

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

I grew up as the Cold War was coming to an end. While I never had to practice them, I recall stories of classrooms running duck-and-cover drills. From time to time, you can still see fallout shelter signs on one building or another, even in places that would be untouched by fallout from a power plant disaster. I watched movies such as *Red Dawn*, *Firefox*, and *War Games* in which Soviet invasion, the Cold War, and global-nuclear annihilation were central themes. These and other signs are all remnants of the preparations and ideas this nation made and had for nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Mr. Gorbachev may have torn down the wall, but the threat of global annihilation still exists as terrorists plot to knock down buildings, overthrow governments, steal nuclear materials to make a dirty bombs, and devise new and horrific biological weapons. There are threats of war left and right, governments posturing here and there, even as, as I have recently read, there are plans to send 100 American tanks to Lithuania to counter "Russian aggression,"¹ a response to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Perhaps none of this is a surprise to you. Perhaps the idea that the destruction of the world could happen by the hands of man does not faze you. Growing up around such threats of war and preparations for global destruction and images and entertainment based on these themes has likely deadened you to the shock of thinking that such things could happen and the hands of warring factions of men.

However, every week you confess the words, "He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end." Every year, as the Liturgical Year comes to a close and Advent begins, we are reminded of God destroying the world and creating a new heavens and a new earth. But, when you stop and think about the world coming to an end at God's doing, does it shock you, does it cause you to shutter for a moment, or do you sometimes think it farcical?

As today's Gospel lesson opens, the destruction of the world at the return of Jesus is exactly what He is talking about. The signs in the sun, moon, and stars, the distress of nations, the sea and waves roaring, the failing of men's hearts, and the powers of the heavens shaken is the destruction of the world as God causes it. There are the wars and rumors of wars that Jesus speaks of elsewhere. These things, as well as famines and pestilences and earthquakes, Christians being delivered to be slaughtered—the destruction of the world, or civilization, at the hands of men—must happen, but the end is not yet. These are just the beginning of sorrows. (cf. Matthew 24:6-9)

"See that you are not troubled," Jesus said of these other signs. (Matthew 24:6) Do not be troubled by the wars and famines and earthquakes. Do not be afraid of being delivered to be slaughtered. These things must happen, but the end is not yet. Like St. Paul, in the face of these fearful events, you can take solace in suffering through them; "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day." (2 Timothy 1:12)

And then, even when the end is near, Jesus encourages strength and comfort. When Jesus returns in glory to judge the quick and the dead, He doesn't tell his disciples to duck and cover, but to hold their heads high. "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near." When the sun, moon, and stars go dark, when the seas and waves roar, when the powers of the heavens are shaken, do not run, do not cower in fear, do not scream in fright, but lift up your heads with joy because your redemption draws near.

1 <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/12/01/us-army-plans-to-send-abrams-tanks-and-bradleys-eastern-europe.html>

I have often wondered what the reaction of the Christian would be at the coming of Jesus in glory. How would one who has received Christ and been adopted as a son of God respond to the trumpet sounding, the dead raising incorruptibly, and people changing in an instant? (1 Corinthians 15:52) From the sound of the encouragement that Jesus gives, it would appear that base instincts will kick in and the Christian will react in fear and trembling, in shock and awe...or will want to.

That makes sense for an unbeliever. Jesus declares that when He returns, "they" will see it. All creation will behold the coming of the Son of God when He returns in glory. When "they" see it, those on the "outside," it will be too late for them; when Jesus returns in glory, the saving is over because He is come to judge the quick and the dead. Those on the "outside" are dead—goats to be sent to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (cf. Matthew 25:41) They will see Jesus coming and know it is Him come to judge them, and they will cower in fear because they know the judgment, too.

But Jesus tells you to look up, lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near. And if you should meet death before His return, then you will be raised incorruptible from your grave when the trumpet sounds. This is Jesus' promise to you: your redemption draws near. He is at hand to save you and bring you out of this perverse generation, to spare you from the destruction He is come to bring on creation, and to bring you into the new creation as a new creation. This is cause for great joy on the Last Day and your comfort as you await the Last Day, as it was for St. Paul as mentioned earlier.

When Jesus returns, all creation will see it and know that He comes in judgment. This is in stark contrast to His first coming. Once, He came as infant, grew into a man, and went to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world. All of that happened insignificantly and without notice to most of the world. Jesus was lifted up on the cross outside of Jerusalem to draw all men to Himself (cf. John 12:32), but few men were drawn to the event that Good Friday—in fact, none of you were there, in person.

Still, His crucifixion did draw all men to Himself. All men were drawn to the cross of Jesus as He assumed all sins into His flesh to die with them. And you, personally, were drawn there to receive the benefits of His passion and death when you received Him and the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism. And, on the Last Day, all men will again be drawn to the cross of Jesus when He judges creation; there, His suffering and death at the cross is pled as your propitiation.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away," Jesus said. The word of the Lord endures forever. (cf. 1 Peter 1:25) On that Great and Dreadful Day, Jesus will return in glory, the quick and the dead will be judged, the dead will be delivered to eternal torment, and heaven and earth will pass away. But He endures forever—His word endures forever. Dear Baptized, you have received that Word of God, and by it have been granted the right to be called children of God. (cf. John 1:12) Dear Baptized, you have received that Word of God, and by receiving it have been placed into Him—into Jesus Christ; you are there, in that riven side from which flowed water and blood, the marks of the Church. Though heaven and earth will pass away, because you are placed in the Church, in the side of Jesus Christ, in the Word, you will endure forever. Take Jesus' word for it,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.
(John 11:25-26)

"So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. [W]hen these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near." Dear Baptized, it is a great joy to proclaim to you the coming of Jesus in glory. When it will happen, no one knows, but by His Word we know that it will happen. On that Great and Dreadful Day, when even the powers of the heavens are shaken, you can look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near. You can look up and see your Savior, Jesus Christ coming for you to take you to be where He is (cf. John 14:3), because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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