

Cool guys don't look at explosions. That's the title and first line of a satirical music video created for the 2009 MTV Movie Awards which I have watched more times than I care to admit. The song is a catchy riff on the movie cliché of a character walking toward the camera, with an explosion in the background — sometimes in slow motion. The video, of course, shows clips from one movie after another, driving home the point that filmmakers love to rehash this same basic idea.

And who could blame them? It sells tickets. They wouldn't keep filming the same thing over and over if audiences didn't want to see it. We are easily captivated by very specific things, and Hollywood knows it.

Jesus knew it too. And he wasn't above a bit of recycling either, but instead of an explosion, he cited an image from the Book of Daniel of "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" as he spoke with his disciples about God's final, decisive reckoning with the world. He said this as his public ministry was very close to ending, that is, mere days before his crucifixion. So he must have thought it crucially important that his disciples knew what to do in light of this inescapable future.

Jesus points out that there will be signs of the end times that anyone paying attention will be able to notice, rather than secret knowledge of a certain date that only a few might possess. Paying attention to the right things will be critical, but so too will be ignoring distracting things. What God is doing is always most important, not the signs themselves. Not even the scary signs, and certainly not the worries and temptations of everyday life.

This was a particularly important message for St. Luke's audience to hear. The Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Most Bible scholars believe that St. Luke wrote some years after the immediate shock had worn off; the year 85 is a popular guess. A few argue that references to the destruction of the Temple are references to the destruction of the First Temple centuries before, and therefore the Gospels could have been written before 70.

In any case, the first Christian communities initially thought that Jesus would return in the lifetimes of the first generation of disciples. As they realized that expectation must have been mistaken as eyewitnesses to the resurrection started dying out, they also realized they were going to need to preserve the story of Jesus in writing for future generations. So the Gospels were written down for specific communities, albeit with a concern for posterity. The four canonical Gospels tell the same basic story about Jesus, albeit with different perspectives, quotes, and anecdotes, despite being written in different times and places, which is why I believe the story they tell.

An important side note about different quotes and perspectives is that the phrase, "this generation," is how Luke's Gospel refers to people who reject God. It does *not* refer to a span of time. So when Jesus says, "this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place," it means that Christians will always have to deal with opposition until Jesus returns.

And speaking of opposition, it's probably a good thing that the ancient Romans did not have explosives. Undoubtedly, they would have destroyed a lot more than they did. But they did destroy the Temple, and that left a lot of Jews and Christians traumatized, at first, but then perplexed. Because life went on. The destruction of the Temple did not provoke the end of the world, or the arrival of the messiah.

Part of the original purpose of today's Gospel reading is to help some of the earliest Christians to understand that nothing human beings do can force God's hand. As devastating as the Romans were on Earth, they could not possibly exert any influence on God. St. Luke preserved a teaching of Jesus's that reminded his perplexed audience that it is *God* who influences *human* events, and uses the material world for God's purposes. Of course, this is an important teaching for every age.

We might not immediately realize that this has profound consequences for how Christians live our lives. But think about it. For one thing, we are reminded yet again of the ordering of Creation, with God at the head and summit, and God's sovereignty can be our assurance that despite our best efforts, chaos can never overcome the divine order of the universe.

We are also reminded that one of the outcomes of that order is that some things in this life are more important than others, and not only can we know which are which, we are responsible for knowing, and acting accordingly. It might seem unnecessary for Jesus to tell people to pay attention to huge, important things, but we all too easily distract ourselves from major crises.

We see the effects of climate change, but we distract ourselves by buying stuff, the production of which does further damage to the environment. We see poverty, desperation, and injustice that the government could do a lot to address, and in some cases fix outright, but we distract ourselves with culture wars and identity politics. Like filmmakers who keep serving up the same empty clichés, politicians on both sides know what sells.

The pandemic might seem like an exception, because it does directly affect our own lives, but precious little attention is paid to the weaknesses and gaps in our health care and public health systems that it exposed, not to mention the chronic underfunding of scientific research, widespread scientific illiteracy and the ensuing acceptance of misinformation, and our relatively poor statistics on individual health.

Sorry. Sore subject. And I just got back from a vacation. This has "long winter" written all over it. But that's not the season I want to focus on. As the beautiful season of Advent falls gently upon us, we should be celebrating our feast of title and the God-given courage and hope inherent in it. And today's Gospel also shows us that we have much to celebrate.

We should certainly celebrate all of the goodness that God inspires us to create in this place. But we can also celebrate that the goodness we do is a reaction to God's love, not something we must do to earn God's favor. Any righteousness we might have

is a gift from God, for as the prophet wrote, the Lord is our righteousness. We can celebrate because God will judge us, and judge mercifully. Through the merits of Jesus, not our own merits, God will judge us worthy.

So we look ahead with gratitude and hope for God's goodness towards us. Today we rededicate ourselves to a radical focus on God, and therefore, a deeply countercultural rejection of distractions. Pay attention to what's important and don't let the rest bother you. Cool guys and girls don't look at explosions, they look at themselves, the world, and most importantly, they look at God. Faithful Christians are cool because keeping an eye on God keeps us focused, grounded, hopeful, grateful, and assured, because we are not afraid of what's going on in the secular world, and we are not drawn into nonsense, no matter how popular it might be.

Instead, we see God everywhere. We rejoice that God is active in history, word, sacrament, church, heart, and future, and we choose to embrace God, because we know that God's works and God's love are wonderful and enduring. We look back to Christ coming in great humility, look forward to Christ coming in awesome majesty, and look around to see Christ already here. When we do, our hearts explode with joy in seeing that he is always acting with grace and love.

I hope that for everyone in our parish, Advent Sunday will mark the beginning of a season of choosing to know God better, of intentional prayer, spiritual discipline, and works of charity. Have faith that God will bless us by putting into our hearts the mutual love and holiness which will enable us to live without fear and, when he comes, give us confidence to stand before the Son of Man.