

“THE END OF TIME”  
December 3, 2017 (Advent 1)  
The Rev. J. Cooper Conway, Priest-in-Charge

In his commentary, William Barclay says that this morning’s passage in the Gospel of Mark offers a permanent truth, which is that “of all things, to forget God and become immersed in earth is the most foolish.”

Now this morning’s passage comes from the end of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has cleansed the Temple, been questioned and tested repeatedly by the priests and scribes, taught his followers who joined him there, predicted the destruction of the Temple...and now, as his ministry (and life) draw to a close, Jesus reflects on the apocalypse—the end of time.

He paints a picture for his listeners. The sun and the moon grow dark. Stars fall from the sky. And the powers of earth are shaken. It is not a comforting picture. The people who are caught in this end world suffer and try to flee. But, even as Jesus describes this nightmare vision, He places it alongside a natural and mundane image. “This end-of-time chaos,” He tells them, “is natural and a sign of something new.” This is the revelation of his eternal Word. So the end-of-time chaos is to Jesus’ eternal word as “the leafing of a fig tree is to the revelation of spring.” For Jesus, the end of time is a natural process leading to (revealing) something better.

“Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away.”

Now let’s talk about “heaven and earth” in the Gospels. For Jesus, heaven and earth are not two places but rather a seamless whole which represents all of God’s creation. So when Jesus tells his followers that heaven and earth are passing away, he is advising them that all earthly things—all things which exist in the “field of time”—will disappear. But then what will be left?

The answer to that question is not found in Mark’s Gospel. However, if we follow the distinctive phrase “heaven and earth” out of Mark’s Gospel and into later writings, we will find an apocalyptic (end of time) image that both answers the “what next?” question and brings comfort to us.

In the Book of Revelation, the term “heaven and earth” comes up again and (no surprise) it is used there in an apocalyptic context. It is at the very end of John’s end-of-time vision. The people of the earth all stand before God’s great white throne while books are opened and people are judges. Clearly, time has run out! “Heaven and earth” have passed away. But then...John the Divine perceives another vision: a new heaven and a new earth, represented by the city of Jerusalem, which appears to him decked out like a bride. No longer a city in ruins but now a glorious raised symbol of God’s creation redeemed.

It reminds me of a story: Once upon a time, on the Isle of Crete, a very old man had come to the end of his life and as he lay dying in his bed, he asked his sons one final favor. “Carry me outside,” he told them, “and put me on the earth of my homeland.” So his sons carried him out and placed him on the ground. There he took hold of a handful of Crete’s soil and died with a smile on his face.

Now shortly afterwards, this same aged man found himself at the Gate of Heaven where God the Almighty One was waiting. “Ah...you have been a good man,” God told the old one. “Come, pass through the Gate of Heaven.” At this invitation, the man gladly stepped forward but just as he came up to the Gate, he found he could not pass through. “Oh, of course,” said God. “Open your hand and let go of the soil of Crete.” Regretfully, the old man refused. He just could not let go.

Eons passed...the man wandered outside heaven, not living exactly but still tied to his earthly home. Again, God decided to invite him in but this time, He appeared as one of the man’s old friends. They sat, they

talked, they drank. Finally, God invited the man to return with Him to heaven and together they walked toward its Gate. God passed through and looked back for the man. But again, the man could not let go of his homeland's soil. So he did not get in.

Eons passed...now the wandering man who was stuck between time and eternity was aged and bent even more than he had been at the time of his death. Walking was a great effort and he could only hold Crete's soil in his right hand by supporting it with his left. And God came to him again. But this time, as the man's granddaughter. She looked to the man just as he remembered: young and fresh and smiling. "Oh, Grandpa," she begged him, "Won't you come back with me to heaven? We have all missed you so."

Now again the man agreed. So slowly...very slowly...the two made their way to the Gate and when they got there, the man found that he could no longer support the hand which held Crete's earth, and so his hand dropped and the dry soil slipped between his fingers as he himself slipped through the Gate of Heaven. And what do you suppose he saw when he came out on the other side? Why...Crete, of course, redeemed, glorious, and familiar.

It is Advent—time to remember new beginnings, eternal beginnings...the Word made flesh who dwelt among us.

It is Advent—God is inviting us to take hold of permanent truth, to let earthly things slip from our hands.

It is Advent—don't be afraid, Jesus tells us, "Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away."

Amen.