

“Signs of the End in the Age of Pandemic?”

Luke 21:25-36

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Last month, I received a curious phone call from out of the blue. An old friend--a member of a church I pastored over thirty years ago--had been having a serious discussion with some family members. Trying to make some sense out of a confluence of recent events afflicting our planet: wildfires devastating much of the continent of Australia, swarms of locusts descending upon Africa, destroying much of its agriculture, and now a viral pandemic sweeping across the entire globe, threatening to wipe out millions, they wondered whether these afflictions of biblical proportions were the fulfillment of the book of Revelation and its prophecies pointing to the end of the world. In the middle of their discussion, a lightbulb went off in my friend's head and he said, "I know, I'll ask Dave! I'm sure he might have some answers for us?" hence, the reason for his phone call.

I quickly reassured him that I did not think so, that after years studying and teaching on the book of *Revelation*, I was convinced the disasters described in it did not point to the END TIMES so much as the time in which it was WRITTEN. Of course, tradition has ascribed it to the disciple John. The Roman empire had swarmed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and burned down its great temple after quashing a Jewish revolt. Christians, during that period, had expected Jesus to return "with power" and conquer Rome before inaugurating a "new age." But the unexpected had occurred- Rome had conquered Jesus's homeland INSTEAD. John's revelation which he received while imprisoned on the island of Patmos was intended to remind the Early Church that God and justice would ultimately prevail, and if amidst all their suffering and persecution they held closely to their faith and persevered to the bitter end, a great reward then awaited them. Hence, this book was intended to be, not a book about PREDICTIONS but rather a book of CONSOLATION AND HOPE.

The late Sylvia Browne was a so-called psychic who predicted in her 2004 book *Prophecy: What the Future Holds for You* and again in her 2008 book *End of Days* that "by 2020 we'll see more people than ever wearing surgical masks and rubber gloves in public, inspired by an outbreak of a severe pneumonia-like illness that attacks both the lungs and the bronchial tubes and is ruthlessly resistant to treatment. This illness will be particularly baffling in that, after causing a winter of absolute panic, it will seem to vanish completely until ten years later, making both its source and its cure that much more mysterious." Of course, like the famed psychic Jean Dixon years before her, she made hundreds of prophetic pronouncements—almost all of them a mixture of both truths and falsehoods that never came to pass. Still, as even a blind squirrel will chance upon an acorn every now and then, so are these prognosticators of future events remembered for the one in a hundred that bears some semblance to an actual current event.

Christianity has itself had its share of doomsday proponents using scripture to draw vivid maps of what the future held. About a decade ago, Harold Camping--the president of Family Radio, a popular Christian radio station, made the prediction that Jesus would return on a certain day and in anticipation of its fulfillment, he, along with many of his followers, made preparations for the big event. Throughout the country, billboards proclaimed the news that Jesus was on his

way while people passed out leaflets on street corners to alert people to be ready. As the sun set on that fateful day in May, there were a number of disappointed Christians who had fervently believed that by 6:00 that evening, they were going to be raptured up and taken to heaven by Jesus Christ himself. However, when the world DIDN'T end as promised, many people who had given up their earthly possessions were left with nothing. One woman, who never lived to see the day, even left most of her \$300,000 estate to Camping's organization to the shock of her family who received almost nothing.

The day after, Camping said he was flabbergasted that his prediction had not come true, having made a similar prediction back in 1994 which ALSO failed to pan out. He said that he was looking for answers and that he'd be in prayer and consultation with friends about it. The following day, he revised his prediction by saying he had found an error in his calculations and that the end of the world would NOW take place five months later. Once again, the date came and went as every other day has since the beginning of time with Mr. Camping finally having to admit that from now on it would be better for him to stay out of the prophecy business. Apparently, despite his expertise on the Bible, he had not read where it states how NO ONE knows the time or the season when the Son of Man shall return in glory- NOT EVEN CHRIST HIMSELF.

Almost a century ago, a newspaper as venerable as *The New York Times* devoted front page coverage for several days straight on Robert Reidt, a 33-year-old German house painter from Long Island. A follower of Seventh-day Adventism and calling himself the "Apostle of Doom," Reidt had set the Day of Judgment as Friday, Feb. 6, 1925. Only days earlier, he had sold nearly all his possessions and was holed up in a ramshackle little hut along with twelve of his followers, his wife, and four of his children. He predicted that at midnight on that date, 144,000 select persons would be transported to heaven with a short stop on the planet Jupiter for, as he said, "the holy shall not travel on the Sabbath." The rest who were not taken would perish the following week from fire, disease, hailstone, and pestilence. As midnight approached, the media crowded into his small shack while Reidt himself sat at the kitchen table, listening to a jazz band on his brand-new radio. When the time of departure came, nothing happened. He subsequently concluded that nothing was GOING to happen that evening and later said that a sign from heaven HAD in fact appeared, but due to the brightness of the camera flashbulbs going off to capture the historic moment, they had missed it. A few weeks later, he was back painting houses and hanging wallpaper.

It's easy to laugh at this kind of Christian zaniness and yet even someone as rational as MYSELF can get caught up in it. When I was a young Christian back in 1973, I became an avid listener of Family Radio and Harold Camping's Bible teachings. Like millions of others, I TOO read Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and believed that the return of Christ would occur at any moment. One Sunday night, I found myself driving two hours through northern New Jersey to visit a small church where the movie *A Thief in the Night* was being shown. This low-budget film was about people waking up to discover that large numbers of Christians had suddenly been transported (or raptured) out of the world and they were now left behind because they'd refused to heed the Bible's warnings. The movie's theme song was "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" which ended with the lines:

Life was filled with guns and war,

*And everyone got trampled on the floor,
I wish we'd all been ready,
Children died, the days grew cold,
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold,
I wish we'd all been ready,
There's no time to change your mind,
How could you have been so blind,
The Father spoke, the demons dined,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.*

It was one of the most frightening movies I had ever seen, FAR worse than *Night of the Living Dead* ever was because I thought this was real and I didn't want to be left behind MYSELF. Yet, despite the failure of Camping's predictions, both he and his theology will CONTINUE to enjoy great appeal as author Tim LeHaye has clearly demonstrated with almost twenty million copies of his popular Left Behind novels having been sold since 1995.

Prophecies of gloom and doom have been very commonplace in human history, ESPECIALLY during times of great social and economic upheaval. We learn that when they fall short, the doomsayers almost never admit that there were wrong but they become even MORE adamant about the truth of their beliefs, employing various rationalizations to cover their failures. But such doomsday scenarios are not just limited to religious people- rightly or wrongly, there are SECULAR versions of it as well whether they involve overpopulation, resource depletion, nuclear winter, Y2K, solar flares, super volcanoes, and, of course, global warming. Sociologists say that such doomsday prognostication helps us to make sense of an often seemingly senseless and chaotic world. Because life can feel so threatening and even tragic, when problems become so big with no apparent solutions in sight, we find ourselves feeling so very helpless and vulnerable. However, when we believe that these events are part of a much LARGER plan, that they are moving towards some kind of final goal, then that helps us to find purpose and meaning in them. Instead of feeling confused or fearful about life, we then start to feel that no matter how chaotic or oppressive or evil the world may be, someone or something is actually in control and all will be made right in the end.

Of course, herein lies a large part of Christianity's appeal. Our faith tells us that things don't just happen haphazardly, that is, without any rhyme or reason, but that God is presently at work helping to shape events in the world and in human lives, that nothing occurs without God first "permitting" it to happen. This is called "divine providence" and it is a central tenet of our own Presbyterian and Reformed theology. This is why we study "eschatology" or the study of the Last Days or End Times, because it teaches us that God's reign will break into this world and ultimately transform it into something we are incapable of creating ourselves. What's more, we can be assured that it WILL come to pass, that nothing will be able to frustrate God's purpose behind it.

We can look at the long history of God's involvement with his people, the Jews, and see how behind it all, God was using them to prepare the way for the advent of the Messiah, for the coming of his own Son into the world. Then, when he was so cruelly and shamelessly put to death by the same people he had come to save, he was suddenly raised back to life again. Through this act, the ultimate power of sin and death was destroyed, guaranteeing the inevitable

defeat of Satan and his minions. Subsequently, at an appointed time known only to God, we are told that Christ will return for his church and take us all back to heaven with him where we shall enjoy his presence for all eternity. Then, all things shall be brought under his control and every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. All history as we now know it shall finally be brought to an end and an entirely NEW history will be begun. Just HOW that will happen and WHAT it will look like, how much is literal and how much is symbolic, we can only speculate. What we ARE assured is that at some time and in some form, what the Bible refers to as our “blessed hope” WILL occur. I suspect that the most basic truth it is trying to convey is that our peace and comfort is ultimately derived in knowing that in spite of the seemingly senseless and chaotic nature of life, above, beneath, and within all human events are the loving hands of One who holds us close to himself and promises to never let us go.

But what does our New Testament lesson--the lectionary text for this morning--have to do with all this. In Luke chapter 21, while teaching in the Temple, Jesus delivers a long discourse which deals with the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. With v. 25, he then moves on to describe what will come upon the world. Cosmic signs will occur in the sun, moon, stars, and sea. This will cause great fear among the people as the forces of the heavens are shaken loose. All of this will be a sign of the coming of the Son of Man on a cloud with power and great glory. In preparation for this event, Christ's followers are exhorted not to give in to the cares and snares of this life but rather to watch at all times, to live in expectation by remaining alert and praying they'll have the strength to withstand the day of judgment that will come with the arrival of the Son of Man. When that day shall come, no one knows, NOT EVEN CHRIST HIMSELF.

In light of this text and others like it, I believe there are lessons we can take from it. FIRST, where we might be critical of those who, like Harold Camping, would make silly predictions concerning the day of Christ's return, we CAN know with some assuredness that regardless of WHEN and even HOW this event will take place, Christ WILL return again. The Bible DOES say that Christ will one day gather up all his children unto himself and draw the curtain on history as we now know it to a close. Thus, I TOO affirm that at the end of time and history--WHATEVER that means and WHENEVER that takes place--that as Christ came among us the FIRST time as a helpless child in a manger in Bethlehem, he will return to earth a SECOND time, but THIS time in power and glory to establish once and for all his kingdom here on the earth.

However, UNTIL that day comes, we are to CONTINUE working towards establishing his kingdom of love and justice on the earth the same way we pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” Besides, when you consider all the horror and injustice in the world, from a plague that destroyed half of Europe during the Middle Ages to the carnage of two World Wars and a holocaust that systematically took the lives of six million Jews, it seems we can't help BUT believe that at some point, there WILL be a final reckoning, that true justice WILL be meted out to everyone, and THEN we shall enjoy eternity in the presence of our God. He will not only judge the earth but he will also inaugurate a new age of peace and justice wherein he promises to right all wrongs and create a world in which “he will wipe away all tears and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” as it says in Revelation. Therefore, we should always live as

though Christ's return is imminent, that TODAY is always the day of salvation.

And SECOND, simply because we affirm that at his return Christ will finally fulfill his kingdom here on earth, this is not an excuse for us to stop trying to reflect the same kind of commitments that characterize Christ's kingdom. On the contrary, it gives us every incentive to work even HARDER on behalf of his kingdom--to never stop trying to alleviate suffering and privation and injustice wherever we see it--for his intention will be to complete the work which we, his church, will have already begun. For now, this world is currently our home; it is the home God made for us and pronounced as good, the home he has blessed us with and instructed us to take care of. Unless we see our present world in this way, we can never be adequate caretakers or stewards over this creation or towards one another.

Let me conclude by saying that the irony for me was that on May 21, 2011, at the exact same hour Harold Camping had predicted Christ would return and the world would end, I happened to be performing a wedding in the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church in Waterloo, Iowa. At the very instant that people were expecting to depart from this earth, I was helping to cement a love relationship and preparing a couple for the beginning of their new lives together here on this same earth. Where the followers of Harold Camping thought only of doom, OUR focus that afternoon was entirely on HOPE and the FUTURE and THAT is what the people of God must be about. Christ never asks us to forsake the world. Rather, he summons us to engage it head on with all the hope and joy and love and faith we can muster, remembering that though the earth is not our FINAL destination, it REMAINS for the moment our ONLY home till his return. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, help us to keep our eyes focused firmly on the future and NOT on the past, to keep our hopes directed toward your Son and the task at hand and NOT on the specious claims of some man or woman who may claim a special knowledge. Help us to truly know that in spite of how overwhelming life can often feel, you are behind it all, and how THROUGH it all, we remain safely and securely in your care. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.