

“Beware”

Mark 13:1- 8, November 19, 2006
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Mark 13:1- 8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Prayer.

The first hint can be found
by those who seek Him faithfully
of the deeper, more profound meaning
of Jesus' words:

“but the end is still to come.”

“This is but the beginning,”

Jesus assures his faithful,
“This is but the beginning
of the birth pangs.”

When given a choice
between
believing in the end
or
believing in a beginning,
human nature tends to look to the end.
This is November,
the harvest is ended
the barn is full and the doors are closed
its time for the winter snows to
cleanse the landscape

of the last symbols of life.

This is November
and the liturgical year is one week shy
of its final consummation.

This is November
and this is the week of Thanksgiving;
a time when we look back
from whence we have come,
recognize that it is only
by the grace of God
that, thankfully,
we have been gathered together again
to the harvest table of Thanksgiving.

When given a choice
between
believing in the end
or
believing in a beginning,
human nature tends to look to the end.
Apocalypse fever rampages
everywhere one turns.¹

¹ Morris, R. C., *Apocalypse Fever The Perennial Return of the End Times*, Weavings XXI:6, 37.

Well over a third of the American population believes the world will end within fifty years.² Jack Van Impe, founder of one of the world's largest evangelical Christian ministries devoted to prophecy, applies an almost literal view of Revelation to a terror wielding modern context. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in their violent "Left Behind" series of books portrays a Jesus that appeals to the masses but has little connection with scripture. The rapture is elevated above resurrection. God is remade into a vengeful, arrogant, xenophobic, obsessed with power, unforgiving lord. Jesus is described striding across the valley of Armageddon with his white robes red to the knees with blood; his enemies explode at the sight of him.³ Fundamentalist Christians from all over the world gather in Jerusalem every year for the autumn festival of Sukkot. When Jesus returns

- any year now -
- on Sukkot, as they believe -

they want to be at ground zero.⁴

When given a choice between believing in the end or believing in a beginning, human nature tends to look to the end.

² According to a 2000 Newsweek poll. See <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/at2000/stories/religion/>

³ Douglas, D. S., Beyond All Worlds Our End and Our Beginning, Weavings, XXI:6, 37.

⁴ Morris, R. C., Ibid.

It has been going on for many millenniums, rooted in Jewish history. Isaiah and Jeremiah Ezekiel and Daniel all looked to the impending destruction of an unfaithful people and made a clarion call to repentance filled with visions of how life might be lived in the absence of God's grace. Indeed, the world came to an end twice over when first, Assyria then secondly, Babylon laid waste the land and kidnapped Judaism into foreign Exile.

Many early Christians employed selective memory from the words of Jesus and took their cue from Jewish roots to believe in an imminent end of the world. Indeed, the world came to an end when Rome crushed the failed rebellion in 70 AD and razed Jerusalem to ashes. It came to an end when the Simon Bar Kokhba revolt was crushed in 132 AD, when the western Roman Empire fell four centuries later to barbarian invaders. Failed predictions of the end had pinnacle with religious furor that gripped Christianity at the dawn of the first millennium, and again in 1033 AD, a thousand years after the death of Jesus.

Flagellant processions,
severe fasting,
and penitential scourging,
all took place in anticipation of the terror
of a wrathful Last Judgment.⁵

When given a choice
between
believing in the end
or
believing in a beginning,
human nature tends to look to the end.
Five hundred years later
and our own Martin Luther
the great reformationist
looked to the advance of Muslim armies
into Hungary and Austria
as a sign of
the impending end of the world
an encouragement for
purifying the church before the Lord's return.
This belief
was central to almost all that he did.⁶
A little more than 250 years after Luther
in mid nineteenth century America,
Baptist layman William Miller,
carefully computed from his literal reading of
the Bible
the exact date
of Christ's cataclysmic return in October,
1844.
Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and others
abandoned farms, sold homes, left employ-
ment
to propagate the gospel of the last days.

⁵ Fulton, R., *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary*: 800-1200, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

⁶ Edwards, Jr., M., "Frontline" as found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/martinluther.html>

In the wake of the inevitable "Great Disappointment"
as it was called
was spawned a number of new religious
groups,
Jehovah Witness and Seventh-day Adventist,
who reinterpret prophesies of the end
and make them central to their faith vision.⁷
Embarrassingly failed predictions
tended to only fan the apocalyptic fires of religious furor.
In the mid 1800s in Britain,
a disaffected Glasgow preacher named John Nelson Darby
snipped and twisted biblical prophecy into literal prediction
inventing what came to be called
"premillennial dispensationalism"
giving birth to the word: "rapture."
His rapture and tribulation scenario
continues to hold hostage to much of evangelical America today.
Though the word "rapture"
is nowhere to be found in the Bible,
millions have been led to believe that the Bible
actually predicts the rapture and the violent seven-year tribulation to follow.
This is more than just nonsense.
This is heresy and idolatry.⁸

Jesus says, "Beware."
"Beware that no one leads you astray."
Beware the one who comes in my name and says, "I am he!"
When you hear
of wars and rumours of wars,
do not be alarmed.
"This is but the beginning
of the birth pangs."
Birth pangs.

⁷ Wright, W. M., *End Times Meditations at the Close of a Year*, Weavings, XXI:6, 34.

⁸ Douglas, D. S., *ibid.*

Instead of believing in the end,
 Jesus is inviting us this day
 to go against the trends
 and to believe in the beginning;
 God's new creation
 that always follows an end,
 God's new creation
 that is rooted in resurrection not tribulation
 that looks to peace not war
 that anticipates justice
 that stretches the Kingdom of God into every
 nook and cranny of this world.

Instead of believing in the end
 look to the apocalypse
 - which literally means
uncovering,
revealing.
 Look to the apocalypse
 for the uncovering of this new age
 for the revealing of God's hand and will
 even as we face some great transitions in our
 time:
 global warming,
 changing energy resources,
 life- altering discoveries in biology and
 medicine,
 cultural clashes in a truly global community,
 weapons of terror and destructions
 poverty and starvation.
 The reality of these apocalypses
 and the hand of God guiding the faithful
 will only become clearer in subsequent
 decades.

God's world is one of continual re- creation.
 It is like the the birth pangs that results
 in a new heaven and a new earth⁹
 as Isaiah promised;

⁹ Isaiah 65:17

a time when a new Jerusalem descends to
 earth
 a renewed and transformed order will be real-
 ized
 and the kings of the earth will bring their glory
 into it¹⁰
 as John envisioned in Revelation.
 Saint Paul correctly recognized
 God's new re- creation
 in his own time
 even as the present form of this world is
 passing away.¹¹

A new day is dawning.
 God is calling;
 and we pray for eyes
 that can look beyond the peril of today
 to see possibility of tomorrow.

Beware the one who threatens;
 but,
 embrace the One who calls
 who saves,
 who gives light
 to the dawning of a new day.
 Behold,
 today's apocalypse
 is a new beginning,
a time to remember and move on,
time to believe what love is bringing,
laying to rest the pain that's gone.

For

*Christ is alive, and goes before us
 to show and share what love can do.
 This is a day of new beginnings;
 our God is making all things new.¹²*

Amen.

¹⁰ Revelation 21:24

¹¹ I Corinthians 7:31

¹² "This Is a Day of New Beginnings" Words by
 Brian Wren, 1978, Revelation 21:5. Music by
 Carlton R. Young, 1984. Hope Publishing
 Company, 1987.