Sunday, November 14, 2004
**A FAITH FOR TOUGH TIMES**
Luke 21:5-19

I have never forgotten a sign I saw on a highway late in November 1992. In big red letters, the sign said, “THE WORLD IS COMING TO AN END ON OCTOBER 28, 1992.” Someone should’ve taken the sign down after October 28, 1992, but whoever paid to have the sign put there expected that the world coming to an end would take care of that. There was nothing on the sign to indicate what church group or individual had paid for the sign. Now they were probably too embarrassed to take the sign down.

After doing some research, I was convinced that the sign was placed there, and probably in other places as well, by the followers of an evangelist who earlier that fall had predicted the end of the world and the return of Jesus on October 28, 1992. Ironically, further research indicated that the same evangelist in that month of October had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonds that would not mature until ten years later, and he was also under indictment for misusing church funds. No one knows what he truly believed.

Predictions by religious leaders, some sincere and others not so sincere, that the end of the world will occur on a specific date are nothing new. Church historians have documented 220 such predictions since the beginning of the Christian era. All have proved false. I remember reading a little booklet titled “The Rapture Could Be in 1988.” In religious terms, “the rapture” means there will come a time when Jesus will, in an instant, take all of his true followers directly into paradise. All others will be left behind.

The basic storyline of what has come to be called “pre-millennial dispensationalism,” the system of thought that informs “rapture fiction,” such as the popular “Left Behind” series, originated in the mid-19th century in the teachings of John Nelson Darby, a disaffected former Anglican priest. He claimed that if you read the Bible correctly, it contains a schedule of the final events that will precede the end of history. Darby believed that God deals with the world differently in each of seven “dispensations” or eras. He claimed that we are now in the sixth era of world history, soon to be followed by the seventh — the end times.

The first event in the chain of dominoes that will lead to the end is the “rapture,” the secret return of Jesus to transport all true believers to heaven. Cars, trains, and planes will fly into one another as believers are suddenly taken heavenward, leaving their clothes, personal effects, and vehicles behind. Maybe you’ve seen the bumper sticker that says, “Warning: in case of rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned.” Those left behind will endure seven years of tribulation, mostly inflicted on the world by the Anti-Christ, disguised as the leader of a one-world government. Some of those shocked by the event become true “Bible-believing” Christians who will band together to resist the power of the Anti-Christ and conduct secret evangelism campaigns to enlarge the power and numbers of their “tribulation force.”

The plot of the Left Behind novels follows several main characters who make up the leaders of this force. They are kept very busy because, according to the “biblical” prophecies on which the novels are based, the Anti-Christ will support a Russian invasion of Israel, rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, and lead nation into war against nation. This global warfare, coupled with a series of horrible natural disasters, will make the world a truly nasty place. Anti-Christ and growing resistance by the tribulation force will ultimately lead to Christ returning a second time to defeat the forces of evil at Armageddon, a large plain in Israel. He will then reign, before the

world finally ends, for 1,000 years over a politically reconstituted kingdom of Israel, full of Jews who have converted to Christianity.

This system is subject to endless variations. For example, the enemies can change. In Hal Lindsey's 1970s rapture fiction, all the bad people are Soviets. The villains can also turn into Muslims, as they often have in the post-9/11 world.

For some reason, and in spite of the fact that at least 220 end-of-the-world dates have been predicted during the past 2,000 years and none of them have come true, new predictions continue to be made, and all of them claim to be based on the Bible with a different interpretation. Each new prediction gathers a certain number of followers.

What is it that draws some people to believe and follow such predictions? For some, it's comforting to believe that they are part of an exclusive group which will inherit paradise and they won't have to put up with the rest of us. Others who have difficulty living in the present world find security in believing that almost any life in another world will be better.

All of these predictions have one thing in common: they are based on a misreading and misunderstanding of the Bible passages on which they claim to be based. Certain books and passages in the Bible contain lots of "apocalyptic" language. This is a language filled with strange imagery, a kind of code language using images of beasts, battles, trumpets, turmoil, and destruction. The passage read today from Luke's gospel is one example. Listen to a few of the verses: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places, dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

The problem with this literature is that for too many readers, ancient and modern, the imagery overshadows the message. People get all wrapped up in speculation about the details of the images and all kinds of timetables, so that they miss the real meaning. Underneath the colorful imagery is a basic message which goes something like this: "I've seen the end. I know how this game comes out, and it's going to be okay. Hang in there through the tough times. There will always be tough times, but the love of God is in ultimate control, and there's going to be a happy ending."

Apocalyptic literature is usually written to people who are already enduring tremendous hardship and even persecution. They take tough times and evil very seriously, which is one of the reasons you could be repulsed by them. It reminds you that life in this world is not all joy and success. There will be tough times that could cause you to wonder where it's all going and what it means.

You also need to remember that many early Christians in the first century confidently expected the return of Jesus in a physical body in their lifetime, and they further believed that the end of the world as they knew it was tied to this return in some way.

The writers of the New Testament were influenced by Jewish ideas from the Old Testament. Many Jewish people in Jesus' time and before believed that their present age was so wicked and deformed that one day soon God would bring a new age of peace, joy, and love.

Some of the early Christians adapted this hope. God's victory would take place with the return of Jesus in glory and power.

You also need to remember that these expectations are written in the language and in the context of the worldview of that time. It's a three-story universe. The world is flat. God is thought of as dwelling in a realm above, returning on the clouds of heaven.

The fact that the writers of the Bible did their thinking and writing in the worldview of their time is natural, but it does not do away with the inner truth of what they were saying.

What are some of these inner truths conveyed in this strange apocalyptic language? I have already mentioned one — the writers are saying, "We've seen the end. We know how this is going to come out. It's going to be okay. Hang in there through the tough times. Keep the faith. God is in control ultimately. It's going to have a happy ending."

The world as you know it is always changing. Even many of the things you think are indestructible will come to an end.

The religious people in Jesus' time were much impressed by the Temple in Jerusalem. Many thought it was the gate to heaven itself. Nothing ever built thus far, or would be built in the future, would be that marvelous. It would last forever. However, Jesus reminded them that although the Temple was an important symbol and gathering place for expressing their religious faith, it was not permanent. He went on to shock them by saying that in the not-too-distant future, the Temple would be destroyed, but this would not mean that God's people would be abandoned.

"Do not put your faith in the wrong things. All these things will pass away, but God's love and power will never pass away. We have this treasure in earthen vessels."

Whether the earth as you know it will come to an end in one climactic moment, no one knows. But in a deeper sense, the world you see around you is always coming to an end. Scientists tell you, for example, that 99% of all the species that have ever existed are now extinct.

It's a matter of emphasis. Too much of your living can be spent on that which is temporary. This is not to say that you should not plan and dream and work. The beautiful buildings and other symbols you build will one day come to an end. This does not mean that you are to neglect them and not care for them in the present. This applies not only to the physical structures you build but also to the institutions that bring order, beauty, and improvement in your daily life. For example, I've known marriages that have failed because of the neglect of one or both partners. I've known educational institutions that have deteriorated because of neglect and lack of support. I've known church congregations that dwindled and died because of the lack of support.

So take care of what needs to be taken care of now. But also remember that ultimately all things will go away. This is what faith is all about. When you talk about faith, you can get overly concerned about the content of your faith, about your beliefs. The faith that Jesus lived and taught is not primarily belief; it is trust. The most basic faith statement there is, is the simple assertion that "It's okay. Everything will be all right."

Nothing except God's love is permanent. The Apostle Paul wrote: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

One day, I was with a group of friends, and someone asked the question, “If you could give your children one thing, what would it be?” There were a lot of good answers to that question. The one that appealed to me the most was, “If I could give my children one thing, it would be faith: a sense that life is trustworthy, that life is good, that it’s okay to be who you are, to trust and value your gifts, to worry less about making a living and more about shaping a life. Life is not so much a mountain to be climbed as it is a gift to be received.”

If you have that sort of basic trust in the goodness and love of God, your life can be lived with joy and endurance. If you believe the big questions have to do with the smaller ones, few events in your life can pass the ten-year test: ten years from now, how much will this really matter? Most of it doesn’t.

But some of it does. That’s the real test of faith for tough times. That kind of faith allows you to see that no grief or loss is final. No defeat is ultimate. No sin is unforgivable. Because there will always be tough times that come to each of you, and your faith will waver, human beings gather into communities of faith where you are privileged to bear one another’s burdens. When your faith is weak, you reach out to others to find support. When your faith is strong, you support others. That’s what makes the church so important. Amen.