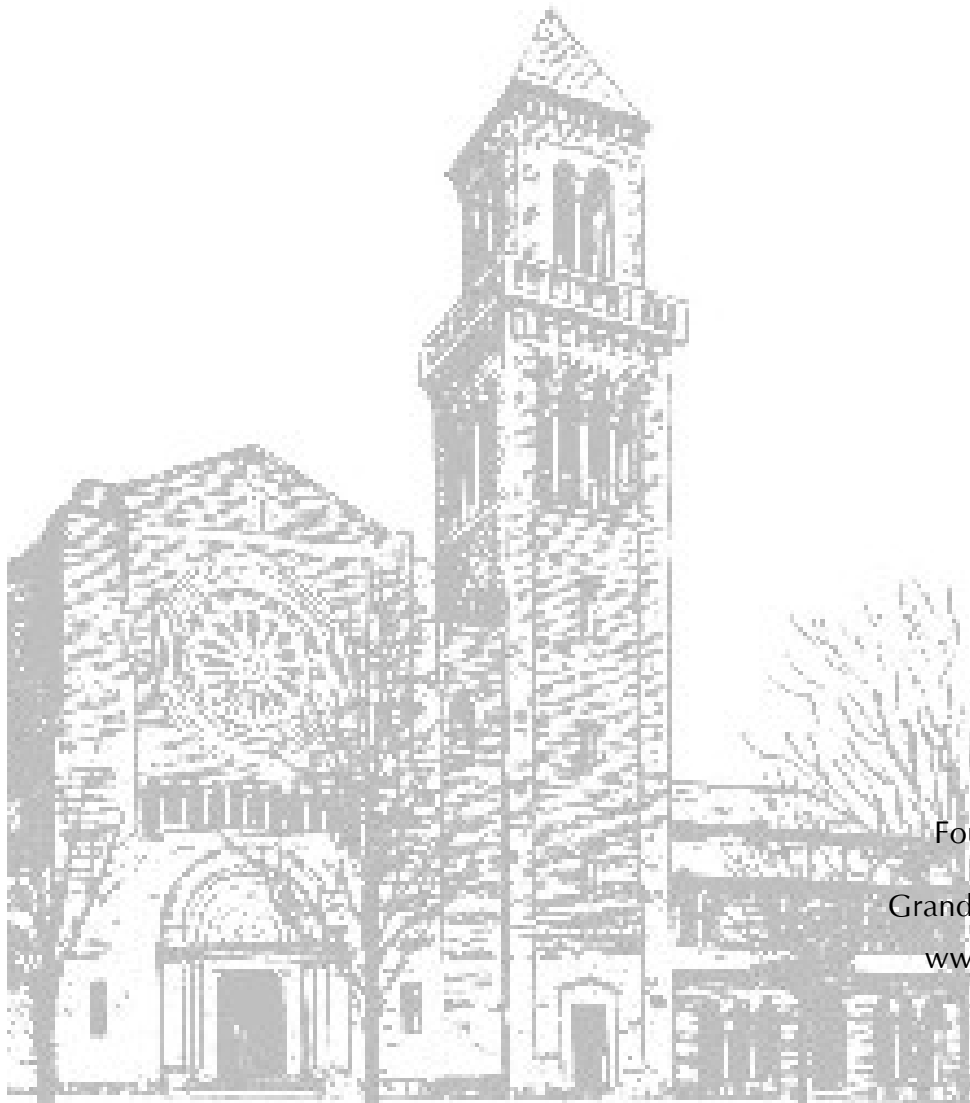


# “The End of the World As We Know It”

Sunday, December 10, 2006

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “The End of the World As We Know It”

## READING

“The Second Coming”, by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

\* \* \* \* \*

## SERMON

As most of you are aware, this is my last Sunday on the clergy staff of Fountain Street Church. The first time I stood in this pulpit was as a guest preacher in January of 1999, and I've been here almost weekly since I joined the staff in August of 2002. Today not only marks my last scheduled sermon here; it also marks my last preaching commitment anywhere for the foreseeable future. After today, I will be an at-home mother to Claire, who is five, and Nathan, who is two years old. I'm looking forward to it.

But this morning before I begin the sermon, I want to thank you. I thank you, the

congregation of Fountain Street Church, for the privilege of serving as one of your clergy. The role has stretched me and I have grown; it has challenged me and I have learned. I've been blessed to walk beside you as your minister. And some of the best people I have ever known in my life, I've met right here. Thank you for offering me and sustaining me in this role these past four years.

This morning I'm going to remind you of you three facts, tell you two stories, and ask you one question. My goal is to get you to think about life—about the life of the world, the life of America, the life of this church, and your own particular life, the only life you can hope to control. My intent is to preach you some heresy. The heresy I preach is pessimism. I think things are bad in our country and in the world, and I think they're going to get worse from here. Most people would say that liberal religion is an optimistic faith, which is why I say I'm preaching heresy. But when optimism collides with truth, liberal religion has to stand on truth's side. And the truth is that we're in trouble. The world as we know it, the way of life we enjoy as Americans, cannot be sustained. The only question is how quickly our everyday American way of life will come to an end, whether it will be a matter of years or decades or a century or two. The end of the world as we know it is on the horizon, somewhere in the distance.

If you came here today hoping for a little joy in your Advent season, take heart. I am a hopeful pessimist. In fact, I believe it is hope that will save us. Before this sermon is done I will challenge you to costly hope rather than to cheap optimism. But first: three facts, two stories, one question. Let's start with the facts.

Fact #1: In the words of Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham, "America faces a major energy supply crisis over the next two decades. The failure to meet this challenge will threaten our nation's economic prosperity, compromise our national security, and literally alter the way we lead our lives." (National Energy Summit in 2001) The transportation sector alone accounted for two-thirds of all petroleum used in the United States in 2000 (US Energy Information Administration). Our daily bread, the food which is the stuff of human life, typically travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from farm to plate—using that petroleum based transportation system. Oil is a finite resource; someday the demand will have grown past the available supply. In fact, the US Army Corps of Engineers stated last year, "Peak oil is at hand with low availability growth for the next 5 to 10 years." (Eileen T. Westervelt and Donald F. Fournier, September 2005) Let's boil it down to one sentence which is surely not news to anyone in this room: we are addicted to petroleum in a world with a limited supply of petroleum.

Fact #2, from the Environmental Protection Agency. According to NOAA and NASA data, the Earth's average surface temperature has increased by about 1.2 to 1.4°F since 1900. The warmest global average temperatures on record have all occurred within the past 15 years, with the warmest two years being 1998 and 2005. If greenhouse gases continue to increase, climate models predict that the average temperature at the Earth's surface could increase from 2.5 to 10.4°F above 1990 levels by the end of this century. Scientists predict that such a climb in temperature will cause catastrophic consequences, from species extinction to coastal devastation to heat waves, droughts, and wildfires. One sentence again, surely not news to anyone: the

world is getting warmer, and the consequences are disastrous for people around the globe.

Fact #3, From the Treasury Department's Bureau of the Public Debt: the current debt of the United States of America is 8.6 trillion dollars. From Fox News, the U.S. trade deficit skyrocketed in 2005 to a record \$725.8 billion, its fourth record-setting year in a row. Our country is in the red. And the bad news is not only economic, but also military: from the confirmation hearing of the incoming Secretary of Defense, our country is not winning the war in Iraq. One sentence: the American empire, having once risen, today is wobbling, and someday will fall.

Three facts: Petroleum addiction in a world with a limited amount of petroleum. Global warming in a world used to a cooler temperature. A tipping point coming closer, the beginning of the end of American world domination.

Some of you are wondering why this would be an Advent sermon, and my last sermon to boot. Well, I'm saying these things because it's Advent, and because it's my last sermon. Before I get to the two stories, let me tell you more.

Advent is a season from the Christian tradition. It's the time when we get ready for Christmas, but it's more than that. It is a season of celebration of the birth of Jesus. In the Christian tradition, the birth of Jesus means something rather profound. It means the world as we knew it is ending, and a new world is being born. That's why in Advent, Christian churches don't just celebrate the birth of Jesus the baby. They also recall the story that Christ will come again. For in the Christian tradition, there is a belief that at the end of time, Christ will come back to earth, and finally all shall be well. The lion will lie down with the lamb; nation shall not take up arms against nation; there shall be war no more. Peace on earth, goodwill toward all will be not a dream but a reality. Advent is the time for conversion of life, a turning point amid the devastation, so that Christmas can be a real celebration of authentically new life, within and among and beyond us. It's the end of the world as we know it, and as the rock group REM sang, we "feel fine," because as Christmas comes, the world begins anew.

And of course for me this is quite true. My world is coming to an end—my world of showing up at Fountain Street Church most weekdays and every Sunday and taking up the tasks of ministry to this amazing community. You all know that my choice to leave is because of my own personal Christmas—my two children, the birth of whom changed my life. But that's not the whole truth. The rest of the truth is that early one morning in August as I sat in my study writing in my journal, I realized that I felt my house was calling my name. I could almost hear it. And I realized that my vocation had shifted. Instead of being called to congregational ministry, I was being called home – home to our ten acres outside of Rockford. I was being called home, I hope and believe, to a different way of life. It's a way of life which no longer will require me to commute an hour or more every day, consuming fossil fuels and contributing to global warming. A way of life which is closer to the old American dream—a little land and a lot of living. A way of life which is, in the words of Duane Elgin, "outwardly simple, inwardly rich."

When I pondered that voice calling me home, and wondered whether I really had

the guts to answer it, two stories kept coming to my mind. These stories speak not only to my condition, but to the condition in which we find ourselves today: oil dependent, getting warmer, tipping over as the world's superpower. If there is anyone who remembers Joseph Campbell's presentations here at FSC or elsewhere, both of these stories fit beautifully into the pattern of his Hero's Journey. One is from the Hebrew scripture and one is from the Christian scripture.

The story from the Hebrew scripture is the story of Abraham's call. The ancient text, Genesis chapter 12, says that thousands of years ago, a man named Abraham heard a voice in his heart. And the voice was that of the Author of the Universe. And this voice, which only he could hear, told him, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." Listen again to those words—go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. In other words, leave behind your familiar way of life, the way of life you have known since your birth. And go. Go where? To a place you've never seen, a people you don't know, a way of life that is utterly new—for the sake of blessing the world. Abraham accepts this call and begins the journey. That's the first story.

The second story is the story of the temptation of Christ in the desert. It can be found in Luke Chapter 4. Those of you who are troubled by past history of Biblical literalism, don't get hung up in the fact that this story is about a conversation between Jesus and the Devil. If that is a problem for you, try seeing both Christ and the Devil as mythic figures, personifications of good and evil. This story is too good to throw away.

This story happens just after Jesus receives his own call into adventure, when he is baptized and hears a voice in his heart telling him that he is beloved by the Source of all Life. He is immediately driven out into the wilderness, and he fasts. It's a Vision Quest experience for him. It includes what Campbell would call the Initiation, a time of trial. The Devil comes and tests Jesus. First, the Devil says, "I know you're hungry! How about you take this stone and turn it into bread." And Jesus says, "No, life is about more than food." Then the Devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and tells Jesus, "You can be king! You can have all earthly authority, all riches, and be glorified by all people, just say yes to me." And Jesus says, "No, I'm going to walk in integrity and keep the path of the Spirit." Finally the Devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem in a vision and places him on the pinnacle of the Temple. And he says, "Why not throw yourself down from here; after all, God will take care of you and make sure you don't get hurt." And Jesus replies, "Giving God a test dishonors and demeans the Spirit, and I won't do it." And then the Devil left Jesus and angels came and ministered to him. Which is another way of saying that Jesus passed the test.

One traditional interpretation of this story is that Jesus was tempted by pride, power, and possession. In a nutshell, Jesus was tempted to act as if he himself were the center of the universe and that the rest of the world existed to glorify and serve him. But he did not; he glorified the Spirit instead. Right now America is failing the test that Jesus passed. Our human greed for pride, more prestige, and more posses-

sions has turned the American dream into the rest of the world's nightmare. Pride, power, and possession are not inherently bad—they just come second to integrity, wisdom, and compassion. Jesus knew that in the desert. And we need to know it now.

This Advent, we Americans need to renew our souls at the wellspring of the Spirit. We need to show the world that we are willing to downscale the outward trappings of our lives. We have to create a way of life beyond oil addiction. We have to create a way of life beyond greenhouse gas emission. We have to create a way of life beyond reliance on American empire. Like Abraham, we heed a voice which tells us that as we walk in faith and hope, the way will be found. And like Jesus, we recognize that the values which are eternal are the values of the Spirit, not of the marketplace.

Edward Everett Hale said, "I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything. But still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." My goal in the next phase of my life, when I am raising my own children and living on Plainsong Farm, our home, is to give a witness for hope. To live in a way which gives rise to a sustainable future for our country and our world. To do the something that I can do. Because I am not optimistic; I am hopeful. Optimism expects someone else—some government figure or scientific expert--to find a path through the maze that confronts us as the twenty-first century begins. Hope requires each person to heed the voice of Spirit and find their own path. Optimism requires nothing of us but a capacity for denial; hope requires the dedication of our lives.

Three facts: Petroleum addiction in a world with a limited amount of petroleum. Global warming in a world used to a cooler temperature. A tipping point being reached, the beginning of the end of American world domination.

Two stories: Abraham, called to leave his old familiar patterns so that he could bless the world; Jesus, turning aside from pride, power and possession so that he could keep faith with integrity, wisdom, and compassion--the values of the Spirit.

One question. The world as we know it—the world of seemingly limitless petroleum, carbon emission without consequences, and American hegemony—is ending. I am choosing a home-centered life, hoping over time to develop a way of life that is sustainable for future generations. That's where my hope is founded. What will you do to usher in a new world founded on the values of integrity, grace, and compassion, even as the old one fades away?

Don't try to answer today. Let the question live in you as the voice was in Abraham, calling him into a way of life totally different from anything he had ever known. Let the question live in you as the presence of the holy dwelt in Jesus, giving him the strength to resist the forces of evil. Let the question sit with you through the rest of the Advent season and into Christmas and the New Year. It is not a question to answer quickly. Let the rest of your life become your answer. So may it be. Amen.