The Scandal of the Century

By the Very Rev. James G. Munroe

at Christ Church cathedral on November 17, 2013

Almighty God, please be real when all hell breaks loose. Amen.

You and I have been sold a bill of goods by the Butterball Limited Liability Company.

Every year at this time, Butterball promises the American public that it will provide turkeys of every size for our tables on Thanksgiving Day. But in last Friday’s newspaper, that was revealed to be a false promise. Apparently, some of the Butterball turkeys didn’t gain enough weight this past year. So there are no Butterball brand fresh turkeys available this month that weigh sixteen pounds or more.

In verse eight of today’s gospel (Luke 21:5-19), we are warned that one sign of the end of the world approaching is that we are going to be led astray by false promises. So I’m not saying that Butterball’s false promise is a sign that the end is near. But I am saying that the lessons for this morning are pretty heavy duty.

For instance, we’re singing some wonderful hymns this morning – and today’s gospel tells us to look out, because wars and earthquakes are just around the corner.

We’ve got a fascinating adult forum after this service and a terrific art exhibit and Thanksgiving service this afternoon – and the Old Testament lesson (Malachi 3:13-4:6) tells us that God’s wrath is like an oven stuck in the self-cleaning mode.

Right now, we’re trying to build up the pledges for the Cathedral budget – and St. Luke tells us that all Cathedral budgets are doomed to destruction.

Well, what’s going on is that we’re just one Sunday away from the last Sunday in the Church year. Every year at this time, the lessons focus on the theme of the end of the world. So this sermon is beginning with the final judgment, and all hell breaking loose, and everything as we know it falling apart, and the apocalyptic second coming of Christ.

I think I can end this sermon on a slightly more upbeat note. But right now, and in order to connect with these difficult themes, let me read some verses from today’s gospel and then mention some headlines from the Springfield Republican and the Boston Globe this past week.

In verse six, St. Luke tells us that at the end of time, there will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. And both newspapers carried photographs of villages in the Philippines in which the wind and the wave surge of the typhoon simply leveled every single house.

In verse nine, Luke tells us that at the end of time, we’ll hear of wars and insurrections. And the Republican told us that thus far, there are 2,224,000 refugees from the violence in Syria, and that three-fourths of them are women and children.
In verse ten, Luke tells us that at the end of time, nations will rise up against nations. And for how many years have the Prayers of the People at Christ Church Cathedral included petitions for Iraq, Afghanistan and the Holy Land every single Sunday?

In verse eleven, Luke tells us that at the end of time, there will be earthquakes, famines and plagues. And last Tuesday, in and near San Francisco, right where my sister lives, there were four earthquakes in one day. They were all little ones. I’m just saying....

In verse eleven, Luke tells us that at the end of time, there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. And the Globe told us that this past year, the destruction of the rainforest in Brazil – which is considered one of the most important natural defenses against global warming – jumped by 28%.

Finally in verse sixteen, Luke tells us that at the end of time, we will be betrayed by parents and relatives and friends. And tragically, a nephew of our wonderful parishioners Edwin and Nilsa Velez was shot and killed here in Springfield last Sunday evening by a one-time friend.

Now, I am not predicting the end of the world this coming week. But I am noting that this theme of “last things” is all around us. I am also noting that this theme is not unfamiliar to the people of God, and that it never has been.

Even in the Book of Genesis, the story of the creation is followed almost immediately by the story of the near destruction of the world, with only a handful of people on a small boat to start all over again.

It also needs to be said that for the people of God, the end of the world has never been simply a picture of destruction. The destruction has always been seen as a precondition, a precondition for the coming of the Messiah and the beginning of the new age of peace.

For the people of God, there is one majestic word that has always been used to describe this hope, this image of the new age. The word is “Shalom” – the Hebrew word that means “Peace”. It is the age of Shalom for which the people of God have always yearned and prayed and hoped.

Can you imagine what our world would look like if Sunday, November 17, 2013 was the end of time, and if the age of Shalom – the promised reign of peace – was upon us right now?

Bay State Medical Center and Mercy Hospital and Shriners Hospital would simply disappear. All the health care folk in our parish – out of a job.

No more need for the ACTS tutoring program. Burt Hansen – out of a job.

No more need for the Loaves and Fishes meal program. Tako Dwyer and the other the Cathedral organizers – out of a job.
No more lawyers. Half of Springfield – out of a job. Just kidding...

No more United Nations – the unity would already be there. No more Episcopal Relief and Development Fund. No more Pioneer Valley Project. No more DSS. No more Open Pantry. No more Hampden County Jail. No more Alzheimer’s. No more cancer.

And no more Forest Park Zoo. Because the prophet Isaiah says that at the end of time, “The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them.”

So here we are, you and I, the people of God – and we’re still waiting for the promised age of Shalom. It’s not here. The wolf and the lamb still need separate stalls. And how are the people of God supposed to live in such a world, where the promised reign of peace is still just a dream?

The answer of Jesus is direct and unequivocal, and it’s found in today’s gospel. Jesus says to us, “This will give us an opportunity to bear testimony.” That’s the answer. The people of God are to live and even thrive when all hell is breaking loose – by bearing testimony.

Now, the testimony we’re not called to bear is that the end of the world is at hand. Maybe it is. It might be this afternoon. It may be a million years from now. Jesus himself said that he didn’t know the time or the season, and I won’t presume to be one up on Jesus.

The Testimony we’re called to bear is this: that the Son of God was broken on the cross for our brokenness, that he is risen from the grave to conquer that last obscene enemy death, and that he lives now and is the most real presence in this church at this moment, and that previews of the new age of Shalom can already be seen.

I want to close by bearing witness to one of those previews – a final judgment of utter condemnation that ended up in the new age of Shalom.

John Profumo was a rising star. He was born in London in 1915. He was educated at the best English schools. He served bravely during World War Two. After the war, he became a politician and was elected to the House of Parliament. He got married in 1954. And as his star continued to rise, he was finally appointed a Secretary of State for War and a member of the Privy Council.

Then he met Christine. Christine Keeler was a model – that’s the polite way to describe her life style. And Profumo made little effort to resist her charms. The affair only lasted a few weeks, but the damage was done. The affair became public. And because Keeler was also having an affair with the senior naval officer in the Soviet Embassy, there was also great fear that national security had been compromised.

For Profumo, this was the end. At first, he admitted that he knew Keeler but tried to say that they didn’t have a relationship. But finally, he was forced to admit that he had lied to Parliament. All hell broke loose in his life, everything as he knew it fell apart, and the final judgment had arrived.
He first confessed the affair to his wife and then to Parliament. Then he resigned, and he disappeared from public life. It was called the Profumo Affair. It was called the Scandal of the Century. And that is all the world ever knew of John Profumo.

But I’m here to bear testimony. And here is what the world didn’t know. Profumo vanished into the hardscrabble East End of London. He went to a place that helped the poor. It was a rundown settlement house call Toynbee Hall. And there he served as a volunteer. He washed dishes, he mopped floors, he cleaned toilets, he took care of alcoholics, he visited prisons for the criminally insane, he helped with housing for the poor and worker education.

He didn’t give interviews. He didn’t write a book. He didn’t go on TV. And after working for forty years at Toynbee Hall, he was asked, “John, what have you learned from this place?” He paused for a moment, and then he said, “Humility.”

By the way, it is no small thing to say that his wife stayed at his side her entire life. John died in 2006 at the age of 91.

John Profumo is a preview of the new age of Shalom. He bears testimony to the God who specializes in new life out of death, new hope after final judgment.

I pray that more and more, Christ Church Cathedral is also a preview. I pray that more and more, you and I bear testimony to a despairing world...

... the testimony that despite all appearances to the contrary, light overcomes darkness, love overcomes hate, mercy overcomes judgment, and a little child – grown, crucified, risen and here – is leading us.

Amen.