

Advent 1A

November 28, 2004

August 14, 2126.

That's the day the world may end.  
Or so astronomers think.

If their calculations are correct, the comet Swift-Tuttle will come close to the earth on July 11, 2126, but  
it's orbit is so uncertain that it might  
hit the earth on August 14th.

No one knows the size of the comet, but experts say it's likely to be about the size of Halley's comet, about 6  
miles across.

A hit of the earth by such a comet would be catastrophic.

The earth would shudder,  
a crater up to ten miles wide would be  
made,  
dust would obscure the sun and  
volcanoes would erupt all over the  
world.

It would be much like the disaster that happened about 65 million years ago,  
when a comet that struck the earth  
caused the extinction of 90 percent of  
all species on earth,  
including the dinosaurs.

There is a profound truth in all this speculation about the end of the world:  
the human race can't last forever.  
No species ever has.

If humans don't end on August 14, 2126,  
they will in the distant future,  
when the sun swells up into a red  
giant and planet earth becomes  
too hot for life.

We don't know when the end will come,  
but it will come one day.

Let's face it.  
Life, which is fragile at best,  
will someday end –  
not just for the planet,  
but also for us personally.

How do we handle that?

Have you ever developed a personal time line?

All of us have a time line – a line that starts at birth and ends at death.

Between birth and death, there is the life we have been given.

We don't know the length of that life, but  
we do know that at some point it will  
end.

So the time we have been given is limited.  
How are we using it?

To put it another way, in the relatively short time that you and I have on this earth,  
how are we living life for all its worth?

For one thing...  
we can remember that this may be the  
day the Lord comes.

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates our Gospel text:  
*"The Arrival of the Son of Man," Jesus*  
*says, "will take place in times like*  
*Noah's.*

*Before the great flood everyone was*  
*carrying on as usual,*  
*having a good time right up to the*  
*day Noah boarded the ark.*

*They knew nothing – until the flood hit and swept everything away.*

*The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that"*

According to an article in The Wall Street Journal,  
some Christians among the 5,500-  
member crew of the aircraft carrier  
The USS Theodore Roosevelt  
are looking at the events of the  
world and wondering if this is part  
of what Scripture says about  
the End Time.

The Roosevelt has launched more than 1,000 combat missions  
since it joined the campaign against the  
terrorists in Afghanistan.

Crew members are asking,  
*"Is this the beginning of the end,*  
*the moment when God will battle*  
*Evil in the Armageddon, and*  
*the saved will ascend*  
*to heaven?"*

Jesus, of course, tells us not to speculate about the day or the hour of the Second Coming.

But that doesn't mean we are to ignore the Second Coming.

We are to live life with the end in mind.

Or, as Chaplain Ray Stewart of The Roosevelt puts it,  
*"Nobody knows when the Son of God is coming.*

*The idea is for us to be busy doing what God wants us to be doing."*

We are to watch, wait and be ready –  
for the end may come when we least expect it.

The tragic events of September 11 bring this point home.

I am sure the people who went to work at the Pentagon or World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001,  
that lovely Tuesday morning,  
had absolutely no idea they would be dead before noon.

For them, like for us, it was just another day.

Many, no doubt, rode the subway to work,  
stopped to get their morning coffee,  
and were preparing to begin another workday when the first plane crashed into the tower.

Who could have imagined such a thing?  
But it happened.

We never know, do we?

Here we are, protecting our lives,  
securing our lives,  
investing for the future as if we have all the time in the world –

and then, in a moment when we least expect it – it all ends,  
life is over, completely over, finished.

Tragic? Of course.

But the events of September 11 have given us an important reminder.

We seldom are allowed the knowledge of when our lives will end;  
therefore we must strive to live each  
day in faith and faithfulness,  
prepared to stand before the  
presence of God at any time.

One of the most important Roman Catholic thinkers in this century is the Jesuit priest Father Teilhard de Chardin.

On Easter Day 1955, he attended Mass at  
St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

After Mass, as he was walking along Fifth Avenue,  
Teilhard suffered a massive heart  
attack.

Efforts to save him were in vain.

He died on the sidewalk in a matter of moments.

Although death came suddenly,  
it didn't catch him unprepared.

His whole life had been a preparation for the day when he would be with Christ forever.

When death came, he was ready.

So should we be when the end comes – for it will come when we least expect it.

Second, we live life for all its worth when we use the limited time we have on this earth wisely,  
making the most of every opportunity.

Again, I like the way Eugene Peterson translates our lesson from Paul:

*“But make sure that you don't get so  
self-absorbed and exhausted in taking  
care of all your day-by-day obligations  
that you lose track of the time and  
doze off,  
oblivious to God.*

*The night about over, dawn is about to  
break.*

*Be up and awake to what God is doing! ...*

*We can't afford to waste a minute,  
must not squander these precious  
daylight hours in frivolity and  
indulgence,  
in sleeping around and dissipation,  
in bickering and grabbing*

*everything in sight.”*

Measured by the standard of eternity,  
our time in this life is short – 70 or 80  
years says the psalmist –  
possibly one hundred years or  
more says the scientist.

But even if science extends our lives to a 120 years,  
that is still no more than the twinkling  
of an eye measured by eternity.

Which is why we Christians are not to fear death but to live life in light of it.

In Muriel Spark’s black comedy *Memento Mori*, which was aired on PBS’s Masterpiece Theater several years ago,

a circle of elderly, eccentric London  
aristocrats each receives a series of  
anonymous telephone calls with the  
frightening message:

*“Remember, you must die.  
Remember, you must die.”*

The different reactions of different people to the message are striking.

A snobbish, rich old biddy, overly impressed with her station in society,  
is terrified by the caller’s message;

she is overwhelmed with distress that  
her precious, self-centered little world  
will end –

her fear so engulfs her that she does die an unexpected and horrible death.

A gentleman member of the party,  
after receiving the call,  
decides to take a new wife –  
his third –  
and attempts to grasp more of life than his old body can handle.

Another dismisses the caller as a silly dolt.

To another, the message signals the last chance to settle old scores with enemies, real and imagined.

But one woman, considered a bit “crazy” by the others, has the strangest reaction of all.

She says with joyful wonder to the mysterious caller,  
*“I’m so glad you called.*

*You know, at our age we forget so many  
things.*

*It's good of you to remind me of that  
most important fact."*

She then goes about rebuilding her life:  
healing a long, painful  
misunderstanding with her husband,  
and renewing loving and caring  
friendships with those who mean  
the most to her.

*"Remember, you must die."*

To the selfish, the caller's message is a death sentence.

To the foolish, it's the "last call,"  
"the last hurrah."

To the vulnerable, the message is a trifle,  
a bit of silliness;

but to the wise, it is an invitation to live the gift of life to the fullest.

Ask yourself....

Is there a job the Lord has for me that I've been putting off?

Is there a responsibility in my church or community that I've avoided?

Are there words of appreciation, forgiveness, or love that are still unspoken?

Follow that impulse;  
make that call,  
teach that class;  
give that gift;  
serve others, and  
share what you have.

Show you care now, because tomorrow may be too late.

Only God knows the days we have allotted.  
Make each day count.

Third, we live life for all it's worth when we treat people as if we will never see them again.

Surely, this is one possible meaning of Jesus' words in today's Gospel:

*"Then two will be in the field;  
one will be taken and one will be  
left.*

*Two women will be grinding meal*

*together;  
one will be taken and one will  
be left.”*

If we don't take for granted that we will have all the time in the future,  
surely our treatment of each other will  
greatly improve.

Use the time now to reconcile with those you have hurt or have hurt you.

Use the time now to enjoy this world and to make this world a better place for generations yet to come.

Use the time now to care a little more deeply,  
to share a little more generously,  
to give a little more liberally –  
for we may never have the  
time to do so again.

In Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, the character Big Daddy nears the end of his life with his world in shambles.

He had built a successful business at the cost of his family life.

He has never truly loved either his wife or his children and thus has estranged himself from his wife,  
reduced his older son to cold  
detachment, and  
driven his younger son to  
alcoholism.

At the end of the movie he discovers he has a terminal disease and soon will die.

In the midst of a violent argument with his younger son,  
he begins talking about his plans for  
the future of his business,  
only to realize that he will not live  
to fulfill them.

It is then that his heart begins to open to the people around him.

He embraces his younger son,  
begins making amends with his older  
son, and  
calls his wife by name as he offers  
her his arm for a walk around the  
farm.

The film ends with him living each moment as if it were eternally significant.

Do you know that the average human being has about 27,000 days to his or her life? That's right – 27,000 days that represents the life of a person who lives to be 74 years of age.

You may live to be eighty or ninety or even one hundred,  
but even 37,000 days isn't very much

compared to eternity.

The Bible is right – our days are numbered.

So no matter when the end may come for this planet – whether on August 14, 2126, or some other date –  
let's be sure we live life for all its worth  
in the short span of time we are here.

Remember that this may be the day the Lord comes.

Use the limited time you have on this earth wisely,  
making the most of every opportunity.

Treat people as if you will never see them again.

It's true. We really have only one life to live.  
So make the most of it.

Amen.