

Heads Up

Sermon by Dr. Jim Gilchrist

November 29, 2009



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Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36).

I said last week that religion is a marketplace phenomenon in America. People shop around for the services they want at a price they're willing to pay, which often means looking for a bargain. I mentioned the prosperity gospel, the perennial favorite that says God wants us to be prosperous here and now, and then we automatically go to heaven, regardless of what we did or did not do for the people around us. There's always a demand for that kind of preaching – for the obvious reason that it's so self-serving. I went to Barnes and Noble last week, and as if to make the point, there on the best-seller shelf was the latest offering from Joel Osteen: *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor*. Do you hear? It's all about you.

The problem with the prosperity gospel is what it leaves out. Does God bless people? Of course. Do people who work hard and use their talents wisely often prosper and reap the rewards of their efforts, and is that a good thing? Sure. But the prosperity gospel stops there. Yes, it says you ought to give something back, but pretty paltry offerings will do. Give away enough to satisfy your conscience, but not enough to make a dent in your lifestyle, and God will be pleased. In fact, God will reward you even more! None of those annoying prophets to worry about. No responsibility for the poor or the sick or the stranger. No sheep and goats to be sorted come Judgment Day. No sacrifice. No cross to bear. Just blessings galore. It's all about you.

It's not hard to see why the prosperity gospel is so popular. Today's text for Advent conjures up another popular segment of the religious market in America: the one that's obsessed with the end of the world. The phenomenal success of Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series points to the size of that market. It's worth hundreds of millions of dollars in book sales and contributions to radio and television shows. The message is that the end is near, and you'd better get ready so that when Jesus comes to gather up the saved, you won't be left behind.

Now any Christian ought to be inviting people to come to Jesus. Presbyterians on the whole are not very good at that, and we need to do better. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, then Christ is the way people come to God, the way we know God most fully and learn to live for God. Inviting people into the fullness of life in Christ needs to be at the center of our church priorities, and we'll talk more about that in days to come.

But there are lots of problems with the end-of-the-world style of evangelism that appeals to so many in our culture. In fact, it has a lot in common with the prosperity gospel.

For one thing, it can be all about you too. The message is, don't be left behind. Jesus is coming, and he will cast into hell anyone who doesn't believe in him; so if you don't want to go to hell, or be left behind in the Great Tribulation, you'd better come to Jesus now. You hear the appeal? It's self-interest again: Come to Jesus or bad things will happen to you.

Is that really the best way to share the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ? Jesus says the whole point of living is to love God and our neighbors. But love means caring for the other. If you come to Jesus because you don't want to be left behind, isn't it still all about you?

If we're going to live for Jesus, we need to love like Jesus. We need to get past the preoccupation with self that is the center of our sin. You could imagine all sorts of people who come to Christ out of self interest, and think that they're saved just because they've said some magic words about believing in Jesus. But Jesus himself tells us it doesn't work that way. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," he says, "but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). And the will of the Father is that we love God and other people, not just with our words, but in our actions.

Some people who call themselves Christians really don't care much about the rest of the world. And that points to another reason the end-of-the-world message is so popular: it can be just another brand of low-cost religion. If the world is about to end, there's not much point in working to improve the world, is there? Why rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic? Why fight poverty, or hunger, or injustice, or anything else that has social implications, when society won't be around much longer? And obviously there's no point in caring about

the environment. If the world is going to end soon, the environment is doomed anyway, so trying to save the environment is just plain silly.

You see how convenient that is? I can save all kinds of time and money and effort if I don't have to pay attention to these big issues. In a peculiar way, the end of the world is a very convenient thing. As long as I won't be left behind – as long as I think Jesus will come and get me in the Rapture before things get too bad – I don't have to worry about making the world a better place. I can just sit around and wait for Jesus to beam me up.

The fact that it can be all about me, and save me lots of time and money and effort, helps explain why the *Left Behind* version of Christianity is as popular as the prosperity gospel – not to mention the sensationalism of thinking we could be living in the world's last days. Even for secular people, that sensational idea sells books and brings people to the movies, as witness the current silliness about 2012 and the ancient Mayan calendar. I don't know about you, but I'm still making plans for 2013. Remember the coming of the year 2000, and Y2K?

If there's a lot of self-serving silliness wrapped around the end of the world, what does Jesus really have to say about it? Essentially, he says three things.

First, he says, the world *will* end one day. Even for people who are not religious, that's clear enough. Scientists say that, if we don't get hit by an asteroid or something else in the meantime, the sun will burn out one day, exploding in a gigantic fireball that will consume the inner planets of our solar system. That won't happen for another five billion years, so you don't need to change any lunch plans, but it will almost certainly happen if the earth is not destroyed in some other way.

The New Testament has some images of the end of the world, especially at the end of the gospels and in the Book of Revelation. The trouble is, the language is so symbolic, and there are so many ways to read it, that it's hard to know what's meant to be taken literally and what's meant to be a metaphor. Jesus says the end will come one day, but figuring out the details is pure speculation.

Which brings us to the second thing Jesus says about the end of the world: namely, that nobody knows when it will be. Jesus said, when he walked this earth, that not even he knew when it will be. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). All this obsession with signs of the times, and the

claims people make to know that the end is near, is sheer speculation. And it's nothing new. People have always thought the end was just around the corner. You can see it in the New Testament itself, and every generation since has imagined that it might be the last. Needless to say, 2000 years of guessing has all been wrong, so you'd think a little humility would be in order about claiming to know that the end is near.

But the third thing Jesus says is that we need to be ready, precisely because we don't know when the end will come. What Jesus means by being ready is not sitting around waiting to be beamed out of this world. What he means is that when he comes again, he expects to find us doing the things God commands.

And that means taking care of God's people. It's ironic: many of those who claim the world is about to end use speculation about things we cannot know to avoid responsibility for the things we know quite clearly from the Bible. We are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, in all the concrete ways Jesus and the prophets tell us. There's no ambiguity about that. And precisely because we cannot know when the world will end, Jesus says we need to be ready at all times.

All of this brings us finally to the great truth so many people miss about the end of the world. That truth is, it really doesn't matter when the end will come. It matters not at all, because our task is the same. We are to be doing what Jesus tells us to do, day in and day out, year in and year out, until the end. If that's the case, what difference does it make when the end will come?

In one sense, of course, we do know when the world will end. As far as each one of us is concerned, this world will end at the end of our own life. As we've said before, the mortality rate among human beings is 100%. But if that's true, then the main point of the Advent message about Christ's coming again is true, no matter what. Whether Christ comes to all of us at once, or we go to him one by one, we will see Jesus soon enough. Then the question will be, are we ready to meet him? Are we ready to stand before the Son of Man?

Jesus says, Heads up. Be alert, because you don't know when your time will come. And that's true, isn't it? None of us knows when the end will come for us. All we know for certain is that it will come. So let's be ready. Let's not waste time speculating about what we cannot know, and focus instead on what we do know: that we belong to God, that we are accountable to God for the way we live, and that we need to be ready for Jesus at any time.