

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Advent, as we all know, is the beginning of our preparation for Christmas. Of course, we're late. Walmart decorated and started preparing for Christmas right after Halloween. We've already been through Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday and Giving Tuesday. The Church, it seems as always, is starting late.

But what a strange way to prepare for Christmas—with a Gospel text that speaks of the end of the world!

Let's face it. Our Christmas preparations have already begun. Many are continuing to shop until they drop. Gifts that have been bought now have to be wrapped. Christmas cards are being addressed. Lists are being written for Santa Claus. Christmas trees are being bought and outdoor Christmas decorations are going up. Christmas music is blaring from all the radios. My favorites used to be "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" and "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer", but I really smile every time I hear "A Waffle House Christmas". Families are deciding where they will gather for their Christmas celebrations and who will bring what delicacy to the table. Yes, we are already preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ, which is what Christmas is really all about.

But, here is the Church directing our attention to Christ's coming again, "coming in a cloud with power and glory". That's a mysterious image, "coming in a cloud with power and glory". And it's meant to be mysterious. Clouds are the biblical symbol of mystery and of the presence of God.

Of course, when the modern ear hears of a "cloud", it associates the word with our computers or tablets or smart phones.

When tech companies say your data is in the cloud, or that you can work in the cloud, it has nothing to do with white fluffy things in the sky. Your data isn't actually in the heavens. It's stored somewhere on earth, actually lots of "somewhere". I'm told that companies like Amazon and Google and Facebook have built a vast network of servers housed in huge warehouses in widely scattered places throughout the world—some larger than football fields. The cloud is wherever these tech companies can find sufficient power to keep their servers humming.

All this means nothing to those who aren't into computers. For the non-techies among us, clouds still speak of weather.

St. Luke is telling us that at the end of time Christ is coming in a cloud and that doesn't have anything to do with computers or the weather. Rather when he says that Jesus is coming in a cloud with power and great glory at the end of time, Google won't own the cloud; Amazon won't own the cloud; Facebook won't own the cloud. God will control the

cloud and all the clouds that ever existed and Christ will reign over all. He's basically telling us that the future belongs to God, our future belongs to God.

So, let's think about this in the midst of all of our Christmas preparations. While Jesus told us that no one knows "the day nor the hour when the end will come", But let's just consider, even pretend, for a moment that this Christmas day that the world will end.

What if what Jesus speaks of comes to pass on Christmas day: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory"?

If you know today that the world as you know it, your life as you know it, will come to an end on Christmas Day, how different would your Christmas preparations be from the ways in which you are preparing now? What would you be doing differently? As a family? As an individual? Would the gifts you're buying or hoping for be as important? Would the parties you're preparing for lose their meaning? How would you be preparing to stand before the power and glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, the Son of the all-high, the almighty, the all-powerful God?

Jesus tells us what we should be doing and should not be doing: "...when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand. Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the faith of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man".

This is how the Lord suggests we should prepare ourselves for Christmas Day, if it marks the end of the world as we know it, if it marks the end of our lives as we know them. Stand strong and with courage in the face of every evil. Don't give in to laziness and apathy in the face of evil and don't try to avoid it by taking up the pleasures of the moment. Don't let your worries and fears and cares and anxieties control your lives and making you lose sight of who you are and whose you are. The way to stand strong and with courage when evil comes is to pray constantly and trust in the goodness and mercy and compassion of God. Do all this and you will be victorious and be counted among the blessed to stand before the Son of Man.

That is not only a good prescription for the end of time. That's a pretty good prescription for this time, for Christmas time, for all our time on earth.

As more and more Christmas joy creeps into our hearts, our homes, our church, our schools, our places of work, and even in a Waffle House, let's not lose sight that we are preparing to, not only celebrate the birth of Christ, but to meet him face-to-face, whether in this life or in the next.