

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁸And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

This morning's Gospel Lesson speaks of calamities larger than this old earth: of "signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars..." And in this scientific age, we can well imagine such stupendous things. Humanity has lived long enough that we have heard of sun flares and comets streaking dangerously wherever they will, and of global warming, and of super volcanic explosions that so layer the atmosphere with ash that it causes climate changes: natural calamities so vast it is hard to imagine how we poor humans are going to manage them.

And the thing is, we are *not* going to manage these end time calamities when they come, nor should we grieve overmuch about such incapacity. Rather, as Jesus says in our text, we should "lift up [our] heads: for [our] redemption draweth nigh."

Jesus is here speaking of a stunning turn of events and turn in our emotions. When human hearts are failing them for fear at the rumblings and the chaos on earth and sky... right in the midst of such turmoil, Christians are to lift up their heads and lift up their hearts, for their redemption draws near. It is said that the night is never so dark as just before the dawn. So it is with the end time calamities that will beset our human race: When things will be at their worst, then they will be closest to their best — aye, and a "best" that shall be everlasting. For our Saviour shall then come again, with beauty and power and boot sin, death, and the devil right out of reality. When the night shall be the darkest, then lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.

The human story, then, shall finish up well. This is what we believe. Of this we can gladly testify to an anxious world. The odds might seem against our race surviving to reach the age of, say, Star Trek. That imagined age always seemed wonderful to me, when basic human needs of food and housing and clothing are all solved and humanity is free to explore God's great universe. But shall we make it? Shall we live ten thousand years? Shall we make it out of this new century? If you stick to what eyes can see and ears can hear, if you confine yourself to thoughts of terrorism, nuclear weapons, and climatic changes, if you make your calculations based on estimates of human goodness and human wisdom in face of terrifying weapons and

technology, then you might conclude that our race does not have much of a chance.

But we believe that Christ shall come again. We believe that the Triune God so loves humanity that the only begotten Son died for us, that we might have life. That which is so precious to God He will not permit to be frittered away as mere cosmic debris. And this good old planet of ours twirling in this obscure portion of God's creation is destined for glory, for the New Jerusalem is bound to descend from the heavens and take up residence on our earth.

Some people worry about the outcome of the human story. If you are such a one, then be encouraged by your faith. Do believe that when our human days are at their worst, we may lift up our heads in hope, for our redemption draweth nigh. I'm not sure whether science will ever extrapolate nor calculate such an outcome. But we believe it, and in believing it, we take our stand on the side of Jesus and of all humanity!

I want to apply this theme of our redemption drawing nigh to you and your daily life. I am wanting to shift the focus from the human story to your story, from cosmic tribulations to your tribulations. But before turning to that, permit me to lift up one lesson from the cosmic story: Since these things are to be, and since Jesus shall come again with beauty and power and rule as Christ the King for ever and ever, set not your hearts overmuch on earthly things. Jesus, the One who is coming again, phrases it best, naturally:

Matt 6:19-21, KJV

¹⁹Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: ²¹For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

That is, if this world is to suffer mightily and, in God's good time, be replaced by the New Jerusalem, then live now with that good Town in mind. Set not your hearts only upon this earth and

its riches, but think also of heaven. Or, the better way to put it: Because we should think of heaven, so we should live here in preparation for that world and its heavenly principles. Let there be something heavenly about us, even now. The Lord knows, our neighbors need it.

So, let us shift from the great cosmic tribulations at the end of time, to individual and personal tribulations now. It seems to me that just a couple months ago, the newspapers presented us with a stirring story of tribulation and faith. I am speaking of the Amish children.

The story takes place back in Pennsylvania, in countryside I once counted home — around Lancaster County, PA. A gunman invaded an Amish school house. In the end he killed five children.

There is something holy about the response of the Amish community. By “holy,” I mean this: There was a kind of goodness about the Amish response to this crime that is hard to explain *except* by way of the notion of heaven. The peacefulness of the Amish response is puzzling unless the Amish folk actually believe what they say about Jesus and about redemption. Only their hope can explain their generosity. So, the money from across our land flew into the Amish community, to try to express sympathy for the tragedy. And the Amish turn around and establish a college fund for the children of the gunman. Their own children are not likely to go to college, neither those who died nor those who survived, yet they established a college fund for the gunman’s children.

And the interviews on television were extraordinary, to my mind. There was grief, yes, but not that worst kind of grief: the belief that all is lost. Instead, the plain, Amish folk spoke of forgiveness and redemption, and for once, this world seemed good again.

But that is not the chief thing of which I wish to speak. The chief thing about this story of the Amish children is a detail that I anticipate lifting up again next Spring on Palm Sunday. It is a detail concerning love and willingness to sacrifice oneself. The report on ABCNews.com starts off like this:

‘Shoot Me First,’ Amish Girl Is Said to Ask
13-Year-Old Tried to Divert Killer From
Classmates

By CHRIS FRANCESCANI, ABCNews.com

Oct. 5, 2006 — The oldest of the five Amish girls shot dead in a Pennsylvania schoolhouse is said to have stepped forward and asked her killer to “Shoot

me first,” in an apparent effort to buy time for her schoolmates.

What grace that girl showed in her awful time of tribulation! Life is sweet, especially to many of our young ones. And yet, when her world was shaken, when her peaceful schoolhouse door was opened and a gunman came in, when the regularities of Amish life were disrupted by that man with a gun, then this girl lifted up her head, as if she knew that her redemption was drawing nigh and that there was nothing the gunman could do to stop that. He could take her life, but not her redemption. He could kill her, but not her Redeemer, and so, in the end, this death was no death, but a pilgrimage to that world in which there is no sorrow, no hurt anymore.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, a remarkable part of our Lord’s sermon is the part about the shaking of the foundations:

...and upon the earth distress of nations,
with perplexity; the sea and the waves
roaring; ²⁶Men’s hearts failing them for
fear, and for looking after those things
which are coming on the earth: for the
powers of heaven shall be shaken.

To my ears, the striking thing about this passage is its similarity to one of our best-loved Psalms — Psalm 46. That mighty Psalm starts off with a declaration of peace and calm amidst wild confusion. The psalmist knows that this world can be chaotic, but even more he knows that this is God’s world:

God is our refuge and strength, a very
present help in trouble. ²Therefore will
not we fear, though the earth be
removed, and though the mountains be
carried into the midst of the sea;
³Though the waters thereof roar and be
troubled, though the mountains shake
with the swelling thereof.(Ps. 46:1-3, KJV)

And so in this morning’s Gospel Reading, it is as if Jesus is saying, before the end comes, there will be confusion on earth. But let it be with you, both now and at the end of time, as it was with the Psalmist of old, that you will not fear... that you will be still and know that I am God!(Ps. 46:10)... that you will lift up your head, lift up your heart, and believe in redemption.

May God save you from chaos, but if nonetheless your world should seem to be falling apart... if the obstacles and challenges facing you now seem overwhelming, then still, lift up your heads. Your Redeemer is nearby. No suffering can

overtake you that is so extreme that it leaves your Lord behind. Indeed, it is the great testimony of the Gospel and of the whole Bible that God beholds the lowly:

Psalm 138:6-7, KJV

6Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.

7Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me.

Indeed, Martin Luther so rejoiced in God's regard of the lowly ones, that he quoted Psalm 113 and said this:

Psalm 113:5, 6: "Who is like the Lord, our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?" For since He is the Most High, and there is nothing above Him, He cannot look above Him; nor yet to either side, for there is none like Him. He must needs, therefore, look within Him and beneath Him; and the farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him. (in Luther's commentary on *The Magnificat*. Emphasis mine.)

Our faith that the end time tribulations are going to result in the Kingdom of God does not imply that our individual tribulations are likewise going to launch the Kingdom. And yet, we can say two definite things about those individual tribulations: (1) They cast us ever more firmly into God's loving regard, and (2) Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh.

And in this second point, I am speaking most concretely. For soon you shall get up from you pew and come forth to the Blessed Sacrament. You will be coming forward, some of you with happiness, enjoying a season of peace, some of you sad, lonely, distressed, or perplexed, as if the seas are roaring and the heavens are shaken. However it is you come, when you come, you are most definitely drawing nigh to your redemption. And this is what he says, "In spite of it all, in spite of your storms without, storms within, you are my own dear child, for whom I would give my life. Do not fear. Be still. The trial of your faith is most precious to me, more precious than fine gold. (1 Peter 1:6) For now, you are a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth (Heb. 11:13), but you are mine, and your life is going to turn out fine."

To this Redeemer who draws evermore near, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.