

Quick! Don't Panic!

It has been nearly impossible in recent days to ignore yet another prediction about the end of the world. When such a thing becomes a running gag in a week's worth of "Doonesbury" comic strips, then you know it has escaped the Christian subculture ghetto and become an obsession even in the mainstream media. Just in case you missed it, an 89-year old retired civil engineer named Harold Camping, who owns a string of low-wattage radio and TV stations across the country, predicted that the Rapture would occur yesterday, May 21, with the subsequent end of the universe on October 21st of this year. While that latter day is my 51st birthday and therefore traumatic to me personally, I'm not taking Brother Camping's prediction seriously and neither are the vast majority of folks who've heard it.

But this begs a few questions. What, for example, is meant by the term "Rapture"? Other terms getting thrown around a lot in coverage of all this are variations on the word "Millennial" – what's that all about? Is Mr. Camping's prediction unique in Christian history (I suspect most of us know the answer to that one)? What does the Bible really say on this subject? Should we be worried? How, ultimately, should we respond?

I'm going to spend a little time this morning giving very, very brief answers to these questions but I'll let you in on a little secret right up top. In my opinion, which corresponds with the historical Christian consensus, predictions like Harold Camping's are mostly worthless. Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" character Zonker Harris gets it exactly right, bless him, when he refers his neighbor to Jesus' words in Matthew 24:36. The teaching of the Bible teaches us to live expectantly in regard to the return of Christ but never in panic or fear. Our Good Shepherd said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Instead, we are called to do everything we can to prepare for the Kingdom of God, the realization of the Beloved Community, by continuing Jesus' mission of bringing Good News to the poor and sight to the blind, being sure that we take the time to minister to the ones Jesus called "the least of these" on our journey to our own End Times.

A few words first about Harold Camping and his predictions. For those who might have been surprised when none of his vision manifested itself yesterday, it should be noted that he had previously predicted the end of the world in September 1994. But he is not alone in his repeated attempts to derive the date of Judgment Day from the Scriptures. A Baptist preacher named William Miller attracted a substantial number of followers in the mid-Nineteenth Century with his predictions about the end times, boldly published under the title Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year 1843. The result was an event still known by historians and some Christians as the "First Great Disappointment." Undeterred, Miller revised his prediction to the date of October 22, 1844, which led to the "Second Great Disappointment." Nevertheless, Miller was so compelling a leader that thousands of Christians continued in the Millerite camp which eventually gave rise to the Adventist movement of which our brothers and sisters in the Seventh Day Adventist church which shares our space are the spiritual heirs. I have a hard time ringing up William Miller or Harold Camping as dismissible crack-pots when predictions like theirs stir up enough interest in the Scriptures to engender such admirable denominations. Of course, one must also remember that the Branch Davidians of David Koresh and Waco fame were also direct spiritual descendents of the Millerites and that for every peaceful and loving group focused on End Times speculations, such as the Shakers or the

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Plymouth Brethren, there are also dangerous cults like Heaven's Gate or Jim Jones' People's Temple.

But while an overly narrow focus on the End of Things may produce unhealthy results, we must recognize that this is a normal human interest and that, indeed, both Jesus and Paul had a fair number of things to say about Judgment Day and that in this they were following in a rich prophetic tradition. It is from Paul's earliest letters, those to the Thessalonians, that we get the beginnings of the idea of "Rapture." In a correspondence that mostly deals with the then-common expectation among followers of Jesus that he would make his return soon, Paul tries to soothe the fears of his friends in Thessalonica about those who've believed but died with this prediction: "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever." The word Paul uses in Greek for "caught up" was translated into Latin by Jerome as "rapiemur," from the root of which we get English words like "rapids, ravish, rape" and "rapture." Those who expected this Scripture to be fulfilled yesterday literally anticipated being "caught up in the clouds."

This belief in a literal Rapture is part of a whole system of theories about the End of the World or Eschatologies, literally "the study of the end of things." You will hear preachers, scholars and other religious thinkers throwing around phrases like "premillennial eschatology," "postmillennial eschatology" or "amillennial eschatology." These three schools of thought all connect the end of all things with some sort of millennium – a thousand years in which Christ may or may not physically reign on Earth – but they can't agree on whether that will come before the Rapture, after the Rapture, on both sides, or at all. My friend and former Church History professor, Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard, gave a one paragraph primer in a recent publication: "Millennial theories abound. Preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney were postmillennialists who believed that Jesus would return after a thousand years of spiritual and social renewal nurtured by a revived church. Later revivalists like Dwight L. Moody and Billy Graham turned to premillennialism, the idea that Jesus will return before his thousand-year earthly reign including the Rapture of true believers, a Great Tribulation, and Satan's ultimate defeat at Armageddon. Historicist premillennialists reject pretribulation rapture while books like Left Behind promote a dispensational approach to the "times and seasons" but with differences regarding Rapture before, during or after the Great Tribulation. Amillennialists suggest that millennial language is merely symbolic, not literal." Got that? I have been a part of churches earlier in my life that took this sort of thing very seriously and arguments about pre- or post-millennialism could cause serious breaches in fellowship.

This sometimes bewildering array of theories stems primarily from an obsession with and general misunderstanding of some books and passages in the Scriptures that we know as Apocalypse. While this word in popular culture has come to mean a terrible catastrophe, up to and including the end of the world, its literal meaning in Greek was "the lifting of the veil," and it referred to literature that revealed the secrets of God. We immediately associate the Book of Revelation and Daniel with this genre and there are also apocalyptic passages in the Gospels and

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in the books of Zechariah and 2nd Esdras, which we will be studying on Wednesday at “Soup, Salad, and Soul” (paid commercial announcement). The important thing to remember about these books and passages is that they were never meant to be read or heard literally. They are expressions of important ideas in fanciful metaphorical terms. If they had been written in the past hundred years, we might call them science fiction or fantasy. Nearly all express the truth that God, the God of Israel and the Abba of Jesus, is in charge of the universe no matter what evil may befall the community of believers. Ultimately, these books say, God triumphs over evil, death and destruction and so believers have solid reason to hope in the worst of times.

We should not be surprised by the idea that these sections of the Bible are written in imaginative language. Yes, many parts of the Bible are to be taken literally. “Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy” – these are all good examples of Holy Writ that mean exactly what they say. But Jesus was not Bread, nor Water, nor a vine and we are not branches, at least not in the literal sense. We use metaphorical language to address big concepts all the time. And when it comes to the things of God, our poor human construct of language is stretched past its breaking point. The mind of the creature cannot comprehend the full reality of the Creator, although we are called to understand as much of God as we can. And so we turn to words that we know cannot capture the whole truth to speak of God and the things of God. So it was with the books of Apocalypse. Added to that universal truth was the fact that the things they were trying to express, that God was greater than the Empire, for example, could have gotten them in very serious trouble. And so the writers used code words that would have been immediately understandable to their intended audiences but not as much to any unfriendly interceptor. All cultures have these words and they fade from use pretty quickly. In 2000 years, who's going to remember who I meant by The Governorator? I might as well be talking about the Beast with Seven Horns!

As I mentioned, even the Gospels contain passages of Apocalyptic thought. Jesus himself used the genre when talking with his disciples about the End Times, not so much, I think, to obscure his meaning but rather because as a human he didn't have any better way to describe the unfolding plan of God. When questioned about the End of All Things, I will invariably turn to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:36, as did that notable theologian Zonker Harris: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Both before and after that verse, Jesus answers his disciples' questions about the End of the Age with all sorts of Apocalyptic, metaphorical language that Rapture-plotters have used ever since to create their scenarios. Some of the phrases will sound familiar: “wars and rumors of wars... famines and earthquakes in various places... false prophets... desolating sacrilege... false Messiahs... the sun will be darkened... the stars will fall from heaven... the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven...” and so forth.

But if we get caught up in the horrific nature of some of these images, we forget the most important things. There are always wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes and false religious leaders. There always have been and there always will be. Things may be tough from time to time, in other words, but we can finally count on the Son of Man, the One sent by God, to bring salvation to those who look for it. God is greater than all of these things, whether in heaven or on earth, and God's purpose is reconciliation of all things to Godself. It is much easier to hear this in another saying of Jesus concerning the end – “Do not let your hearts be troubled.

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Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." I have always loved that word from Jesus and I also loved it in another work of fanciful writing about the great truths in the universe, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien, as I'm sure many of you know, was a devout Catholic believer and his work is full of references to the Bible in general and the Gospel in particular. Professor Tolkien appropriated those words of Jesus for the great Elf-Queen Galadriel who delivers them to the weary and grief-stricken members of the Fellowship of the Ring after the fall of Gandalf, their wizard companion. Ultimately, the members of the Fellowship face death and betrayal and unimaginable hardship. Their quest is successful and the forces of evil are turned back but victory is incomplete. Traces of evil remain in their world and some things that are good dwindle and fade away. So it shall ever be in this mortal world but do not let your hearts be troubled. Our God has the final say and our God is love.

Jesus promised that there was a place prepared for those who believed in him and followed his path. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places," he said. I do not look for a great mansion in the sky, myself, but I do trust in the deeper reality of Jesus' words. However death might seek to claim me, I rely on the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, whatever form that may take. I don't panic when the calendar turns to Y2K or to May 21, 2011, or to the Mayans' dreaded 2012. There is a place prepared for me. The Lord of All is my rock, my shelter in the time of storm. My heart is not troubled.

But what does give me pause, if not trouble, is what Jesus had to say at the end of our reading this morning: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." This passage brings me up short because I don't think that the Body of Christ has done a very good job of living it out and I include myself in that. I think of the things that Jesus did that his followers considered mighty works – the healings, the feedings – and I wonder, why are we not doing greater works than those? In some respects, we are, of course, but we could be doing so much more. Could I, could we live our lives in such a way as to spend less on consuming and discarding things we don't really need and using more of our resources to help others? Could we as a majority Christian nation, the most powerful nation on Earth, be doing more in these regards? If we spent just a quarter of what we spend as a country each year on weapons of war and far-flung troops to address hunger and illiteracy in the world, those problems could be wiped out. What if we spent a like sum on medical research and education? Would we already have the cure to cancer? Would malaria and AIDS be controlled? Would the epidemics of obesity and diabetes dwindle away? What kind of world could we have today if we spent less on selfish desires and on protecting what we have from those who have not and more on making sure that everyone had enough? Wouldn't that glorify God?

The section of the Gospel According to Matthew that deals with the End Times is quite long; a total of two chapters. It ends with the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats. I'm sure I

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scarcely need to remind you of the particulars. Jesus tells his disciples of the day when the Son of Man will come in glory to judge the nations. The people are divided like sheep and goats; one group on his left, one group on his right. The ones who are blessed? They are the ones who feed the hungry, clothe the naked and help the sick, the strangers, the prisoners. The others are punished. Again, it's apocalyptic language, although the truth behind the metaphor is clearer than most. I'm not convinced that Jesus meant that we should expect a massive lineup of all humanity at once before a physical throne and it's easier for me to process the idea of eternal punishment for some as metaphor than as literal reality. But the core truth is clear for all to hear. Our fidelity to God's calling on us is measured in how we treat the vulnerable ones among us. Just before this, Jesus has told a parable about servants entrusted with money by their employer. The ones who use it wisely are praised – those who fail to do so are dismissed. It is clear to me that when Jesus talked about the End of Time, the important things to him were not where and when and how angels would come and defeat demons but rather what the people of God were doing to bring this world as close to God's loving intent of Shalom for all as possible.

He also said in that long discussion of the End that we must be prepared for it at any time. All of the signs and predictions, he said, are immaterial. "Keep awake, therefore," he said, "for you know neither the day nor the hour." We should live our lives as if the Rapture, the Parousia, the Apocalypse or whatever you want to call it, was coming tomorrow. I'm not talking about selling everything or giving away your car or going up to a mountain top to pray. I'm talking about the things that Jesus told us to do – make peace with your sister, love your enemy, feed the hungry. I tell you plainly, my friends, my heart is not troubled about my fate. I know in whom I have believed. And I know that there is nothing that I or any of us can do to earn the love of God for it is a free gift. But my heart is grieved when I consider how many times I have hurt others or missed an opportunity to bless others because I was so focused on my own desires. If you will pardon my use of apocalyptic imagery for a moment, when the end comes and I stand before the throne of God, I know that all my memories of failure and misdeed will burn my soul like everlasting fire. But I also know that I will be forgiven, wrapped in the love of God. I just want to give God as many opportunities as possible to say to me, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

So, that's my take on all the Rapture brouhaha of this past week. Those Rapture predictions are based on some very shaky interpretations of Scriptures but if they get people thinking about the things of God and how they are living, then it's not all bad. But let me give the last word to my old professor, Bill Leonard. He wrote, "For now, let's keep last things last... if there is an ounce of Jesus in any of us, let's opt out of the Rapture and stay right here to the bitter end, because there is still justice to be done and too much good to be accomplished to forsake this world, even in Jesus' name. For Jesus' sake let's stay behind, loving God with all our hearts, and if we can muster it, loving our neighbors as ourselves. What Rapture!" Amen.