Middle East. The ancient theme of release from bondage returns to the biblical narrative in the form of a helpless baby.

The first Advent of Christ, Immanuel,
points the way to the personal righteousness
that God intends.

The Christ-child grows in wisdom and love,
fully aware of the social ills of his day,
possessed of divine powers for good,
yet disavowing political power.

Death on a cross releases the cosmic force
of resurrection, and earth rejoices.

Our gospel lesson is set
in the Temple at Jerusalem.

The Temple is magnificent,
rebuilt to world-class level by King Herod.
Rituals are carried out with high ceremony.
Within the walls is the very heart
of the Jewish nation,
theologically, politically, and economically.
Some of Jesus' disciples begin talking about
the majestic stonework of the Temple
and the memorial decorations on the walls.
But Jesus says, "The time is coming
when all these things
will be completely demolished.

Not one stone will be left on top of another!"

Then, in today's apocalyptic passage,
Jesus prophesies his return in glory.

The signs will not be only local, but cosmic,
in sun, moon, stars, and earth.

The impact will be felt in the sea and the waves.

It is not Israel's people alone who will panic:
there will be distress among nations –
among ethnicities, in the Greek.

All people throughout the inhabited world
will faint in fear and foreboding,
because whatever heavenly powers
they believe in will be shaken.

History records that Jerusalem does fall,
and that is terrible for the Jewish people
in that time and place, but that's not the end.

It's a funny thing about human nature:
we are more ready to accept the voice of doom
than the assurance of hope.

We need a good scare every now and then.

As the saying goes,
good news never sells papers.

We are inundated with voices of doom.

I daresay the ratio of doom to hope is 20 to 1.

But anyone experiencing anxiety over
the changes and upheavals of history today
needs to read verse 28 of our lesson:

"Now when these things begin to take place,
stand up and raise your heads,

because your redemption is drawing near."

Apocalyptic messages needn't be fearsome.

This prophecy must be heard as good news.

My generation grew up

under a mushroom-shaped cloud of fear.

It was common for schools

to instruct students on what to do
in the event of nuclear attack.

If the air-raid sirens ever went off,
we were to duck down under our desks,
pull our knees up to our chins

and cover our heads.

America's schools stopped conducting
duck-and-cover drills

decades before the end of the cold war.

That was a hopeful sign. We have to look.

I see hopeful signs in news stories from 2015:

January: job creation is up and stays up all year.

Feb: FCC regulates internet service as utility.

March: Iraq begins campaign against ISIS, and
the Justice Dept. investigates Ferguson police.

April: U.S. and Cuba resume diplomatic relations
and Nigerian Army frees Boko Haram hostages.

May: A jury finds Tsarnaev guilty
in the Boston Marathon Bombing;

Tsarnaev apologizes in June.

June: Supreme Court upholds same-sex marriage.

July was a banner month for hopeful signs: US Women's Team wins FIFA World Cup, South Carolina removes the Confederate flag, Iran agrees to a historic nuclear deal, and the New Horizons Spacecraft reaches Pluto.

August: Heroes foil a French train terrorist attack and the first women graduate Army ranger school.

September: Millions are evacuated safely after a huge earthquake in Chile and our embassy opens in Cuba.

October: China ends its One-Child Policy and the strongest Pacific hurricane ever hits land, killing only 8 people.

November? Well, not much good has happened. But our Governor has reaffirmed his welcome of Syrian refugees into Delaware.

As you see, Life As We Know It does contain hopeful signs of a world submitting to God's reign.

We only need to be alert for the signs of God's liberating agenda and proclaim the signs we see.

Jesus' advice to us, his disciples, is the opposite of duck and cover: "Stand up and raise your heads."

Life As We Know It has things to be feared, no doubt about that.

If we didn't plan for worst-case scenarios — like rising sea levels, crop disruption, epidemics, plant closures, and corporate inversions — we'd be foolish.

Yet, Jesus also is sharing the good news in chaos. Like a controlled burn, destruction can lead to renewal.

For those who hold steadfast in their faith, who believe that Christ is alive in the world and witness to him,

there is no fear of the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud of power and great glory. There is only eager anticipation.

CONCLUSION

The incarnation is the birth of human freedom: freedom **from** structural oppression and freedom **for** the gifts of the human spirit. There are signs of righteousness to which Christ calls us to be vigilant. Precious words as we begin the season of Advent, anticipating the first coming, in a stable in Bethlehem — and the Second Coming, a new cosmic age. Prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.