

It's the End of the World As We Know It

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

My sister in law put a book in my hands this fall that turned out to be complete surprise. The very first surprise was that she would think to give me a book called, simply, *Truck*. Neither a catchy nor a particularly engaging title, especially for, well, me. But the biggest surprise was that I really enjoyed it. I didn't expect that. I didn't expect to enjoy a book of essays by a reluctantly confirmed bachelor who was born and raised in northern Wisconsin, and has pretty much never left his tiny, little hometown. The author, Michael Perry, writes pages and pages of thoroughly engaging, humorous, and poignant material about such prosaic things as coaxing a vegetable garden up out of the ground, hunting deer in a stand of trees he's hunted since he was a small boy, and rebuilding his ancient and decrepit International from the tires up. He writes about small town life, a life I know absolutely nothing about, and one that I had always thanked my lucky stars I didn't know anything about.

But something happened to me as I read it. Even though I was enjoying it thoroughly, I found a sense of melancholy and wistfulness welling up in me. Envy. He wasn't just writing about things he did, growing things and shooting things and the satisfaction of Gerry rigging a part to fit his rusty old International. He's writing about who he is. For him these aren't just hobbies and pastimes and humorous stories, the sorts of characters one seems to find only in a small town. They are his roots. His home. They are his bones and blood. It's who he is, and who his people were for generations before him. He wasn't just writing about small town people and small town life. He was writing about his identity. His place in the world.

I've had that same sense of wistfulness and longing before. When I read Flannery O'Connor and Ferrell Sams I long to be a quirky Southerner with crazy relatives and wonderful idiomatic phrases. I listen to Garrison Keillor and think how great it would be to be an uptight Minnesota Lutheran. I read Chaim Potok and acutely feel the fact that I come from traditionless people who have no unique or defined history. I am not a farmer, or a Southerner, or a Hassidic Jew, or a sturdy and stoic Norwegian. I don't have that sense of identity that is rooted in place and family and work or even creed. I am only an IBM kid with a hodgepodge accent that betrays the fact that I have had numerous addresses, and yet call no place home. I am not a child of the land, or a third or fourth generation anything. There is nothing I can point to and say, This is what my people do; this is where we are from. This is where I belong.

I wonder if you have felt some of that same sense of disconnection from time to time. Maybe it doesn't happen when you read. Maybe for you it happens when you look at the craziness of the world around you and you think, this is not my home. I do not belong here.

You might feel that when you hear stories like that one a week or two ago about the 15-year-old girl who was gang raped at a school dance while bystanders looked on and did nothing.

Or when you think about the billions of dollars that are spent waging war, or the space program or researching some ultimately useless thing, while people are dying of malaria and starvation and diseases that could easily be treated or vaccinated against with that same money.

You might feel like that when you hear about the destruction of the rain forests or see clouds of pollution that have settled on a city or learn about the species of wildlife that are in danger of extinction because of our waste products.

Or maybe when you hear about the savage violence people are capable of, or their incredible indifference to the suffering of others, or the arrogance and greed that causes them to use people or resources for their own indulgence...

...and you wonder how you could possibly be related to people like that, if only by species. You just don't feel rooted in this world; you don't feel comfortable in your human skin.

Home and place and belonging don't seem like typical, traditional themes of Advent, I will admit it. Especially the first week, which almost always presents us with texts about destruction and fury and chaos; anything but home and comfort and belonging. But those texts are about more than the unraveling of the world. They are also about the unwavering promise of God.

Lectionary blogger, Dylan Breuer, observes that somewhere in the course of time, probably about when Christians began to gain the upper hand in the world, we began interpreting apocalyptic literature all backwards. She writes, "It's a strange accident of history that the apocalyptic texts in our scriptures were written to encourage tiny minorities at their society's margins to greet the tribulations they witnessed not with panic, but with confidence that God was working out God's purposes for peace, joy, and justice – and that these same texts seem now to be read even more often among prosperous and powerful majorities as if they were written for people like them, and they are used mostly to point to current events with the loud message that people should panic, that God intends to bring chaos, agony, and unprecedented bloodshed to the world."

God hasn't brought about all this chaos and agony. AIDS and terrorism and all that aren't the warm up act for God's decisive moment of judgment and doom. We did this. And that sense of alienation and discomfort deep within us whispers the truth – this *isn't* where we belong, in the midst of discord and disease and destruction.

That's what these texts were written for: to give people on the verge of hopelessness hope. To encourage us – every time you feel alienated or in danger or lost or adrift in the world, remember, the reason we feel lost and alienated and adrift is because this isn't our home. Our home, our true home and true family is somewhere else, or something else. No one really knows what it is, but it isn't this.

And God hasn't abandoned us to this. This won't last forever. We won't completely do ourselves in. Our true home awaits. The days are surely coming, the prophet wrote. Just hang on. We don't know how, and we don't know when, but God has promised it, and what God promises, we can be sure of.

Does this mean we rejoice in the disintegration of society, the terrible signs of the world in its travail, knowing that the Lord is near? Of course not. How could we possibly rejoice in watching the world God created and loved consume itself? Does it mean we give up trying to do anything about injustice and suffering and abandon it? Again, of course not. As we said last week, it may not be home, but there is still the possibility that the Kingdom of God will glint and glimmer and shine through the darkness, any time we do the work of its King. No, we don't give up on it, and we don't let it beat us down. We stand with our heads up watching, expectantly, hopefully, confidently. Ready. Because the days are surely coming, and we are going home.