

The story of Chicken Little is older than you might expect. A Danish version appeared in print in 1823, but the fable had been around for much longer. The basic story, if you don't know it, is a little chicken gets bonked on the head by a falling object, typically an acorn, and then proceeds to work the barnyard into a frenzy with cries of “the sky is falling!” The story has been told and retold in print and on film, probably making the biggest splash in 2005 with a fully merchandised Disney version (not their first, either).

We have reached a point in our church year where traditionally we talk about final things. At the end of the church year, we talk about end times. Makes sense. But I have to admit that when I see these kind of Bible passages, I wonder, “When it comes to end times stuff, has the Church's message become like Chicken Little?”

I'm afraid that in the eyes of unbelievers, warnings of the end inspire more eye-rolling than anything else. When preachers insist that Jesus is definitely coming back in our lifetime because of current events and ‘here's the date,’ the Church's message becomes a Chicken Little message. A generation comes and goes, the end does not come, and since it was a Christian predicting this or that date, a skeptical world thinks that all Christians are convinced that the sky is falling. Since it hasn't yet, the real Christian message—the message that centers on Jesus Christ—is dismissed.

It's enough to make the believing Church want to avoid talking about the issue, but that would be a mistake. Jesus spent a great deal of time teaching about the signs of the end and what it all means for those who follow him. Clearly, it deserves our attention.

So what did Jesus teach? We have big chunk of it in today's Gospel lesson. He wasn't fooling around when he told his disciples about the end of Jerusalem. This is graphically described in verses 20—24. Many people who heard his words were still living when the city (including the Temple) was completely destroyed in 70 A.D. What sets Jesus apart from Chicken Little prophets is that His predictions actually happened.

That's why we must pay attention to what Jesus says next. He speaks vividly about the laws of nature being shaken as God begins to withdraw his patience from the human race. This will be more than the wars and natural disasters that are already plaguing God's creation. The sun, moon, and stars will be affected as the universe begins to come unglued. How long can the Church proclaim such things before no one listens anymore? And yet the Holy Spirit enters our hearts through his Word and convinces us that Jesus is the Son of God; is our Savior from sin and hell; is our Lord; is our teacher of the truth: and this is what he teaches about the end of this world. He means it when he says that entire nations will be shaking in fear. He means it when he says the heavenly bodies will be shaken, and he means it when he says that He, the Son of Man, will be seen coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And there is the good news in all this apocalyptic chaos: These fearsome signs signal the visible return of Christ. Those who are alive at this time in history, who have been waiting for Jesus with faith in their hearts, are told: “When

these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

What will that feel like for the faithful? The prophet Malachi says: “...you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” In other words, you will jump for joy.

“Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” The redemption that Jesus talks about here is release from the consequences of sin that remain with us. Think of it this way: You now have the forgiveness of sins. You now are the recipient of God’s undeserved kindness and the gift of faith. You now have the promise of heavenly life that never ends. You have these things already through Jesus who comes to us and is present with us today. But we still wait for the perfection that will only come when our souls are delivered from this world. In the meantime, we deal with the consequences of sin—of our own sin and the sinful choices of others. Those consequences include, but are hardly limited to, sickness and disease; mental, emotional, physical and spiritual struggle; the pain of broken relationships and families; and finally, death and its ripple effects of grief and loneliness.

But be convinced that your redemption from these things is drawing near. The same Jesus who was crucified, died and rose again to conquer your death will return on a cloud as your Redeemer. Now, you know what a redeemer does, right? A redeemer is a person who rescues another by paying a ransom. The ransom Jesus paid for you was his own precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, and with that ransom payment your account is credited for heaven. When Jesus descends to earth amidst this world’s last violent gasps, he will redeem you from the power of sin’s consequences. That means no more sadness. No more brokenness. No more suffering. No more isolation. No more pain. No more hatred. No more death.

Until that great day, the Church will continue to broadcast the Bible’s simple invitation: Today is the day to repent. Change. Turn around. Come close to God. Feel terror at your sins. Mourn the wrong you’ve done. Give up spiritually self-reliant ideas. Your sins are forgiven thanks to the sacrifice made by Jesus, the Son of God. Heaven is yours, thanks to his rising from the dead. Trust in his actions. Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if the sea roars and the heavenly bodies shake, and you see Jesus coming down on a cloud; you can stand with your head raised to the sky, welcoming your Redeemer.

May the prayer of God’s faithful always be: Come, Lord Jesus.