

Lenten Nukes      Grace Cathedral, February 25, 2018 A sermon by the Rt. Rev. William E. Swing  
based on the Gospel According to Mark: 8:31-38

The only, only good thing about the massive nuclear proliferation that is going on today is that it compels us to imagine the end of the world. That is spiritually healthy. That is the kind of imagination that Jesus had.

How much imagination does it take to picture the end of the world, now? With Pakistan, India, China, Russia and others in the exclusive nuclear club of nations producing ever more powerful, modernized, deadly warheads and delivery systems, we are following suit. The United States is refurbishing our nuclear weapons to the tune of \$1.2 trillion dollars over the next decades. And the United States is calling for more small nuclear bombs, about the size used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so that we can surgically eliminate cities when needed. And ... we are trying out the policy of "first use," dropping the bombs on others before than can drop them on us.

It doesn't take a prophet or a poet to point out that we are rushing toward the moment of self- destruction of life on this planet. All the while, we fantasize that our deliberations are only about national security and reality, all the while disregarding the sustainability of all the nations and all of nature! This past summer, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations said, "There is nothing I want more for my family than a world free of nuclear weapons. But we have to be realistic." Ah, there it is. The ultimate choice. A fairy tale world free of nuclear weapons vs. a realistic world of nuclear weapons proliferating endlessly. The winning argument today is that the more nuclear weapons that we and our enemies have, the safer the world will be.

For 4.5 billion years, the world has been free of nuclear weapons, and we muddled along and evolved. But for the last 73 years, we have had nuclear weapons. And the world has not gone up in flames. Thus, brimming with confidence, this world's most armed political regimes and their politicians are betting that they can control nuclear weapons indefinitely and that no human errors or glitches in triggered systems will ever lead to an unmitigated apocalypse. And thus life on this planet is left to dangle at the end of these assumptions.

This is where Jesus comes in. He says to his closest follower, "you are setting your mind, NOT on divine things but, on human things." It is easy to set your mind on human things. We happen to be human and we tend to make decisions based on now, with only a fragile guess about our future. Divine thinking takes into consideration the end of the story. Hauntingly Jesus says to us this morning, "What will it profit (you in the end), if (you) gain the whole world and forfeit your life?"

Translating those words into this moment of nuclear peril, we might say, "What does it profit the nation to have nuclear superiority over the rest of the nuclear nations if it sets up the scenario of a global thermonuclear war and the end of life on this planet? "What will it profit you...?" Or put another way, who wins the game of total extinction?

Here's is how I read the Gospel lesson today. Jesus is saying, "you think that you know how to handle ultimate power responsibly? Only God, who is the Beginning and the End, handles ultimate power

responsibly. When you and I posture with end game weapons, we are just playing God as we pretend to hold sway over this planet. Isn't this blasphemy? For Jesus, ultimate power on this planet is a revelation, not an explosion. Jesus has a pretty simple message: take the low road, follow me, live in a God intoxicated world, suffer, die and live a life of resurrection. The answer is in the back of the book. Resurrection! Live the answer.

In 2018, with nuclear proliferation, the options become stark. Either annihilation or resurrection. We are late in the game and time is running out. Today we are driving fast toward the cliff and our leaders demand that we hit the accelerator, now. With gusto! That's the annihilation way to drive. The resurrection way to drive is to slow down, imagine the cliff that is just ahead and begin to figure out how to stop this mad dash. Resurrection means learning to live on the other side of the death that beckons.

In the Jesus story, life after death was not referring to heaven. After his death, Jesus did not go to heaven. He came back to this earth. Earth I Here! This is where resurrection happens for Jesus, and He invites us into it. His fervent prayer was "on Earth as it is in heaven." Or as the angel said in the book of Revelation, "Hurt not the Earth." Jesus was focused on Earth. Don't you dare blow it up!

In heaven, the intractable issues will be resolved and the rough place become plain. But don't wait. Make them happen here. Resurrection means that Trump supporters and Trump detractors will figure out how to get along ... North and South Korea figure out how to be one ... Israel and the Palestinians will discover room for everyone ... we will learn to preserve the Earth and make money at the same time ... people of one religion will be taught to respect the people of other religions. Living into the ultimate solutions is resurrection living. You can't travel in both directions. You have to make your mind up, annihilation or resurrection.

At the most recent State of the Union Address, these words were spoken: "Perhaps someday in the future, there will be a magical moment when the countries of the world will get together to eliminate nuclear weapons." Today, I want to go on record and say that I believe in magic. That is part of what I mean when I recite the Creed and say, I believe in the Resurrection of the dead." Living, suffering, dying and rising from the dead to create a new order of life .• here ... is far more appealing to me than driving, full throttle, toward the nuclear annihilation hoping for resurrection ... there.

Resurrection takes the long view and acknowledges that Earth is the Lord's. Annihilation takes the short view and accepts that the politicians of the moment and the industrial/military complex of the moment, have the right to destroy the Earth. In our lesson this morning, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan I For you are setting your mind, NOT on divine things but on human things."

At the Biblical beginning of life, there was the choice of the apple or paradise. In the midst of life, there was the Biblical choice of the Empire or the cross. At the end of life, we have the same old choices, but now they are in context of annihilation or resurrection.

And choices have consequences. Finally, at the end of time, the Author of life will return to this created and well-loved Earth and demand accountability of us for what we did to enhance or destroy it. On that Day of Judgement, our precious bombs won't amount to a hill of beans. "What does it profit (you in the end) if you gain the whole world and forfeit your life?" Amen.