

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **The Birth of a New World**

*“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” –*

Luke 1:5-25

Anybody here worried about the future? Maybe it is your personal future you are worried about: your health, your finances, your relationships, or something else. Or maybe it is the future of your community you are worried about: the increase in teenage depression and anxiety, the opioid crisis, accumulating government debt, the decline in civility in the political arena, or something else, or all of the above. Or maybe it is the future of the world you are worried about: the rise of robots and what that will mean for employment, the way populist leaders are fueling racism and xenophobia, the extinction of species and other environmental problems. I spent my twenty minutes last week sharing how worried I am about the impact of climate change. God knows there is no shortage of things to worry about.

This time of year – the end of the church year last week with Reign of Christ Sunday, and the beginning of the new church year this week with the first Sunday of Advent – is a time to think about the future, about how to think in the midst of often foreboding news about a future that belongs to God. And this year the themes of Advent: the birth of Jesus (the first Advent), and the second Advent, the second coming of Christ (whatever that means), are all on my mind. The chorus of a song by the band R.E.M has been running through my head, a song about the end of the world. If you know it, sing it with me:

It's the end of the world as we know it;  
It's the end of the world as we know it;  
It's the end of the world as we know it;  
And I feel fine!

In truth the Internet and evening news is nothing compared to the Bible when it comes to encouraging wild speculation about the end of the world. The Bible often predicts monumental events, because there is this tension between the belief in a just God and the reality of an unjust world. And this world is unjust. We live in a world where a billion people don't have enough to eat, while some people have

accumulated vast sums. Even in wealthy Alberta, food bank rates are higher than the national average and one in six children live in poverty,<sup>1</sup> many are in homes where one or both parents were working full time for the entire year. If you are an indigenous child, your chance of being poor is much higher, about one in four. And if you are poor, you not only don't have enough money, you are also at higher risk of asthma, heart disease, and many other health problems. The world is not a fair place.

Yesterday was World AIDS Day, and AIDS has always been a disease that has affected the most marginalized and most impoverished people most strongly. According to the most recent data available, 35 million people have died, and another 37 million people live with the HIV virus, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Last year there were 1.8 million new infections, 940,000 died, and anti-retroviral treatments reach almost sixty percent of those who need them,<sup>2</sup> which are big improvements from several years ago, but still, that means there are 15 million people living without the drugs that would keep them alive and prevent new infections. AIDS affects the most impoverished people disproportionately, and linked with other diseases like Tuberculosis and Malaria, keeps whole communities at risk. The world is not a fair place.

You know this world is often not fair. Some people get more hardship than anyone deserves, while others have all the luck. The world is not fair, but we believe in a God who is fair. And there is a tension between those two realities. If God is fair, how can the world be so unfair? If the world is unfair, how can its creator be fair?

Tensions are hard to live with, and so some people will do almost anything to avoid living in that tension. Some deny one side of that tension, insisting in spite of all the evidence that the world is fair, that suffering is an illusion, that there is some economic or religious explanation for poverty or cancer which resolves the apparent tension and makes injustice seem all very normal, all very fair, to everyone, except those who suffer from them.

Others, unable to deny the injustice of the world, deny the reality of a just God. Strangely, it is most often not the poor and the suffering themselves who take this route. A man I know who hasn't a religious bone in his body, recently asked me to pray for his wife, who was struggling with more medical problems than anyone

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<sup>1</sup> "One in Six is Too Many: An Alberta Child Poverty Report," published by the Edmonton Social Planning Council, Public Interest Alberta, and Alberta College of Social Workers, November 20, 2018.

<https://www.pialberta.org/childpovertyreport2018>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>

deserves. If anyone has the right to give up on God, he does. If anyone has the right to give up on God, it is the desperately poor! There are no atheists in foxholes, the old saying goes, but there are also few atheists in emergency wards or in slums. The poor and the desperate turn to God, partly out of their desperation, but even more importantly because they sense intuitively that God is the defender of justice, and that without God, it is easier to dismiss injustice as the way things are, the way things need to be, the way things should be. God is the defender of the poor, the source of healing, and the source of our commitment to justice, compassion and respect. For those who could otherwise be so easily ignored and dismissed, to give up on God often seems like nothing less than to give up on life.

And in the midst of poverty and violence and oppression and rampant, entrenched injustice, people hope. They live in the tension between the world's injustice and God's justice because it is the very presence of that tension that is the source of hope. People hope for a day when God's justice will triumph over injustice, a day when God's peace will win out over violence, a day when God's abundance will overturn poverty, a day when God's healing will transform suffering. And that is why there are all those strange Bible passages that talk about a day of judgment. They aren't talking about the end of the world; they are talking about the end of an unjust world, the end of an unfair world, and the birth of a better one.

That is why at the time just before Jesus' birth, people were longing for a saviour. They were hoping for something and someone who would bring about, in some small way, the birth of a new world.

The promise comes to a couple who were barren, unable to conceive. To be barren means the future is closed; there is nothing to look forward to. When the future is closed, whether it is for an elderly childless couple in ancient Judea, or for indigenous children growing up with little money and less hope, or for grieving parents, or those facing fearsome medical problems, or for you, here today, struggling with your own worries, life seems dry and joyless. It can be an effort to get out of bed, and the day might seem to last forever.

But in barren situations, angels appear, bringing good news. Is that because only those who are barren are open to God's visitation, or because God hears their cries and sends to them especially some sign of hope and care? We do not know. But we do know that God has a way of touching people, precisely at those times when God seems most distant.

And so it happens that this barren couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had been unable to conceive, suddenly in their old age, experience a revelation from God: a child will be born, a child who will turn the people caught in injustice back to the ways of a just God.

One of the problems with the bible's emphasis on a day of judgment, I think, is that it can encourage people to think that God will one day magically intervene in the world to establish justice. I don't think that is right. I think that God acts in the world not by dropping things on us fully formed and fully grown, but by conceiving things small. The new world won't drop out of heaven like an asteroid but will grow from the earth like a seed. The new just world will be conceived, like a baby is conceived, like John and Jesus were conceived, and then it will grow, and at each stage it will need you and me and many, many more to nurture it and help it grow and grow.

There is still much injustice in this world, but for every example of injustice, there are many more of growing justice. There is much poverty, but there is a growing sense of the scandal of that, and a slowly growing movement to correct it. There are too many people who don't get the medications they need, but the number of people who do has grown 25 times in the last ten years. There is a huge amount of progress, but every bit of that progress has been struggled for tenaciously by people who would not give up their faith that justice demanded a different world. Sometimes it seems like we are taking two steps back for every single one forward, but I believe that every effort, every act of kindness, every thoughtful word, every letter you write to your MP or MLA, even though it may seem to fall on deaf ears, has an impact. I believe that, because I believe in a just God, who is at work birthing a more just world, through you and through me.

So I've been rewriting that REM song in my head, and I want you to help me to sing it somewhat differently. I don't think it's the end of the world as we know it. I think it's the birth of a new world, we know it! And I don't always feel fine, but I do feel hope. So sing that with me, not only with your voice, but with your life:

It's the birth of a new world, we know it,  
It's the birth of a new world, we know it,  
It's the birth of a new world, we know it,  
And I feel hope!