

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.

No one can be God but God. We are all wise to remember this.

Every year about this time, a new theme slips into the Lectionary. We're winding down one more Church Year, and what better way to do that than to ponder the Day of the Lord, or, to put it in more everyday language, the End of the World as we Know It. It's meant to be a little shocking and it comes to make us think. Are my faith and understanding adequate to the times in which I am living?

Last Sunday, we crossed the threshold of All Hallows/All Saints/All Souls. We are beginning our slide toward Advent. We stand in the shadow

of death, and God is leading us toward birth. Six months later, when spring returns, we will walk the road from death to new life.

It seems to be important to God that we wrestle with our fear of death.

Like Judaism, Christianity is a spiritual tradition rooted in linear time and history. Unlike our counterparts in Asia, we are not asked to cope with the suffering of rebirth. We are firmly planted within the changes and the chances of this world. Indeed, some of Jesus' most powerful teachings are about finding God's love and favor at history's darkest hour. Jesus himself experienced the worst that world had to offer, and his response was to offer himself in love. And come back to let us know he was OK. Like the Buddhists, Jesus knew that death is not an end. Like everything else in the universe but God, death is impermanent. Jesus will come again.

One of the biggest issues faced by the early church was the matter of how and when this second coming would happen, and how we might recognize it. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, the earliest text in the

New Testament, goes into this in some detail. In case you've forgotten, it told us we would be raptured.

The Second Letter to the Thessalonians, which we read today, was written about a year later and the linguistic evidence suggests that it might not have been the work of Paul himself, but another member of his community. Second Thessalonians arrives to clarify confusions which had arisen in the face of Roman persecutions. Rumors were spreading that Jesus was back already, that judgment was happening, and get ready to see your enemies cast into the lake of fire. To which this letter says. Don't believe it. "For that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed."

Which is to remind us, an unbearable political situation is not necessarily the end. The Second Coming, says this letter, is not about imperial misbehavior, Roman soldiers, or ICE. It is about facing the root of evil itself and watching it drown in the lake of God's love.

Like many, when faced with an impossible problem I turn both to the Bible and to great literature. Not surprisingly, in this age of eco-catastrophe, I picked up John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In its pages we hear

the rallying cry that began our age of revolutions: “Better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven.”

No line speaks better of what has become of us. We have literally made vast parts of our world an inferno.

Paradise Lost is a seventeenth century version of the Rolling Stones’ hit song “Sympathy for the Devil.” Because that is precisely what Milton is asking us to have. In the eyes of most readers, Satan is the most interesting character in that whole convoluted tale. Unlike the obedient residents of heaven and the clueless Adam and Eve, Satan has drive. He seeks agency. Satan stands up to God and calls God’s bluff. Satan receives the consequences of his acts like a crown of royalty. I will accept every misery if I have power. And my magnificent stand in the face of so much evil will inspire other miserable souls to worship me.

That said, I find Milton’s Satan boring and egocentric, just as I thought the Rolling Stones song was grotesque. Satan was so immersed in himself that not only did he rebel against God, he couldn’t see the truth of what was happening.

Lucifer asked God to share the secrets of his power. And God said “Yes.”

And God sent Lucifer back to before the beginning of time, to that state of pure chaos from which God brought all there is into being. Far from casting him away, God was actually giving his favorite archangel the chance to try and do creation better, or to understand on his own terms when he couldn't.

But Lucifer saw only punishment for all eternity, and he would spend that eternity fomenting and refining rage and revenge and refusing to change or grow.

Lucifer was not content to be a Creature. He wanted to be something he wasn't, to know everything that God knew. God loved him and showed him the unimaginable. The beginning.

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

I have learned a lot from pondering all this. I now understand our entire beautiful, created world to be an alchemy of order and chaos, a

network of interlocking lives, a convocation of limited creatures whose constant growth, change and decay maintain a glorious cycle of life far bigger than any of them individually. I am one of those creatures. I am grateful to play my part. I have asked some hard and angry questions of life, but have, after many years, ceased to seek the overthrow of my enemies, and instead pray for their enlightenment. God alone knows how to enter chaos and shape order and form, a book of divine changes and seasons, departures and returns, something which will grow forever because it will never stagnate.

Satan could not accept this because it lay far beyond the limits of his knowledge.

Unable to accept that he was a creature, Lucifer experienced only terror when God gifted him with chaos. And because he was terrified, he covered up his weakness with rage. Invited by God to experience the conditions of creation, Lucifer saw nothing but Hell. He could not make chaos into beauty and intelligence. Envy ate him alive.

Our God is not an angry God. Our God only asks that we work with God, that when we go too far, as we all have, we say “I’m sorry. I didn’t get

it at all, did I? Can you take me back? Can I use the profound things I learned in the darkness to shed kind light on a frightened world?”

And suddenly, in the world of revolutions and upheaval, the worship of wealth and misery, the destruction of creation to satisfy my endless need for more, I meet the lawless one, the one who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, and beyond that ugly face stands Jesus who has come to save me.

That is the second coming.

To walk with Jesus over a lifetime is to discover a whole new way of seeing. Yes, there are storms and predators, but these arrive in the name of life just as my joy at a beautiful morning arrives in the name of life. The secret is not about making war against negative forces but understanding and transforming them. Seeing that darkness is the medium of light. Disarming the enemy with love. Dying when the time comes in the full assurance that I will always be alive.

For God is the Creator of all: the alpha and omega, the beginning and end and meaning of all life. God gave us a world to tend and care for. The civilization we inhabit chose to turn away from God. I think I

understand why we did that, even though I don't agree. After all these years, I'm strangely grateful to have been born a woman. I've had to contend with limits imposed upon me since the day I was born.

Returning to the Church Year, I am grateful for the opportunity to pray my way through cycles and cycles of seasons, upheavals, and change: unending life in many different forms: bare branches, buds, blossoms, baby birds and spotted fawns, sprouting grasses giving way to heat and growth and waterholes, the great work of harvest and abundance, the bright colors of spring evolving through green and gold grasses and hills to the fiery hues of autumn until winter comes again and I may rest and ponder, light candles and feast. Heaven and earth may pass away, but my word will never pass away.

Or as TS Eliot says:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

We are at the end.

Our nation is in rebellion against itself, and instead of coming together, we are being torn apart.

Should we panic? No.

Should we rebel? No.

Should we practice kindness in all that we do? Yes.

Every end is a beginning. Something new is being born. We're experiencing birth pangs. The world takes on the aspect of chaos because that is the medium through which God creates new life. We are present at an awakening. Job, who suffered much, met God in a whirlwind. And so, my friends, can we. Amen.