

## WITH SO MUCH TO LOVE

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

As you are perhaps aware, there is a phenomenon in our country that is roughly two years old known as the “birther movement”, among other things. Those involved hold that Barack Obama, owing to his birthplace, is not eligible to be President of the United States. The evidence for Obama’s birth in the United States, including a birth certificate dated August 4, 1961 at 7:24 p.m. in Honolulu is everywhere available. The “birthers” refuse to accept the evidence, and more than a dozen lawsuits have been filed alleging Obama is not a “natural born” citizen. Information doesn’t matter to these folks. Evidence doesn’t matter. The “birthers” are unfazed by such things. There is nothing that could convince them that they are mistaken. They believe what they believe, and that’s that.

As in the case of the “birthers” it seems impossible to shake the convictions of people who believe the end of the world is fast approaching. Every generation has included such people, and ours is no exception. They believe they know the day and the hour of the end. They claim to see the signs of this all around them, as in a recent book by one Ronald Weinland, who is convinced that 2008 marked the last of God’s warnings to begin the count down to the final day, May 27, 2012, which I should say is not the same day I told you would be the end last year on the basis of another authority on such matters, Harold Camping, who predicts the final day of the world will be on October 21, 2011. According to Weinland, the first trumpet of the seventh seal of the Book of

Revelation sounded on December 14, 2008, announcing the beginning of the collapse of the economy of the United States and the great destruction that will follow. Weinland knows all about the seven Thunders of the Book of Revelation, even if nothing about these is actually recorded in the Bible. The prophecies revealed to Weinland explain the destruction of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (?), Great Britain and much of Western Europe, to be followed by the final world war. Billions will die.

Despite the fact that stuff like this has been predicted again and again throughout history—and not just throughout Christian history—and not come to pass, we're still getting predictions that are no less certain than those in the past that failed to come true. What, we might ask, would cause these contemporary prophets to temper their certainty and restrain their fervor for the end? Nothing, because this is not about anything that could be affected by evidence or rationality.

For example, what would Weinland say, if we told him that the first of the biblical end-time, or as they are known, apocalyptic, texts, the Book of Daniel, was actually about the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV and not about the end of the world? Using the literary form of the vision, the writer of Daniel expects an ideal kingdom to come after the fall of Antiochus. The Book is written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE but set in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, probably to avoid censorship. The book is not a magical foretelling. Like the prophets, Daniel is a Book intended to call people back to faithfulness to God. The Book counsels living one day at a time and trusting the future to God. The end of the present tribulation begins with the overthrow of Antiochus. Now, what would the fans of end of the world predictions say if they were told that the apocalyptic literature they read in the Bible is not about a future cataclysm, but is rather an interpretation of the meaning

of the present and that writings about the end in the Bible were to shock people into being wise and good in the present, as when Daniel writes, “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”? Not much, I suspect. These folks have already given up on this world. They despair of this world.

We humans are combinations of the eternal and the temporal, of freedom and necessity, of mind and body, and the condition of despair occurs when there is an imbalance of these factors, such that if one is too preoccupied with the eternal, one becomes a dreamer who cannot cope with present realities. But if one is too preoccupied with the here and now, one cannot imagine anything more real than making one’s fortune in the present. The person who is obsessed with thoughts about the end of the world is a person who cannot bear to be himself in this life. In effect, he wants to get rid of all that makes him himself and have God come down and destroy everything in the confidence that what comes next will be better for him.

Despair, we should note, is not the same thing as depression, which is condition from which many of us suffer. Depression is an emotional condition, but despair is a spiritual condition. A person can be as happy as can be but still in despair about her life and the world, as when people welcome the end of the world because they think they are the apple of God’s eye and will be well provided for even as the heavens and the earth are destroyed. On the other hand, a person can feel depressed and even deeply depressed about himself and the world and yet want good for the world and better for himself.

But lest I put you all to sleep going on about this distinction between despair and depression, and lest I push you into despair that this sermon will never be over, I think I better find something to say that is more directly beneficial to us. Try this.

This world is terrible and wonderful. It is filled with problems and pains but also with blessings and joys. This world, terrible and wonderful and of which we are a part, terrible and wonderful creatures that we are, is, according to our faith, God's creature and, as such, to be loved in both its terror and its wonder. This creation, fraught as it is, is good! Good because it is God's. Why would God wish to destroy it? Is God like a petulant child who smashes the Legos when he can't get the structure just right? And what is it that is not already present that would make the creation better in the sight of God? That the creation is not "just right" for me doesn't mean it isn't "just right" for God. I am not the center of everything. God is. In short, it seems to me that the folks who are fixated on the end of the world lack respect for the creation and by extension lack respect for its Creator. Furthermore, they have made a mistake in thinking that the judgment of God is something punishing, like a trap snapping shut on us when we have done wrong. But what if, instead, God's judgment is grace and love, that the very love we believe has made the world in the beginning sustains the world now, that God does look upon us with favor and wants us to be at peace with one another, with the rest of nature, with ourselves? Isn't that what our faith teaches us?

There is much in the world to depress a person—our venal politicians, the sickening violence of war, our indifference to the suffering of the poor, the ruining of the environment, sickness and accident and tragedy—and we would be idiots and perhaps immoral as well not to be depressed by such things because they are depressing. But

*despair* is something else. It is giving up on the creation of God our Creator, by whose love there is a world to which we have opened our eyes this autumn morning, a world we can choose to love as God does or to despise and ignore as God does not. And with so much to love, what reason is there to despair?

In the Letter to the Hebrews we are urged to, "...consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching." That last clause about the Day approaching is best understood as encouraging us to live this way *now* in the world of our experience because none of us is getting any younger and, as I say, there is so much to love. Amen.

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, November 15, 2009

Emanuel Lutheran Church