

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, December 1, 2019
First Sunday in Advent

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”
First of Four in “Are you Ready?”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5
Christian Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44



Welcome to the *first* of four sermons dedicated to Advent
entitled “Are You Ready?”



Before we hear this morning’s message, let us listen to this song
recorded more than thirty years ago (1987) by R.E.M. For you readers
at home, watch the video on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com> >
[watch](#)



The song was once featured in several satirical videos in connection with the prediction by radio pastor Harold Camping of Family Radio, that the world would end on May 21, 2011 (with earthquakes rolling around the world in each time zone; "that's great, it starts with an earthquake".) Also, before the supposed Mayan apocalypse on December 21, 2012, sales for the song jumped from 3,000 to 19,000 copies for the week.¹



That's great, it starts with an earthquake
Birds and snakes, and aeroplanes
And Lenny Bruce is not afraid

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_the_End_of_the_World_as_We_Know_It_\(And_I_Feel_Fine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It%27s_the_End_of_the_World_as_We_Know_It_(And_I_Feel_Fine)), accessed November 29, 2019.

Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself churn
World serves its own needs
Don't mis-serve your own needs
Speed it up a notch, speed, grunt, no, strength
The ladder starts to clatter
With a fear of height, down, height
Wire in a fire, represent the seven games
And a government for hire and a combat site
Left her, wasn't coming in a hurry
With the Furies breathing down your neck

Team by team, reporters baffled, trumped, tethered, cropped
Look at that low plane, fine, then
Uh oh, overflow, population, common group
But it'll do, save yourself, serve yourself
World serves its own needs, listen to your heart bleed
Tell me with the Rapture and the reverent in the right, right
You vitriolic, patriotic, slam fight, bright light
Feeling pretty psyched

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

Six o'clock, T.V. hour, don't get caught in foreign tower
Slash and burn, return, listen to yourself churn
Lock him in uniform, book burning, bloodletting
Every motive escalate, automotive incinerate
Light a candle, light a motive, step down, step down
Watch your heel crush, crush, uh oh
This means no fear, cavalier, renegade and steering clear
A tournament, a tournament, a tournament of lies
Offer me solutions, offer me alternatives and I decline

It's the end of the world as we know it (I had some time alone)
It's the end of the world as we know it (I had some time alone)
It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine (time I had some
time alone)
I feel fine (I feel fine)

It's the end of the world as we know it (time I had some time alone)
It's the end of the world as we know it (time I had some time alone)

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine (time I had some time alone)

The other night I drifted nice continental drift divide
Mountains sit in a line, Leonard Bernstein
Leonid Brezhnev, Lenny Bruce and Lester Bangs
Birthday party, cheesecake, jellybean, boom
You symbiotic, patriotic, slam but neck, right, right

It's the end of the world as we know it (time I had some time alone)
It's the end of the world as we know it (time I had some time alone)
It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine (time I had some time alone)

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 (time I had some time alone)

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Source: [LyricFind](#)

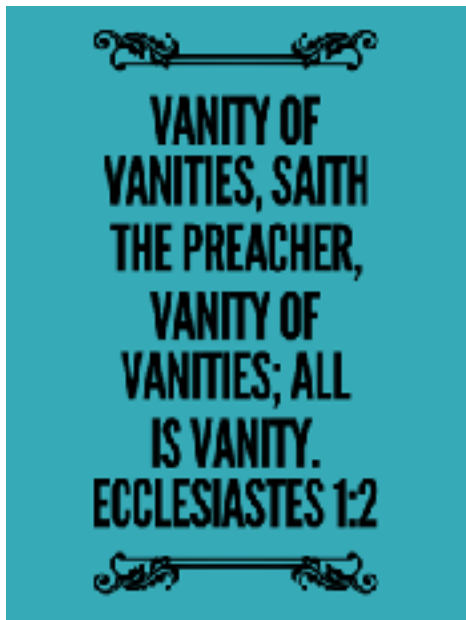
Songwriters: John Michael Stipe / Michael E. Mills / Peter Lawrence Buck / William Thomas Berry

It's The End Of The World As We Know It lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

[All art, be it music, literature, a painting, or dance, as it regards meaning, is only but a suggestion.]



Substantive meaning, and therefore its actual interpretation, is forfeited to he or she who receives the art. In regards to the Gospel message, Jesus said repeatedly, “Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Matthew 11:15, 13:9-16, Mark 4:9, 8:18)].²



² Text in brackets were omitted from the sermon delivered in the pulpit.

As I watch the R.E.M. video, I see Proverbs' perspective "Vanities of vanities. All is vanity" (Ecclesiastics 1:2). Much of existence and its past seems random, chaotic, and therefore often makes little sense. In the video, we see the decay of the dilapidated house in which the boy wastes away his time. Much of that around us, things material, provide us with little meaning and are soon disused.



A few things provide peace: (for some, but not me) the unconditional love of a dog, a relational connection to a grandparent, and uninterrupted, unscheduled time to simply be with one's one thoughts and pastimes. Whatever provides us peace, allows us to stand above and beyond time.



This Advent, I wonder if we can see through the cacophonous kaleidoscope of commercialism, the rise of Putin and Russia, holiday

shopping, climate change, materialism, domestic political division, glitter, Christmas lights, and the apparent irrelevance of facts in politics that so saturates our country to the point that it seems so much is meaningless and disconnected. It is as if it is “the end of the world as we know it”.



Our reading from Isaiah instils in us a peace in the midst of chaos. The second chapter of Isaiah speaks of a reign of peace and justice in the world where all makes sense. But chapter two cannot be read without first reading chapter one. In chapter one, we are presented with chaos: Greed, self-interest, corruption in high places, and religion went awry. “It *was* the end of the world as *they* knew it”.

Today, instead of caring for widows, orphans, and the oppressed, the world is upside down with ‘socialism’ and ‘commonwealth’ becoming pejorative terms.



[Corporate families earn disgusting profits and live ostentatious lifestyles with little regard if those beneath them have health care or a living wage. Western democratic allies are now held in contempt and tyrants are now our country's allies. Religion has been twisted to bless militarism and white supremacy. Instead of caring for fellow Central American Christians in or approaching our land, they are hunted, separated, and expelled.] It is as if “it’s the end of the world as we know it”.



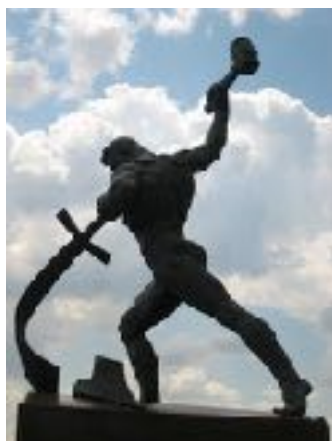
Yet, our scripture reading this morning from chapter two of Isaiah provides a peace amidst the chaos. A vision that sees through the rubbish of history is proclaimed. All of the peoples of the earth gather and worship. God operates as a highly effective cosmic United Nations that “judges fairly and equitably among the nations of the world” (Isaiah 2:4).³ Because of a universal devotion and thanksgiving to God for the abundance received, nations cease war and turn their weapons into farming tools. In short, chapter one of Isaiah is the “it’s

³ Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, “First Sunday in Advent”, *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice*, eds. Dawn Ottini-Wilhelm, Ronald Allen, and Dale P. Andrews (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p.2.

the end of the world as we know it” and chapter two is the “and I feel fine” caused by God’s establishment of a new reign.



In our Christian reading, we hear again about “the end of the world as we know it” - and unlike the Mayans and Pastor Harold Camping we have no idea when it will happen. For many of us watching CNN and Fox News, it seems like it’s now! Perhaps it seems this way for every generation. So it did for Noah’s generation. It was a crazy time in Noah’s age. Hedonism was the clarion call of the age! Folks were drinking and cavorting with little regard to God, justice, or care of their neighbour. Today too, it seems like the “it’s the end of the world as we know it”. How are we to ready ourselves for the new age so that we can experience peace?



I am a half-Christian in that I proclaim the gospel, but I wonder if I at all live it out. This morning, I'm only lifting-up the example of someone with whom I had coffee last week: [a Quaker named Daniel Sickens.⁴ Daniel has worshipped with us at Centre Church at least twice. He was drawn to our stance on the environment. On first meeting Daniel in church, the Holy Spirit whispered to me 'This man can teach you'.]



While having coffee with Daniel on Monday, I learned that through his participation in the Plowshares movement he spent three years in a federal prison for trespassing a Minuteman missile site in Colorado.⁵

⁴ Permission to use his name was granted by Daniel on December 3, 2019.

⁵ The Plowshares movement is an anti-nuclear weapons and Christian pacifist movement that advocates active resistance to war. The group often practices a form of symbolic protest that involves the damaging of weapons and military property. The movement gained notoriety in the early 1980s when several members damaged nuclear warhead nose cones and were subsequently convicted. The name refers to the text of prophet Isaiah who said that weapons shall be beaten into plowshares.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plowshares_movement, accessed December 3, 2019.



He spent three years in prison in order to communicate to me and to you that Isaiah's vision of "turning swords into plowshares" was not a two-and-a-half thousand year-old eschatological vision but rather a vision for our modern day.



May we as people of faith better understand *that* for which we wait, and thus know *what* to proclaim. While we proclaim, like the boy in the video, let us seek to find the ways in which can connect with that which gives us peace, centres us, connects us with the transcendent, and protects us from the vanities that saturate our existence. This is our Advent time.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.