

What would you say? Who would you call? How would you handle it? If you had only minutes left.

Cynthia Manley, a resident of Hawaii, shares with us her last words when the end seemed imminent. Earlier this year, you might remember there was a threat from North Korea. There was a fear they might aim their missiles at our nation, and fire them right at Hawaii. Well, one Saturday back in January began like any other in the “Aloha state.” That is, until Cynthia received a startling alert on her phone around 8:05 am.

When she heard the alarm blaring, she looked at her phone and shock came over her. She put on her glasses to double check she had read the message correctly. To her dread, she verified that impending doom was indeed headed toward her island paradise. Her life—as well as everyone else’s in Hawaii—was now in danger all because of some madman and the simple push of a button. All Cynthia could do was just stand there, wondering how long she had, where to go, and what to do. Sure, she’d attended workshops and read pamphlets about how to plan for a nuclear attack, but nothing could prepare her for the actual moment.

Finally, she realized there was no time to prepare, no escape from what was about to come. Within 15-30 minutes all would be laid waste, so all there was left to do was to say goodbye. So she made the most of her final minutes by sending messages to her daughters. Both are in college, with their whole lives ahead of them. So Cynthia sent them encouraging texts, saying, “If this is the end, stay strong, and no matter what happens take care of you and sis. Find a way to . . . be together soon and be a family. [Get your degree! Have a good life and be successful.] I love you so much.” After sending the text messages, she then tried calling—but quickly found that many others had the same idea because the cell lines were jammed. *This is it*, Cynthia thought, *those will be the last words my daughters ever get from me.*

Surprisingly, 15 minutes went by . . . then eventually 30 . . . and nothing happened. After about 38 minutes another text came in, it was an alert that the previous message had been a false alarm. Cynthia joined her friends and neighbors in a good cry at the relief that this wasn’t really the end. There was still more time—she’d see her daughters again, and get another chance at life. But the very real possibility of destruction still hangs over Hawaii to this day.

According to an article in *The Sun*, scientists predict three probable ways human civilization will come to an end. Using math models, a team from the University of Rochester, NY, calculated what would happen to the planet as the population grows and the effects of climate change inflicts chaos. The conclusion? It was found that humanity could go through a) a soft landing; b) a gradual die off; c) a full-blown collapse. A gradual die-off is when 70% of life on Earth is wiped out before things can go back to normal—and depressingly, this was found to be *by far* the most likely outcome. The most positive outcome is a soft landing, which is where we’re able to avoid mass extinction. This, however, is the least likely outcome, but it is still possible if civilization can adapt to radically changing weather and sea levels over time—thus dodging the bullet. Then, there’s a full-blown collapse, which means our planet will be too sensitive to recover from the damage caused by humankind.

Well, that might be what scientists think—but what do they know? Today, we hear from God Himself, the very creator of the cosmos, how it’s all gonna go down. In the Gospel text this morning, Jesus tells us that we shouldn’t be too arrogant and hog all the credit for the destruction of the planet. We’re not going to be the end of it, but He is. Jesus promises that one day will be our final day, and it’s only because He has something to say about it. And when that time comes, you and I won’t have the luxury of 15-30 minutes to prepare like Cynthia did when she thought the missile was about to hit. No, we know from elsewhere that at Jesus’ Second Coming, He will strike like a thief in the night. It’ll come out of nowhere, without warning, and that’ll be all she wrote.

Now, how do you feel about that? I’d imagine most of us feel kinda like how Cynthia probably felt. It’s difficult, sad, terrifying even, to think of everything we’ve built for ourselves, all we’ve come to love, the world as we know it coming to an end. Tomorrow, or later this afternoon, or maybe even in the next minute, it could all be over, done with, no more—how does that sit with you? It can be hard to say goodbye—if you’re like me, goodbyes are never easy.

That's how the Jewish people in Jesus' day felt. Two thousand years ago, they had their beautiful temple. It took much time, much labor, many resources to put it all together, but there it was. And what a sight it must've been. In fact, today's Gospel tells us that when Jesus walked out of the temple, one of His wide-eyed disciples exclaimed, "Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" But while the disciple was walking on air as he took in the sights, Jesus quickly pulls him back down to earth with a sober reminder. "Do you see these great buildings?" He said. "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And what Jesus said would come true. It was only a matter of time, about forty years or so, before the Romans would come in and fulfill His prophecy in 70 AD.

How sad that must've been for the Jews. Their bright shining jewel of a temple . . . gone! The place where they got to meet God . . . destroyed! Their only means of making amends with their Lord . . . wiped out! What would they do now? How could they go on? For them, this was it.

But I wonder—for them and for us—is that really so bad? All this talk about things being over, it sounds just awful. But what we're doing is focusing on what we're losing, what's being taken away. And all the while, we're forgetting what God's really up to. We're overlooking everything He has in store. I mean, this is God we're talking about! And last time I checked, He's the loving, caring, gracious Lord who's always on the lookout for how He can bless us! Now, the way He works sometimes can really be strange, but what He's really after is to make things better, to give us His best!

Anyway, that's what He's talking about this morning. He might sound like a Debbie Downer (no offense, Debbie!), but Jesus has big plans! No sooner did the Jews think everything was coming to an end with the destruction of the temple, then Jesus gave them something wa-a-ay superior! Sure, the temple was beautiful; sure, the temple was where they met God; sure, the temple was how they got right with Him; but why would they want to settle for that when they could have what Jesus has to offer!

You see, Jesus wasn't just a beautiful set of stones, but a temple made without hands! And no longer did you have to travel long distances to a temple where God was hidden behind a veil, but in the person of Jesus God came *to them* and they could see Him face to face! And what about the endless sacrifices being made there, well they could finally come to an end! Routine and ritual be gone; in Jesus, they now had the Lamb of God who could take away the sin of the world once-and-for-all! Why would they bemoan their loss, considering what they were gaining instead! Who needs the old temple, when they have Jesus Christ—the New Temple!

The same goes for us—Jesus even says so in the text. When you sift through all the nasty stuff He tells us will happen—like wars and earthquakes and persecutions—Jesus reminds us what all this really is. It's not the end, but He calls it "the beginning of the *birth* pains." Birth pains means there's labor going on, that something new is about to be *born*. If you've ever been excited about a new baby coming, then you know what Jesus is talking about! Nothing's over, but things are just about to begin!

One professor at Duke Divinity School recounted a student mission trip he'd taken to Honduras. A group of them had worked a couple weeks in the impoverished village of San Marco, running a makeshift health clinic. And each night, when they'd get done, they'd build a fire and sit with the villagers. One particular night, a student had the bright idea that they could all go around and share their favorite Bible verses. Someone mentioned John 3:16; another, "The Lord is my shepherd"; and then a Honduran woman said through an interpreter that her favorite passage was Mark 13—today's reading about how not one stone will be left upon another; earthquakes, famine, and fire. She said, "That passage has always been such a comfort."

The professor admitted his bewilderment. "What, 'comfort'? Sounds more like Jesus on a bad day. What's so comforting about The End?" But then the nurse sitting next to this professor gave him some insight. She said, "I was talking with that woman a little while ago. Three of her five children have died of malnutrition." . . . "Oh," he said.

For many people like us—well-housed and well-fed, reasonably safe and secure, with a 401k and decent enough health insurance—when Jesus says, "God's going to dismantle all this. He never meant things to be the way they are today. God isn't interested in maintaining your status quo," when Jesus says this, we might take it as bad news. But for that woman, who's had to suffer the harshness of life and the cruelty of death, Jesus' talk of all that coming to an end sounds more

like gospel! And my guess is, despite how sheltered our lives really are. Regardless of how many luxuries and creature comforts we enjoy. No matter what happiness we get out of life. We too can relate to that woman.

We've all suffered serious setbacks, faced loss and heartache, endured pain and turmoil. We know that things aren't right with the world, that we aren't the best versions of ourselves, that none of this is as it should be. And so Jesus will be coming back to bring about the birth of a new existence. We, ourselves, and everything and everyone around us, will be put right. Finally, we'll be the best you and me we could possibly be. And never will death or hardship or tears disrupt our lives ever again. When Jesus talks about the end, that's what He means—the end of all that is ugly and stinky and out of place in God's perfect creation. Which also means it's finally the beginning—the fresh start of all that is beautiful and sweet and how God intended it to be. Maybe now you agree, this is indeed good news!

One of my former members shared a story, and it's stuck with me ever since. Once, there was a young woman who'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness. She was told she only had three months to live, so she got busy getting her things 'in order.' The first thing was to contact her pastor, and have him come over to talk through her final wishes. During their discussion, she shared which hymns she'd like at the funeral, which Scriptures she wanted read, even the outfit she would like to be buried in.

Everything was in order, and the pastor was just about to leave, when the young woman suddenly remembered something. Excitedly, she said, "There's just one more thing." "What's that?" the pastor asked. "This is very important," the young woman said. "Maybe most important of all. I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor looked at her intently, trying to figure out if this was some kind of joke. But after a few moments, he could tell she was serious. He didn't know what to say.

"You look surprised," the young woman said. "Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by your request." She then began to explain, "See, my grandmother used to tell me how when she'd attend socials and dinners as a little girl, just when the dishes were being cleared after the main course, someone would lean over and instruct her, 'Keep your fork.' At that, grandmother would get excited because she knew her favorite part was coming up. She was about to get something even better, the best part of the meal—like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. And so when people come to my visitation and see me in the casket," the young lady concluded, "I want them to wonder, 'Why does she have the fork in her hand?' Then, I want you to tell them, 'Keep your fork, the best is yet to come.'"

Today, it might sound as if Jesus is talking about the dishes being cleared, like the meal has abruptly come to an end. But just remember, "Keep your fork," because the best is yet to come.

