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Advent 1C
Peace, Seattle
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Luke 21:25-36

IN THE END, IT'S HOPE

With the release of the film **2012** this month, the big budget Hollywood disaster film is flexing its muscles once more, upping the ante yet again with computer generated effects on a scale never seen before. **The result? The end of the world never looked so good!**

And all this timed, of course, to coincide with the onset of the Christmas shopping season and the end of something retailers consider even more ominous: the consumer retail recession.

For those who haven't seen the movie or its trailers, the premise of **2012** is based on an interpretation of the ancient Mayan Calendar that predicts the end of the 4th age of the world on December 21st in the year 2012.

When an astrophysicist in India uncovers evidence that neutrinos from a massive solar flare have penetrated the Earth, causing a rapid rise in Earth's core temperature, the countdown to doomsday begins, and a secret project is launched to ensure the continuity of human life through the construction of a series of gigantic arks.

The film plays out in a somewhat predictable format—after all the real stars here are the special effects—and religious traditions of all kinds end up with egg on their faces.

Say what you will about America's obsession with apocalypse, after just two weeks in theaters **2012** has taken in $108 million dollars in gross revenue.[1]

Entering the murky world of internet blogs dedicated to the themes played out in this movie is like entering a subterranean warren of caves: you never know what awaits you around the next corner. Suffice it to say there are plenty of folks out there who see this film more as a true-to-life depiction of events that await us in the not to distant future, than as the mere product of creative imagination.

Our gospel reading for this first Sunday in Advent, in which Christ prophesies his return amid a series of cataclysmic events, seems particularly attuned to this climate.

- Celestial signs, roaring seas, earthquakes, fear and foreboding—it's all here in the 21st chapter.

At first hearing, Luke's recording of Jesus' end time prophecy reads like an executive summary of the latest Hollywood disaster epic. So what are we to make of it all?

First, a word of caution: no matter which interpretation captures our attention (and there are many) we do well to remember that apocalyptic writings are notoriously difficult to pin down.

Richly symbolic and multilayered, and at the same time rooted in historical events of the time, writings like Luke 21 were written primarily to bolster hope among the faithful —not to instill fear—as they sought to live their lives consistent with the teaching of Jesus as a minority community amid a majority culture that was hostile to their beliefs and practices.

[1]Caveat: America's love of apocalypse is apparently in danger of being eclipsed by teenage obsession with the *Twilight Series*, whose latest film, *New Moon*, grossed more in one weekend (142.8 million) than *2012* did in two. See http://www.nytimes.com/pages/movies/boxoffice/weekend_us/index.html

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There are some in the Christian fold who seem to have lost track of this essential characteristic of apocalyptic; who welcome—even relish—the notion of epic disasters and destruction raining down on humanity on an unprecedented scale.

Interpretations of this ilk seem much more interested in proclaiming a message of fear and retribution than a message of hope and redemption. They also tend to project themselves to be among the "holy remnant" which, from self-serving point of view, will be spared from experiencing the ordeals they so eagerly anticipate for others.

Today's gospel surely does issue warnings to the faithful. But the voice undergirding those warnings is a voice of hope. Two examples.

(1) First, in verse 28, after a long litany of woes that began all the way back in verse 8, Jesus sums it all up by saying (VERSE 28):

NOW WHEN THESE THINGS BEGIN TO TAKE PLACE, STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, BECAUSE …

Because why? Because the day of terror is near? Because you're about to become toast? Because you're going to eat it, like the thousands upon thousands of digital extras in one of 2012's climactic sequences?

NO! STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEADS, Jesus says, BECAUSE YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR. Because that which God has been working toward since the dawn of time, the new order which all creation has been groaning and laboring to see, the promised fulfillment of all God's hopes and dreams for creation, is coming into being at last.

(2) Second, verse 33: HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, BUT MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY. (REPEAT)

Which is to say, the enduring Word of wisdom and grace spoken by God from the beginning of time; that Word which became flesh in Jesus, that aching Word of love that found its deepest expression in the humility and forsakenness the cross, will endure beyond all the vicissitudes of human struggle and human history. Indeed this Word and his teachings will never pass away.

Now chances are, the disasters you and I experience get played out on a much smaller scale. Relationships gone bad; health concerns on the rise; anniversaries of loss; issues with jobs and troubles with children; struggles with addiction and depression; challenges paying the mortgage; questions about where this all is leading anyway.

These may not be epic to anyone else, but they sure feel epic to us when we're the ones being kept up at night.

Against this backdrop Jesus' words of admonition in verse 34, to not be weighed down by the worries of this life seem, at first, to be so feeble. Until you realize that the only thing you really are in charge of in this life is the attitude and the choices with which you engage the world.

Try as we might, we can't control how our spouses behave, or how our children engage with us or not. Though we may wish it, especially around the holidays, we have no voice in determining who are relatives are, or controlling the temper of the foul-mouthed neighbor down the street, much less the state of the economy, or the pace of climate change.

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As the season of Advent begins once more, and with it a new church year, we are invited to begin again in our selves and in our yearning, to orient our lives toward a promise worth living for.

The upshot of the gospel—the GOOD NEWS—is that no matter what the scale or the size of the canvass on which are lives are lived, we live them faithfully in this MEANTIME because we know the one who holds us in the ENDTIME.[2]

HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, Jesus promises, BUT MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY.

The surest sign of that truth this morning is not a cosmic sign, but this community itself; gathered around font and table, coming together to take in Christ's promise in bread and wine, and to support each other as we make our way together on this venture called life.

LET US PRAY:
Almighty and Altender God, Alpha and Omega, to you belongs all our beginnings and all our endings. So, shape our lives this day with hope. Nourish us with your body and blood of your son, that we might in turn stand with and for one another and for our neighbors, testifying with our lives each day to the hope that is in us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

[2] Wesley D. Avram, from *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4.* Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2009, page 22.