

## THE DAY THE SUN EXPLODED

TEXT: Luke 21:25-38

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 28, 2021*

In my junior year in college, I had a strange experience. I'm not sure what to call it. It might have been a dream, since it happened as I was waking up in the morning, but it might also be considered a vision, since it happened after I was already awake and out of bed. In any case, I got up on this particular morning and went to the window in my dorm room. I was on the third floor. The sun was shining nicely—which is generally the case when I wake up; I am NOT a morning person—and it seemed like a pleasant morning. But as I looked out on the lovely day, the sun exploded. I'm serious. Whether it was dream or vision, I don't know, but I watched the sun explode before my eyes, and things began to get very dark.

I remember thinking, "Okay, then. This is it. The world is coming to an end." I knew, if that were true, that Jesus would arrive any minute. Even then I knew my Bible forward and backwards, so I immediately thought of the passage that Pam just read from Luke, especially the verse that says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." I was very much a literalist at the time, so I did just that. I stood in front of the window, looking to the darkening sky, and I lifted both my head and my hands, waiting for Jesus to come.

As my arms started to grow tired and the dark sky was not parting for Jesus to come in glory, all the scientific ramifications of the sun exploding began going through my mind, and I left the window to gather all the blankets I had, because I knew it would be getting very cold. I prayed a very simple prayer for Jesus to come and take me home. Then I crawled back into bed with a pile of blankets to wait for the end.

Whether it was a dream or a vision or some odd combination of both, it was very powerful; and I lay on the bed for about five minutes before realizing that the sun was back in the sky where it belonged and I needed to get up and go to class or it would be my GPA and not the sun that was blowing up.

I don't know what spurred that event. I might have been reading too much end-times literature. I certainly was engrossed in it during that time in my life and had prayed often that I might be privileged to be alive when Christ came in glory. Whether vision or dream, it might have been God's way of showing me that the end would not be the fun party that I thought it would be—that the end of the earth would be a terrifying thing. You don't watch the sun explode and say, "Oh, isn't that wonderful!" Especially if Jesus appears to be taking his own sweet time in arriving to pull you out of the cold and dark. What I experienced might have been God's way of getting me past my obsession with the end of things and motivating me to get to work in the present.

But to say we shouldn't obsess about something is different than ignoring it entirely. Jesus himself, talks about the end of the world, as we heard in today's reading. And the second coming of Jesus is prominent enough in Christian doctrine that we proclaim it as part of the central mystery of faith in our communion liturgy: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again."

Even more to the point, here on the first Sunday of Advent, just as we might think we should be focused on the *first* coming of Jesus, every tradition within Christianity, Protestant and Catholic alike, asks its clergy to begin our waiting for the birth of Jesus with a Sunday devoted to remembering the promise of his second coming. What's with that?

My take is that the practice is based on the same idea that Stephen Covey identified as the second habit of highly effective people: “Begin with the end in mind.” Today isn’t just the first Sunday of Advent. In the Christian liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent is basically New Year’s Day. This four weeks of preparing for Christ’s birth, what we call Advent, starts the entire year’s cycle of remembering the life and teachings of Jesus. And so, before we dip our toes in the stories of Gabriel appearing to Mary or anything to do with shepherds, bright stars, or giving birth in a barn, the church across the ages has asked us to hold up with the sheep and donkeys for a minute and begin with the end in mind.

Why? Because, what we are waiting for in these weeks isn’t ultimately about what happened 2,000 years ago. Well beyond whatever the *facts* were of that birth long ago, the *Truth* of the story is the same as the Truth spoken by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40, verse 8: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever.”

It’s the same Truth that William Shatner discovered, not while playing a starship captain on Star Trek, but just last month when he traveled into space for real on a Blue Origin flight, becoming, at age 90, the oldest person ever to fly into space. Shatner said,

“I hope I never recover from this. I hope that I can maintain what I feel now. I don't want to lose it. ...It has to do with the enormity and the quickness and the suddenness of life and death. Oh my god, it’s unbelievable.”

“The moment you see the vulnerability of everything; it’s so small. This air, which is keeping us alive, is thinner than your skin.”

“Everybody in the world needs to do this. Everybody in the world needs to see.”

I think that’s the Truth we’re meant to absorb here at the beginning of the Christian year: Life is fragile; death comes to each of us, indeed to all living things, so there’s not a moment to lose. The passage from Luke that Pam read about the end of the world is Jesus’ last public teaching. The next chapter is Jesus’ last meal with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus could have prepared those who were listening in a number of ways. He could have said, “Hey, don’t worry. Bad things are coming in the next few days, but don’t get depressed, I’m going to turn it all around in three days.”

Instead, Jesus chose to leave his public ministry with closing remarks about terrifying times for the entire world; things that would not only threaten all people but would be the end of both heaven and earth. Only one thing survives. Eight centuries earlier, Isaiah said, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever,” Jesus echoes that with “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” And Paul clarifies that further by saying in 1 Corinthians 13 that prophecies, tongues, and even knowledge itself will end, but the one and only thing that never ends is love, which is the sum and substance of God’s word.

There’s a Christmas carol called “Love came down at Christmas,” and that’s exactly the message of the holiday. But the purpose of love becoming flesh in Jesus was not so we could get all misty-eyed about babies in mangers. Isaiah and Jesus and Paul and the church ever since have told us to begin with the end in mind.

God didn’t decide to take a spin as a human being on a lark. God’s love was embodied in Jesus because we weren’t getting either the message or its urgency. Forever is available, but only for whatever has been established in love. All the rest? Boom, gone. Think the big, fiery sun is immune? Nope. From the smallest insect to the largest celestial body, without love, it is all a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And without love, it will all be gone sooner than we think.

But with love, it's an entirely different story. Add love and no tomb can hold you or your child or even your dog; add love and no chainsaw can destroy the Amazon Rainforest; add love and there is no extinction of species, cultures, or peoples; add love and no chemical can pollute the living water; and the thin layer of air, that is the only thing standing between life on planet earth and annihilation, becomes the breath of life for eternity.

Unlike love, however, time is not eternal. In the limited time we are given, our job is to pull as much of creation into that loving web as possible, because, outside of that web, it will not last. To me, that's the core of what it means to be "saved." It is to love and be loved; nothing more and nothing less. Without love, even the faith that can move mountains can do nothing; because without love, those mountains are no more protected than the moth headed for the flame. You won't need faith to move them because, without active love, protection, and care they will be no more.

Jesus wants our lives to have a sense of urgency to them. We are asked by both the Bible and the church to not let ourselves get so drunk on this life's passing fancies that we forget what William Shatner glimpsed from the distance of space—the enormity and the quickness and the suddenness of life and death—the vulnerability of everything.

Our job is more than to enjoy what we are given here, although it includes that. Our job is more than to be thankful for it, although our gratitude helps keep us going. The core function of the human vocation is the same as was given to Adam in the Garden in Genesis 2:15—to serve and protect the earth and all that is in it. To actively love all that God has made and save as much of it as possible before the sun explodes.

Through that active love—the love modeled by the word of God made flesh in Jesus—we save both ourselves and others. Through that active love the world is made new. It's easy to get weighed down in watching hate and destruction surge around the globe; but beginning the Christian year with the end in mind, we have the assurance that in the day that the heavens and earth pass away, hate vanishes with it. Only what is done in love remains.

Our job is only to meet every act of hate with love; to welcome every outcast with love, and to spread God's love to every living thing that crosses our path. What does that look like? Love comes down at Christmas, and the rest of the Christian year is meant to tell us exactly that. Amen.