

THE END IS NEAR

This past week, at the second of three sessions in our Jewish-Christian Dialogue, my friend Ed Horne, senior pastor at the United Methodist Church, mentioned that he had discovered a website devoted to explaining the rapture.

Those who hold to the Doctrine of the Rapture believe that at some point in the future Jesus will descend from the skies, gather up all the faithful and take them off to heaven, while those who do not believe will be left behind here on earth. The bestselling *Left Behind* novels are fictionalized accounts of all this.

Well, I decided to check out the website Ed had mentioned for myself. It's known as *raptureready.com*. It's a very professionally done site, with some very intriguing materials. There's a quiz of sorts for checking your spiritual health to ascertain your chances of being left behind. There are numerous articles on subjects ranging from "God's 7,000 Year Plan for Mankind" (I'm not sure if they think God has a plan for women or not) to one called "God's Billionaires" (sorry, Trustees, they don't name names!) I didn't have time to read the article titled "The Dead Frog Report" or the one titled "Donuts in Heaven"—but I must admit the titles peaked my curiosity! The web site even has an online store, complete with raptureready t-shirts, beer steins, coffee mugs and the Rapture Ready Cookbook. I guess we now know what it means to say that no one will be hungry or thirsty or naked in heaven. There is even a section of the site called "The Post Rapture Survival Guide."

The survival guide is full of advice and analysis. Some of it is spiritual: "This manual," the write notes, "is about the survival of the soul. But it also has sections devoted to things political (the author doesn't seem to like the United Nations or the North American Free Trade Act) and economics (multi-national corporations are seen as precursors to the end of the world.) The survival manual also includes a very lengthy set of suggestions addressing health and safety concerns. The writer advises stocking up on food and water and gold (there will be no hard currency he predicts) and moving to a remote area. And finally, just for good measure, he recommends taking a good dose of multivitamins with antioxidants each day.

The website's most frequently visited section, apparently, is the Rapture Index, which is sort of an early warning system, pointing out events in the news which indicate that the rapture is close at hand, that the end of the world is near. The index, right at the moment, what with all the hurricanes, the earthquake and the war in Iraq, is at a very high level.

Christians today have a wide array of opinions about the rapture, not to mention the concept of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. After all, people have been predicting such things for the last two—thousand years.

Whole movements and denominations have arisen based on an emphasis on such beliefs. The raptureready website is just a high tech version of an ages old approach to the Bible and to Christian life.

But in the early years of the church, there was a fairly uniform understanding that Jesus was going to return, and that it could happen at any time. And that understanding, that belief, is reflected in our lesson this morning from First Peter. In fact, the whole letter is written in that context. As William Barclay writes: “From the beginning to the end of the letter the second coming is in the forefront of the writer’s mind . . . It is reasonable to suppose that I Peter . . . comes from the days when Christians vividly expected the return of [Jesus] at any moment.” (*Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter*, 162)

So it is that when Peter writes “The end of all things is near” (4:7) he means it quite literally. Rapture. Tribulation. The Apocalypse. The end of world. The second coming. Any and all of it might happen at any time out, any minute.

But there is a significant difference between Peter’s advice and that given by the folks at *raptureready.com*. Yes, the advice in both cases is all about being prepared for the possibility that Jesus could show up at any minute. But while the raptureready folks urge you to prepare by focusing on your own spiritual needs and by stocking up on essentials, Peter urged his readers to focus on the needs of others. The raptureready approach, in the end, is driven by fear, and results in a rather self-centered lifestyle. Peter’s approach, though, is motivated by love, and therefore it is generous and other-directed.

“Pray as you ought . . . ” he says, “Cherish and love one another . . . Be hospitable Serve each other . . . Be good stewards of God’s grace.”

That’s Peter’s advice. Not, tend to your own needs; rather, tend to the needs of others. Not focus on your own concerns, rather focus on the concerns of your neighbor.

Now, you might be thinking, why does this really matter anyway? I’m not even sure I believe in the rapture, or any sort of literal Second Coming.

But, whether you believe in a literal Second Coming or not is immaterial, the underlying reality remains the same—not one of us knows how long we will have in this life. And while that may sound a bit morose, it is nonetheless true. And so, whether we expect some dramatic end to history or not, the truth is clear: your time, your own personal allotment of days and weeks and years, is limited. As is mine. And in light of that, we are all faced with the same basic question: how will you use that time? Will you use it to stockpile canned tuna and dried fruit and multi-vitamins in some remote cave? Will you buy into the bumper sticker idea that “He who dies with the most toys wins?” Or will you work for the good of those

around you? Will you focus on your own material well being, or on the well-being, material, spiritual and emotional, of others?

I'm a lectionary preacher. The lectionary is an ecumenically prepared and recognized three-year cycle of scripture readings for use in weekly worship. Every Sunday is assigned from four to six lessons. So, on any given Sunday I have four to six choices for my preaching text. But this Sunday, I'm not preaching from one of the lectionary scripture texts. I didn't choose this lesson from First Peter, rather it was chosen by our Stewardship Committee as the theme for our annual Stewardship Campaign. No doubt it was chosen because of verse ten: "Like good stewards of God's manifold grace, serve one another with whatever gift each one of you has received."

When I first read the passage, though, and realized that it was in the context of Peter's teaching about the end of time, I thought, "Whoa! That's pretty heavy y stuff! What am I supposed to say about that? 'Guarantee your place in heaven tomorrow, by pledging here today?'"

But the more I thought about it the more I realized how very appropriate it is as a stewardship text. The more I considered its implications, the more I recognized it was a very wise choice indeed. Not because it implies some sort of threat. Your eternal destiny is NOT dependent on your financial giving. Nor for that matter on any of your good deeds. You are loved and accepted by God, and that love is a free gift. No, this is a perfect stewardship text because it states a very clear reality. Our time on earth is limited, and what we do with our resources, our time, our talents, our possessions, really does matter.

This past summer, as most of you know, our Youth Group's annual mission trip took us to Sarasota, Florida. There we worked with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

The Sarasota Habitat chapter is extremely well-organized and very well-run. They have built well in excess of 150 houses; they operate a used furniture store and a home improvement store, where gently used furniture and building materials are recycled to raise funds to put up even more houses.

The fifteen of us who went on the trip this year were given general guidance by some paid staff members. But the hands-on supervision for our efforts came from several gentlemen known as Orange Shirts. They were called that because on the worksites they wore orange so that they could be readily identified. Some of them had had professional building experience, but most of them were simply highly skilled amateurs. And all of the Orange Shirts were unpaid volunteers. They were all retired, and several of them were snowbirds. The guy I worked with was a retired chiropractor.

When we go on our mission trips I give everybody a faith-related question to think about during the day, and then at night we all get together and everyone gets to share their own answer.

One day I asked the group to think about this question: How and when have you experienced the presence of God?

That night as everybody piled into my room there was the usual joking and jostling for the most comfortable spots. But as folks began to settle down to answer the question, a hush of respectful silence fell over the space.

One young person spoke of the beauty of the ocean, and how the constancy of the waves reminded him of God. Another spoke of a time his parents had given him a second chance. Still another spoke of Sunday mornings in this meetinghouse.

Near the end of our time one of the young women offered her thoughts. “You know,” she said, “I think I felt God’s presence at the worksite today. I mean, here are all these old retired guys who could be out playing golf or tennis, and what are they doing? Helping out poor people who need a house to get one.”

We all nodded our heads. We knew just what she meant. And I turned to one of the other chaperones and whispered, “Our work here is done, we could go home right now!”

Those old retired guys in the orange shirts had received many gifts—the gifts of health and skill and free time. They were all in their sixties, or seventies or eighties, and I imagine they knew better than I, that life has its limits. But in that knowledge, they had opted to use their gifts to serve others, they had opted to be good stewards of God’s grace. No wonder we felt God’s presence there amidst the sheet rock and insulation!

Author Kathleen Norris, in one of her books, tells how her father did some genealogical research and discovered that their family crest had on it the motto: “Regard the End.” (*Amazing Grace*, 12)

It could be Peter’s motto as well. Regard the end. Not to wallow in some morbid obsession with death. Not to turn ourselves into raptureready survivalists. Rather, in order to constantly remind ourselves that life itself, and all that it means, is a precious gift. A gift we have been given to use wisely and well. A gift we have been given to share with others.

Over the next two weeks you will be asked to consider your pledge to the work of this congregation in the year ahead. It is one very concrete way that you can share your gifts, your life, with others. For in our work together we do indeed strive to follow Peter’s advice. We pray. We love. We serve. We offer hospitality.

Together as a congregation, and in partnership with various missions and agencies here and around the world, we work together as good stewards of God's grace.

Friends, the truth is plain: the end is near. In this mortal life of ours, it is always near. The question today, and everyday, is this: how will you use your time, your talents, your treasure, your gifts.

Sisters and brothers, the bottom line is this: God is indeed present in our midst. And each and every time we reach out to one another, Christ comes again.

Amen

John H. Danner