

WGUMC Christmas Eve 2012

Several weeks ago, in the Russian village of Gornoye, in Prison Colony No. 10, the inmates were exhibiting high levels of stress and anxiety. Some of the women were sick, others were having seizures, and a few even broke out of the facility in their panic over a Mayan prophecy. The end-of-the-world fever got so bad in that country that the minister of emergency situations, the chief sanitary doctor, and even a top official in the Russian Orthodox Church felt compelled to speak out.

[Ellen Barry, *New York Times*, 12-1-12.]

Now I didn't see the movie. And I didn't really pay any heed to all the hype, until I read in the newspaper last week that Macy's had decided that most of its 800 stores would be open from early morning December 21st until midnight December 23rd for 80 hours of continuous shopping. [Heather Summerville, *Mercury News*, 12-17-12] Now, if that isn't a sure sign of the end of the world, I don't know what is.

I was somewhat heartened when I heard just a few days ago about the spiritualist gathering in Merida, Mexico. About a thousand shamans, seers, stargazers, crystal enthusiasts, yogis, sufis and swamis from all over the world gathered on the Yucatan Peninsula to mark the end of the Mayan long-count calendar. Evidently, not many of the attendees expected the world to end on Friday, because the convention was scheduled to run through Sunday. [Mark Stevenson, *AP*, in the *San Jose Mercury News*, 12-21-12]

All this scary and silly talk about the world coming to an end right before Christmas comes to tell us of a world about to begin. For Christians, the coming of Christ is a new beginning. It's no accident that John's Gospel begins as the Book of Genesis does, with the beginning. In the first beginning, Adam came and you know what happened to him. In the new beginning, Christ, the new Adam comes and the whole world awaits him.

From John: "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But the Word was not content to be just a Word, spoken into the void, echoing through the nothingness. No, the Word called a world into being. From Genesis: "Let there be light" and there was light." And from John: "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." From Genesis: "And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." [John 1:1,5; Genesis 1:3-5]

In a word and a big bang, our timeless God created our concept of time, the turning of days and seasons, the progress of the years. And so the eons rolled by and gradually life evolved and finally humans appeared on the planet earth and so history began.

But the more history that happened, the more the darkness began to encroach on the light, until eventually the human soul couldn't tell the difference between day and night. O, the Word was still speaking, but the human heart was not listening. The Word was still creating out of nothing, but we were bent on destroying everything. And so just when it seemed that the human experiment had gone horribly wrong and that the world should rightly come to an end, the Word became flesh and the world began again.

We hear stories about babies in mangers, barns in Bethlehem, angels and shepherds, stars and wise men, and we think: what a way to begin. For Christians, Bethlehem is the New Eden. But Mary and Joseph didn't get to stay there, and neither can we. If you remember the story, Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus had to flee to Egypt to escape from Herod. In a very short time, every one of us will have to leave this

cozy stable and head back out into a world that is forever threatening to end.

This year, some of us won't make it to Bethlehem. For too many parents in Newtown, Connecticut, the world already came to an end a week before the Mayan calendar did. It's the same for the Tandel family from San Bruno who were out shopping the day after Thanksgiving when they crashed their Lexus into a patrol car on 101. For them, Black Friday will forever be the blackest day of their lives. And it was a very black Saturday for the family of the Navy Seal commander who took his life in Afghanistan last weekend. It will be a long, hard road to Bethlehem for all of them. And I bet each of us know people just like them.

So, what do we say to them? How can we bring them the Good News of Christmas? How can we assure strangers and friends that life can begin again? Preachers, teachers, counselors: we all rely on words. But sometimes words aren't

enough. Yes, in the beginning was the Word, but we're not here because of the Word made words! We are here because of the Word made flesh.

We worship Jesus Christ. And that's where you and I come in. We are the Body of Christ, so you be his kind hands. I'll be his sure feet. You be his clear eyes. I'll be his sharp ears. You be his loving arms. I'll be his strong back. Together, we'll get our loved ones to Bethlehem so that their world and ours can begin again.

Now as a Christian there are many things in this world that I would like to see come to an end: pain and human suffering; the cycles of violence and revenge; the diseases of poverty and oppression; sickness and sin; war and global warming; racism and all of its kin; fear and self-hatred; the hopelessness that sets in.

Just in time, Christmas comes with the ancient message of the angels: peace on earth, good will to women and men.

And the real miracle of Christmas is that we will find it in ourselves to believe that if we are faithful in our living and constant in our loving, our story, like the calendar, can begin again.

Whether they lived in Mexico or the Middle East, ancient peoples knew that God is in the business of making all things new. In the apocalypse of John, when the Bible talks about the end of the world, there is a new world about to dawn, where death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more for the former things have passed away. [Revelation 21:4-5] And in the hope of that new day, I plan to stay.

So, my friends, forget the so-called prophecies of the Mayans. Remember the surefire promise of Christmas: for unto us is born this day in the hearts of the hopeful and in the future of the faithful a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Merry Christmas.