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For this second Sunday of Advent and the lighting of the peace candle, today's scripture readings don't sound too peaceful, do they? Malachi closes the first portion of the Bible with the imagery of a terrible day of judgment, when one will come who will "be like white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace. He'll be like the strongest lye soap at the laundry. He'll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes."¹ I'm all for cleaning, but this sounds a bit extreme, doesn't it? Strong lye soap and white-hot fire? When I'm cleaning clothes, I'd rather use a dash of sweet smelling detergent that leaves my clothing with a fresh spring-like smell. And rather than fire, a dust rag and lemon-scented Pledge are more my style for cleaning. The idea of lye soap and a burning fire seem a bit overdone, for they could destroy the very clothes and house I'm trying to clean.

And what about Luke's message? *The Message* translation of the Bible uses terrifying imagery: "sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be

quaking."² This doesn't sound very peaceful, nor does it reflect the light of the first Advent candle—the candle of hope. Rather, it seems more like the end of the world as we know it.

And that brings to mind what many of us have been hearing in the media about December 21, which some suggest could be the end of the world, at least according to some who interpret the ancient Mayan calendar when, according to an isolated passage in Mayan writings, "a Mayan god descends to some unknown destination."³ Interestingly, there are many other passages in Mayan writings that refer to important days long after December 21, some decades or centuries into the future. So why all the attention on this particular date?

This focus arose when one alternative thinker in the 1970s ate psychedelic mushrooms and had a vision about the speeding up of time.⁴ The Mayans had a calendar of cycles, with one of their cycles ending this month, and as he read this ancient literature he became convinced that the Mayan calendar confirmed his vision. Soon others began

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looking for natural events to explain how the world might end.

One writer has noted that during this month of December the sun will line up with the center of the Milky Way, which could create chaos in the world. But this phenomenon also happened in December 1980,⁵ and I don't recall anything devastating happening that year, do you?

History is littered with those who have predicted the end of the world, from the Essenes living during the time of Jesus who isolated themselves in the desert as they waited for the end, to the Great Awakening that occurred in this country in the 1700s when preacher Jonathan Edwards spoke of an angry God, leading people to think the "Earth was going to open up right underneath them as they sat in church."⁶

In the 1800s William Miller interpreted the imagery in the book of Daniel to predict the world would end between March 1843 and March 1844, but when nothing happened he realized he made a calculation error and revised the end to October 22,

1844. During the final week before this event, thousands of his followers devoted themselves to prayer and Bible study, with some wearing white robes in preparation of entering into heaven. When the event didn't occur, it became known as "The Great Disappointment."⁷

You can probably think of other more recent end-time predictions, such as when the Hale-Bopp Comet appeared in 1997 and the group known as Heaven's Gate believed that the Earth would be wiped clean and the only way to avoid destruction was to leave the planet before it happened. You might even recall the flurry of concern last year when a Christian radio broadcaster predicted the end in 2011 and his followers gave up all their possessions, only to discover that they had nothing when the world did not end.

The idea that the world would soon end has been floating around for thousands of years, dating back six centuries before Jesus when Zarathustra had a vision of the world coming to an end in what he believed was the not too distant future. He planted

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this notion of the world ending, which later sprouted in Judaism, Christianity, and most world religions, an idea known as the *apocalypse*, a Greek word meaning “revealing.” Why has this idea continued to flourish, even when we know that multiple predictions of the end did not happening?

In his book *Apocalypse NOT*, the author tells the story of a woman who was very concerned about the year 2000 and the Y2K problem when all the computers were supposed to crash and create havoc in the world. He thought what worried her “was the prospect of cascading computer failures causing power grids and the banking system to seize up, potentially causing worldwide chaos, but she quickly set him straight. Her life was unsatisfying, her career was going nowhere, her marriage was on the rocks; what worried her was the possibility that on the morning of January 1, 2000, she would wake up and have to deal with the same painfully mundane realities that she’d had to confront the day before.”⁸

I think that’s why this idea of the world ending has remained so strong for thousands of years, for in

each generation, there have always been people who find life difficult. The idea of the world ending offers an escape from the struggles of life; it offers a peace in the next realm that many can’t see to find in this life. With the number of wars we see streaming into our living rooms through today’s modern media, with the large number of people who have lost their homes due to recent foreclosures, and as cancer and other illnesses affect loved ones, it’s not surprising that apocalyptic imagery of the world ending continues to flourish today. For religious and nonreligious people alike, many are searching for an end to unrest as they long for a beginning of peace.

Sometimes we long to hear that all will be ok, as in the Peanuts comic strip, Linus and Lucy are standing at the window looking out at the rain falling. Lucy says to Linus, “Boy, look at it rain...What if it floods the earth?” Linus, the resident biblical scholar for the Peanuts, answers, “It will never do that...in the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never

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happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow.” With a smile on her face, Lucy replies, “Linus, you’ve taken a great load off my mind.” To which Linus responds, “Sound theology has a way of doing that.”⁹

I believe that’s what Advent is all about: the anticipation of sound theology—for we prepare to celebrate the message that God has come into the world through the birth of a small baby...that even in the midst of all the chaos of life, that God is with us, as one mother was reminded by her two children. She was going to go away for a couple of days. The night before she left, as she was in the two boys’ room to hear their prayers, she told them she was going to go away, and asked if in their prayers they would like to ask God to protect her on her journey.

Jesse, the six year old, thought not. But Luke, the four year old, prayed this prayer: “Dear God, if buffaloes or bears, or other mean animals, come near mommy, can you handle it? If you can’t, just call on Jesus.”¹⁰

Sometimes in our lives we experience fears as life changes around us, but when uncertainty enters our lives, Advent reminds us to wait a bit longer, to trust that in our waiting God is with us, that peace can be part of our lives as we wait with God and one another. Although there are days it may feel like the world as we know it is ending, God’s care for us never ends. And that’s the best gift to offer someone this season: the gifts of peace and hope, and the sound theology that reminds us of Emmanuel—God with us.

¹ *The Message*, Malachi 3:2b-3.

² *The Message*, Luke 21:25-26.

³ John Michael Greer, *Apocalypse Not*, 2011, 157.

⁴ Greer, p. 158.

⁵ Greer, p. 160-161.

⁶ Greer, p. 116.

⁷ Greer, p. 120-124.

⁸ Greer, p. 168.

⁹ Charles Schultz, *Peanuts*, adapted by David E. Leininger

¹⁰ Mark Trotter, *Collected Sermons*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.