

As Christians, what is the big thing that we are looking forward to in Advent? The answer might seem to be Christmas; after all, that's what comes after Advent. And the remembrance of our Savior's birth, God becoming flesh to pay the price for our sins, is an important thing. There's a reason why Christmas is one of the holiest days in the year, up there with Holy Week and Easter.

But we're not actually looking forward to the birth of Christ, because it's already happened. The birth of Jesus is in the past, not the future, and so we can't look forward to it.

So again, as Christians, what are we looking forward to? Quite honestly, the Christian Church looks forward to the end of the world. That seems a little odd to say it like that, but it's true! What do we confess in the Nicene Creed? "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." What do we pray in the Lord's Prayer? "Thy Kingdom come."

Ever since Christ ascended into heaven, His bride the Church has been waiting for His glorious return at the Last Day. We're looking for the end, which is why these readings are chosen for the Second Sunday in Advent. As we consider them, we see our Lord speak of three ways people look for the end, and in His words find both great warning and great comfort.

The first way in which a person might look to the end of all things is with apathy. This isn't really a looking toward the end, but rather an attempt at ignoring it, pretending it's not actually going to happen.

For some, they might say that, sure the world will end some day far off, but not any time soon. And at any rate, they're got too much to worry about now: all the things in life they need to do, the places they need to go, the people they need to see.

These people are, as Christ describes, weighed down by the cares of this life. The end of the world might cross their mind on occasion, but they're usually just too busy to think about such things.

Others are apathetic, seemingly uncaring about the end of things because they see it just as religious nonsense, a scary story told by con men to get people to fall in line. The Bible describes the views of such people with great accuracy. In 2 Peter 3, we read, "Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.'"

They say "Where is this Jesus? He's been gone a long time, if He ever really existed at all." "The earth keeps spinning, the sun keeps rising, nothing changes whether or not I believe, so why bother?" Since they deny the coming end as the Bible describes it, they just live for the moment. "Dissipation and drunkenness," as Jesus says. Life's about having fun, enjoying the present as much as possible.

This near-complete focus on the present causes people to miss the signs the Lord sends to warn of the coming end. And so, when it comes, it comes suddenly, like a trap. They're just having fun and living life, and then it's the end. Christ returns in glory, lighting up the sky, filling the heavens with His

angelic armies, and it's all over. No time to "get right with Jesus." No time to repent. No time to believe. Just destruction, endless torment in the outer darkness.

Others consider the end of the world and are concerned about it, but are left in fear as they think on it. Some see signs in the heavens and worry about what these might mean. Things like eclipses and comets are disregarded by many as modern science is able to explain them.

We shouldn't be so dismissive of these, though, as God's Word does tell us that the sun and moon are given to us for the purpose of providing signs. And even with science helping us understand the movements of the heavenly bodies, it also opens our eyes to other disasters that could come. For example, it doesn't take much time searching the internet to find the odds of a civilization-ending asteroid impact.

Or you can hear about things like solar flares and geomagnetic storms, which could fry electronics, disable communications, or bring down the power grid. Back in July of 2012, we missed one by just nine days, which when you consider the vastness of space, is pretty close.

And there are plenty of other disasters that could happen at any moment, natural or man-made. Maybe the Yellowstone caldera explodes and covers North America in ash. Maybe terrorists get a hold of nuclear weapons and set off a war or a nuclear winter. On and on you can go.

The reason why such things cause fear is because they remind us that we aren't in control. Sure, we might think we understand the movement of bodies in space or what a solar flare is, but we can't do anything to control or change them.

If a hurricane is going to make landfall, we can't change its path. If a volcano is going to erupt, we can't stop it. We are powerless before such things, and this powerlessness produces fear. We are left at the mercy of these great forces of nature, and nature is not something that shows mercy. It is unfeeling, uncaring, "red in tooth and claw," as the famous saying goes.

To be in the hands of forces that might bring great destruction without reason or without notice is a terrifying thing – why some people are terrified of the end of the world.

Yet Christians know that they are not in the hands of uncaring forces such as nature. No, we know that we are in the hands of the God who loves us, and that it's not just us, but that all of creation is in His hands. He is the One who formed it all from nothing, and He is the One who continues to uphold it by His might and power.

We can look at the end of the world, not with apathy or fear, but with comfort. When the end comes and this earth begins to collapse and come apart, that means that our Lord Jesus is right around the corner. Disasters and tribulations, signs in the sun and moon, roaring of the sea and the waves, it's all taking place because, as Jesus says, "your redemption is drawing near." For us, signs of the end times are signs that deliverance is coming.

This can be seen also in the parable that Jesus gives in the midst of this teaching about the end. He speaks of a fig tree. Now, for all the talk of coming trouble and disaster, you'd think that Jesus might talk about a dying fig tree and how when the leaves wilt and fall you know that winter is coming.

But Jesus doesn't go that route. He says, "As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that summer is near." The signs – the leaves budding and coming forth – are signs pointing to life – summer – not death. When we Christians see things like Jesus speaks of, things that make it seem like the end is nigh, we can rejoice! We can straighten up and raise our heads, as He directs us to, because the end of this world is for us the beginning of the next one. And that world will be perfect.

Because of Jesus, we need not be apathetic, trying to ignore the end, nor fearful, scared of what the end will bring, but we can be confident and comforted, for the end of the world brings about the fullness of His Kingdom.

Yet these words of Jesus don't apply only to the end of the world, though that is their main focus. They also very much apply to an end we will all face, the end of our lives individually. The end of the world is something that only a very, very small percentage of humanity will be alive to see, but the end of life is something that happens to everyone else. And so this end is something that every individual must face.

Just like there are signs that show the end of the world coming, there are signs that the end of our lives is coming. With each passing year, each sunrise and sunset, we're reminded that time is moving on, and that our time is limited. The signs can be as simple as turning over a page of a calendar, marking a month that is gone and will never come back. Or the signs can be as serious as attending the funeral of another person and realizing that one day, that'll be me.

The Lord gives us plenty of signs to remind us of our own mortality, our own end. And how people face that end mirrors the three ways one can face the end of the world: apathy, fear, or comfort.

For some, the preferred way to deal with the end of life is to not deal with it, to try as much as possible to ignore it. But since mortality can't just be ignored – people are dying all the time – you have to block it out with something.

Some people devote themselves totally to a job or career so that they don't have to think about what happens at the end. Some people have hobbies or other leisure activities, but rather than enjoying such things in their right place, they absolutely fill their lives with them.

For other people who are trying to block out the reality of the end, they go toward the dissipation and drunkenness like Christ speaks of, trying to numb themselves by abusing alcohol or drugs so they don't have to think about dying. Tragically, this path often hastens the end that the person was trying to avoid thinking about.

However one tries to ignore it, the end of life comes for all. And when it comes, there will be no distractions, no pleasures, nothing to numb oneself, as a person stands before God in judgment to give an account of his life here on earth.

While some try not to think about it, others face death with fear, terrified at the thought of closing their eyes for the last time. Sometimes, this is seen in a life filled with fear, afraid of taking any risk that might lead to the end, filling their lives with worry and precautions that go way beyond reasonable because of fear.

Others times, this fear is seen in people as their loved ones are dying. They want to do everything possible, and then more, to keep the person physically alive. Never mind if that makes the dying person miserable, or bankrupts everyone. They are terrified of losing the person, because once they're gone, they're gone.

This terror is usually found in these people themselves once their own death draws near. A life filled with distractions and pleasures and whatever else can't stop the end from coming. Nor can any heroic medical measures or drastic lifestyle changes. Delay the end, maybe, but not stop it. And the thought of looming darkness, with no hope, is truly terrifying.

But as Christians, we are not without hope, and so we need not face the end of our lives in fear. Our Lord, the Son of Man, has power not only over the heavens and the earth, the sun and the seas, but over our individual lives as well. Just as the end of the world will come only on the day the Lord has set, so too will our lives only end on the day which the Lord has established.

Every second of our lives is in the hands of Jesus, and not one can be cut short against His will. This means that, when our end comes, it comes at the moment that the Lord knows is right. He never calls His saints to His side too soon or too late. For us, it might seem so, especially in deaths that are sudden or tragic, but our Lord sees all of time, the big picture, and so His timing is always right.

Not only are we comforted by knowing that the time of our end is in Christ's hands, but even more so by the fact that death is not the end for us. God's Word gives us many comforting promises to this effect.

For example, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Or "For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's."

Or think of all the places where death is described as mere "sleep" for God's people, like where we are told, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus."

For Christians, death in this life is not the end. It is the end of our time on this earth. But when a Christian dies, his soul departs his body to be in the indescribable peace and joy of heaven while his body rests in the earth. And then, at the Last Day, the glorious second Advent of Christ, the Scriptures tell us this: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

For Christians, we have comfort as we face the end of this life. To be sure, it is sad when our brothers and sisters in Christ fall asleep. We mourn the separation that sin and death brings. But because we are joined to Christ and His death and resurrection, we know that we will all live again, and live forever.

For Christians, there is no final goodbye, no last time. We have some good friends from the seminary, and the wife just got back from Austria, visiting her grandmother there who is dying. But as she and Whitney were talking, she shared with us a beautiful saying that her grandmother would always say when they'd have to leave and come back to the states: "If not next year, then in Jerusalem." Christians may be separated by thousands of miles, by years or even centuries of time. But Christians are never separated forever.

Such is our confidence that we Christians even see the signs of approaching death not with fear, but with hope. As our bodies break down, as problems arise, as the news from the doctor is more severe, we can look at it all like those budding leaves on the fig tree. Each day that passes, good or bad, brings us another day nearer to the everlasting summer in paradise. Every year that goes by is another year closer to being in the New Jerusalem.

As Christians, we pray with Moses in the Ninetieth Psalm, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." When we number our days according to God's wisdom, seeing each one as a gift given by our Lord, we don't pass them in apathy, trying to ignore their limit, nor do we spend them in fear, terrified of the day they run out.

Rather, we face the end, both of this world, and of our individual lives in it, with comfort and confidence, because through this end our Almighty God brings us to the beginning of eternity with Him. When it seems as the end is at hand, then heed the words of our loving and mighty Savior: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

In the name of Jesus, amen.