

KEEP ON THE ALERT

When I was a pastor in the South Alabama Presbytery, I was assigned to work on the presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry. The committee was moderated by a pastor named Joe Johnson. One day, before one of the committee meetings, Joe was telling a story about one of his parishioners. This was right after the publication of the books in the Left Behind series. This person offered to loan Joe a copy of the book Left Behind. Joe said, "I have a stack of books on my desk this high. I don't think I'll have time to read it anytime soon." The man responded, "Don't you think you should move it towards the top of the stack? It's a pretty important book." Joe said, "You know, I don't think so. I think it's a mistake to be preoccupied with the second coming of Christ when we haven't fully lived in to the implications of Christ's first coming."

You know I think there's something to that. In our passage today there's a lot of apocalyptic language and imagery. There's a lot of talk about signs in the heavens and on earth. Apocalyptic language has always captured the imagination of people. In every generation there is a great deal of curiosity about exactly when the end times will come. Just look at a sampling of all the end time propositions that have been put forward over the years. In the 1840's, William Miller, a founder of the Adventist movement, claimed that the world would end sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. Now, remember that March 21 is the spring equinox- it's the first day of spring. There are reports that during that time people spent nights on their rooftops, scanning the heavens for signs of the coming end. A number of people went bankrupt, foolishly spending what they had, believing they wouldn't need it. Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church, proclaimed that Jesus would return by the year 1891.

We're not immune to this even today. Do you remember the book The Late, Great Planet Earth? It was written in the 1970's by a man named Hal Lindsey. Lindsey predicted that the world would come to an end before the year 2000. Obviously he was wrong. Harold Camping is an interesting figure. Mr. Camping has several times predicted the end of the world. Most recently he predicted it would end on May 21, 2011. Each time he has been wrong he has moved the yardstick. I remember seeing a newspaper interview with him in the 1990s. At the time he was predicting that the world would end in about two weeks. I've always thought the interview in the paper was rather humorous. They asked him, "What if you are wrong?" He responded, "Obviously I'll be very disappointed." Okay, well, "I'm disappointed the world didn't end this week, but we'll set a new date and it will happen soon."

We seem to come up with ever more inventive ways to imagine an apocalypse. Every day it seems like the ice caps are melting faster, and there's a killer comet screaming towards the earth. The Mayans, the civilization who couldn't even predict their own demise, have predicted our demise. By the way, that date has passed too- it was in 2012. This idea has even worked its way into our popular literature and media. Look how many television shows there are out there with an apocalyptic theme. Several years ago, there was one named "Revolution", in which the world collapsed because some scientists

had discovered how to stop all of the electricity. The world completely collapsed. “The Walking Dead” is another example, very apocalyptic, dystopian world, in which your biggest danger isn’t the zombies- it’s the other people who survived with you. The collapse of civilization and the horrible world that exists afterwards is all throughout our culture.

I have a theory about these kinds of stories. I believe that they capture our imagination because they speak to our greatest fear – the fear of being out of control, the fear that the world is much larger than ourselves and we can’t control every aspect of it. I have seen people collapse into tears because their plans didn’t work out exactly the way they were supposed to work out. In the same vein we fear the apocalypse because it’s something we can’t control. So we write about it. We make apocalyptic predictions and create apocalyptic stories as a means of dealing with our fear about them.

While dealing with our fears is a good thing, I think to place too much emphasis on the apocalyptic imagery is to miss the real point of the story. I have news for you. Life is messy. It’s going to be messy. All of our plans are not going to work out the way that they are supposed to work out. That’s okay because the world is in God's hands. If the world were to end tomorrow – if that comet were to land on my head or the glaciers all melted and I drowned – what could I do about it? I mean honestly? What could I do? Where could I go? What safe harbor could I find? The only safe harbor is in Christ

There's an even more important question from a theological point of view. Why are we worried about it? It’s not that we shouldn’t make some plans to deal with the problems that are out in front of us, but why are we worried about an end that we can’t escape. After all, we claim to believe in eternal life. We claim to believe that we've been saved by Jesus. So why are we afraid of the end of the world? It won't be the end of us.

No, I think Jesus used this entry to try to make an entirely different point. I think the most important statement made in this passage comes in verse 34. It is variously translated as "be on your guard" or "keep on the alert". To me, if someone were to ask me the biggest difference between the mindset of the ancient church and the mindset of modern church this would be it. The early church had the sense that Jesus was coming back any old day now, so we had better be prepared for it to happen. In the modern church we have lost that sense because of so many years have passed and there have been so many false alarms and there have been so many crises. We’ve lost that sense that Jesus is just about to come back.

One of my favorite movies is the movie Groundhog Day. The premise of the movie is that the main character, Bill Murray, experiences the same day over and over. Every day he wakes up and it's Groundhog Day. At first he's confused by this, then he is frightened by it. After the initial shock he goes through a period of depression, and even tries to kill himself. Then he comes to the conclusion that there may be some advantages to this life. He can do whatever he wants and there are no consequences, because

tomorrow, he will wake up and it will be Groundhog Day again. However, he soon learns that there are limits even to this lifestyle.

Throughout the movie he has an interest in the main female character played by Andy McDowell. He decides to try to win her heart. So he asks if he can buy her a drink. When she agrees he notices the type of drink that she orders. The next day, when he tries again, he orders exactly the same type of drink. And it goes on like this – he changes little details each time they meet – each time getting a little bit closer to success. He gets to try over and over and over with the idea that eventually he will succeed. But it doesn't work, because he's not really building anything.

This is a great story. But it points a little bit to the human character. We do often act as if there's plenty of time – as if we will be able to correct whatever mistakes we make because of the promise the future holds. The fact is we don't know when the end of the world will come. No one knows the date or the time when that will happen. Even Jesus said that only the father knows. I want you to consider something. What would it be like if we lived our lives as if it could happen just any old time now? What would it be like if we thought every day might be our last? How would our lives change if we lived them as if the apocalypse were imminent? Would we be so worried about those bills that are on our desk to be paid? Would we be so worried about that report that was due to the boss? Would we be so worried about the program that we missed or what we have to fix for dinner tomorrow night? Would we be so worried about those things if we knew the time was coming?

Now, we don't know. We do have to prepare for the future because it might come, but it also might not. How would our lives be changed if we lived them as if the apocalypse were imminent and Jesus were coming back?

I really think this is what Jesus wants from us: to live our lives constantly on the alert for him to return, ready for him to come back the next moment- to be constantly at work, constantly tending his vineyard, waiting for the master to return. This is what the Christian life is supposed to be. The Christian life is supposed to be a life lived in anticipation that the master will return to inspect the servant's work. This is the word we should hear this morning. Keep on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life and that day catch you unexpectedly.