

IN EVERY ENDING IS A BEGINNING
Luke 21: 25-36

Science fiction, science, and Christian theology have a common interest-the end of all things. Science fiction is obsessed with the great finale facing the earth. Witness the movie “2012” playing at six different theaters in Albuquerque right now. Listen to the movie’s description in this week’s Venue: “2012 is the mother of all disaster movies and the father and the extended family! It spends half an hour on obligatory ominous setup scenes (scientists warn, strange events occur, prophets rant, and of course a family is introduced). Then it unleashes two hours of cataclysmic special effects in which the earth is hammered relentlessly. This is fun.”

So much fun that this apocalyptic thriller which cost \$200 million to make has of this month raked in over \$461 million. Not to ruin it for you, but some of the cataclysmic highlights include a megatsunami surging over the Himalayas and California as predicted finally falling off into the Pacific Ocean. If you like deluges and floods, I am told you will love this movie.

But that’s not all. There is now a “2012” web site where you can register for a lottery number. And should you win, it will guarantee that you and your family will be rescued from global destruction looming just two years ahead. Perhaps you will be taken to the new spaceport down near Las Cruces to be jetted up to safety. Or maybe the aliens will return to Roswell and from there whisk you away. The web site is a bit unclear on evacuation details for the lottery winners.

All of this goes back to what are called the “long count” calendars produced by the Mayans in Central America over a thousand years ago. Some scholars have interpreted these calendars to point to the end of the world, as we know it, on December 21, 2012. That, I assume, will ruin the Christmas shopping season two years hence. Other interpreters of the Mayan Long Count Calendars insist that the world’s last night is not predicted, only its physical and spiritual transformation into a new era. These scholars suggest that it may be like the odometer on your car turning over and going back to all zeros. Then the cycle of time would begin again.

Now if you prefer science, hard science as they say, let us turn to astronomy. And let me here salute one of the finest professors I have ever sat under-Dr. Frank Bash, professor emeritus at the University of Texas and former head of the McDonald Observatory in the Big Bend. I took

Introduction to Astronomy from Professor Bash in 1986 along with 600 other unwilling students. In this large lecture hall Professor Bash won over these “non-science majors” who had to be there in order to graduate. Within days he had us in the palm of his very skillful hands. Using pictures and charts projected on a huge screen before us, Professor Bash at one point gave a series of lectures on cosmology. Cosmology involves those fundamental questions about the origin of the universe and its ultimate fate.

Repeatedly Dr. Bash stressed the limits of scientific knowledge. Some questions are simply unanswerable for the scientist: What made the universe begin? What was there before it existed? Dr. Bash described in marvelous detail the Big Bang occurring some 11 to 16 billion years ago. A hot fireball of radiation and subatomic particles exploded and began that expansion of the time and space into what we now call the universe. I remember well the hush that fell over his audience of 600 students captivated by the magic of this astronomer.

And I vividly recall the hairs on the back of my neck rising as he addressed another unanswerable question: If the universe is evolving, what will it evolve into? Dr. Bash posed two alternatives. One is that the universe will keep on expanding until it reaches a state of total thermal equilibrium or heat death. In simple terms, it freezes to death. Or the braking force of gravitation will eventually halt the expansion and cause the galaxies to fall back together. If that happens, the result may be another big bang, with the entire cycle starting over again. This is the oscillating or pulsating universe model.

In all my years of going to school, I can't remember a moment where I was more breathless than the day Dr. Bash outlined those two alternatives—an infinitely expanding universe that in effect freezes to death or a contracting universe that starts the whole process over again. That's when the thought struck me—in every ending is a new beginning. Here science and theology intersect. Here what we cannot know empirically is supplemented by what we can only assert by faith. Is the ending just the beginning? Is this what we mean when we talk about “a new heaven and a new earth”?

All the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus addressing the end of all things even as he faced the end of his own life. During that last climatic week of his ministry in Jerusalem, Jesus overhears his disciples admiring the beauty of the massive temple complex. Then Jesus notes that the temple is doomed to suffer destruction. As we know, that is exactly what happened some forty years after Jesus' life. The Romans destroyed the temple, never to be rebuilt even to this day.

Apparently Jesus links his observations about the temple's demise with his observations about the end of the world, as we know it. The events surrounding the end of the temple in some way parallel the events surrounding the end of the world. In broad apocalyptic terms, Jesus speaks of the appearing of signs in the sky, the shaking of the powers of the heavens, the roaring of the seas and waves. Then the nations will experience distress and perplexity and fear. All people will be overwhelmed with foreboding of what is coming on the world. Think "2012" and then some.

And then Jesus offers something that science fiction and science wish they could-hope for a world beyond this world. Jesus says that "when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." He points to the fig tree blooming and says that these buds herald the coming of summer. And thus we should be assured that "the kingdom of God is near." All these foreboding events should be an occasion to watch and pray for the coming of the Son of Man. The end of all things is but the beginning of a new world, redeemed and renewed.

I suppose we cannot help but feel some anxiety as we read this text from Luke's Gospel. Jesus specifically mentions the fainting and foreboding and fear. And thus he counters these all too natural feelings with this promise: "Your redemption is drawing near." And, "The Kingdom of God is drawing near." So we are encouraged to "take heed...lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life." We are to pray that we have strength to "escape all these things...to stand before the Son of Man." Perhaps a short hand way of summing up Jesus' words would be this: "Be of good cheer. We don't know exactly what is coming, but we know who is coming."

The End! That's how all movies used to conclude. But here is the Good News this morning-for us the end is just the beginning. Advent is the beginning of the new church year, our new liturgical season. And every Advent begins by anticipating the end. We work backwards from the end of all time to the beginning of our redemption in Jesus Christ. We begin our new liturgical year by reminding ourselves how this entire story will unfold. We begin Advent with the coming of the Son of Man in power from the heavens. We conclude Advent with the coming of the Son of Man in weakness at Bethlehem. So we celebrate the glory of Christ and the humility of Christ.

And we remember this deep and profound truth-in every ending is a new beginning. It is true of Advent. It is true of our lives. Every ending feels like the end of our world, as we know it. And sometimes it is. But the

end may well signal fresh new possibilities. Whether it's a lost relationship or lost job or lost health or lost wealth. There is something on the other side of that darkness. The slate is cleared away for a new starting point.

We believe that God can create something out of nothing. God can raise the dead from the grave. God can put new life into the dust and ashes of our lives. This is not science fiction. This moves beyond science. This is a matter of faith, our deepest convictions about who God is. Your life can begin again, on the other side of your present darkness.

So lift up your heads! Your redemption is drawing near! Beyond the fainting and foreboding and fear, the Son of Man awaits you, drawing you into a new future, a different future. Be of good cheer. God is with us. Christ beckons us. In every ending is a new beginning. This is the promise of Advent. Thanks be to God. Amen.