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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Home is Where Our Hope Is*
The Rev. Dr. Jim Bennett ~ May 22, 2011

John 14:1-14

Well, we're still here: the world continues on as it did yesterday and the day before, without signs of earthquakes, or judgment or rapture. It appears that we will have to pay the bills, do the laundry, and return to (school and) work after all. All the billboards, ads, and websites trumpeting yesterday as the day of judgment and rapture have gone from confident prophetic pronouncements to quaint historic artifacts.

We've been here before, of course—many times. Among the many examples, the nineteenth-century Millerite Movement probably exceeds all others. The movement is named after William Miller, who was a farmer living in upstate New York. Miller became convinced that Biblical symbols and numbers in the book of Daniel could be interpreted and manipulated to calculate the day of Jesus' Second Coming as sometime before the end of March, 1844. After an initial reluctance to share his ideas (he spent five years refining his calculations to make sure they were correct), he got a good publicist who made Miller and his teachings a household name. When Miller's original date of March 1844 passed, new calculations pointed to a firm date of Oct. 22, 1844.

There was great anticipation as the day approached, with tens of thousands awaiting Christ's second return. In southern New Hampshire, the farmer Leonard Hasting faced a dilemma: should he harvest his potatoes? if by chance the end didn't come, they would rot, leaving him without income or food. But to harvest them would signal his lack of faith. In the end, he left them in the ground. In Rochester, NY, two days before the predicted date, a hat maker invited the public to come in and take all the hats they wanted for free, giving away his entire inventory.

On Oct. 22, 1844 Millerites gathered, and worshiped, and prayed all day and into the night. When Oct. 23 broke as any other day, it became known as The Great Disappointment. This morning, there are undoubtedly some who know what that felt like.

It is easy to dismiss the misguided faith that has become the punch-line in endless jokes this week. But before we return to our routines and realities of our lives, it seems worthwhile to pause and ask: What should we as Christians lift up about the end? Just because it's a topic we

Presbyterians don't spend much time talking about doesn't mean it's something that scripture is silent about

Today's gospel lesson from John is one that helps us think faithfully about the issues that dire predictions of the end of the world raise. This is not an apocalyptic text— it's not one of those densely symbolic passages like Daniel and Revelation, full of unfamiliar and uncertain references that typically form the basis for speculations about the end of times. Those Apocalyptic texts are not very helpful for explicating doctrine about the end times. Our text from John is a good point for such reflection, because it captures both our uncertainty about this topic and Jesus' clear response to our questions.

This passage in John is part of a larger speech known as the farewell discourse. It takes place over the course of Jesus' last evening with his disciples—during and around the Last Supper. In the sections just before today's reading, Jesus has told his disciples that he is going away, news that he sandwiches between predicting Judas' betrayal and foretelling Peter's denial. In our reading today, Jesus explains how we are to understand his absence: it is a time when he will continue to prepare for the moment when we all be together again in the house that God's has prepared for us.

And then we get another one of those refreshingly human moments, one of those moments of apostolic obstinance. Jesus has just offered these powerful words of comfort about what he is doing and where he is going and the good news that they will be together in God's presence. But then Thomas interrupts: "Uh, Jesus? Actually, I don't think we know the way. Can you give us some directions? What signs should we look for? You're going to give us a trail-guide, right? Maybe step by step and turn by turn directions from Google Maps or something?" And Jesus responds: "**I** am the way, and the truth, and the life..."

The exchange captures the details Jesus says we need to know about his return: not many! Like Thomas, we often hold a fascination with unknowable particulars: How will things end? When? How will we know? What are the signs? But scripture makes quite clear that the end of time is known only to God and is not for us to know.¹ The creeds and theology of our Reformed Tradition likewise reject idle speculation in favor of the clear conviction of scripture that we do not know. All who claim otherwise trade biblical claims for convoluted explanations that rely on equally dubious interpretations. In fact, most of the vocabulary used by end-time prophets— words like rapture and eschatology and dispensationism—are products of the nineteenth century. Such interpreters replace ambiguous symbols with chronological certainty and transform historical and literary descriptions into fortunetelling.

So the quest for certainty is misguided because scripture says we can't know. But more importantly it is misguided because asking the wrong question distracts our focus. It turns our attention away from where it should be. This is the heart of Jesus' response to Thomas: while Thomas is busy worrying Jesus tells him to refocus his attention: Thomas, stop looking out there, stop worrying about the not yet and the unknowable details: **LOOK AT ME** Jesus says: **I AM THE WAY**, the truth and the life. Numbers and signs cannot tell you how to live in this world and they cannot reveal to you the promises of the next: **I AM THE WAY**, the truth and the life around which you should order your being and believing.

¹ E.g. Mt. 24:36; Acts 1:6-7;

In Jesus' address to Thomas and his disciples we see that there are still things we can say, even if there is much we do not know. The framework for understanding that vague idea we call the end of times begins with basic affirmation, the warm reach of loving arms extending out to embrace us: Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

We are not to be troubled, Jesus assures us, because what will unfold is all part of a continuous whole: God's narrative for the world, a narrative that stretches from creation, through the incarnation in Jesus and continues on to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth is all the same story. The story as it unfolds in its entirety is one of grace. It is a story of redemption. It is a story of hope. To speak of the end is to speak of this trajectory, rather than something short of that. To believe in God, and to believe in Jesus, as Jesus instructs his disciples, is to believe in a God and a Savior whose love for the world has remained constant, from before its creation right through its transformation into a new heaven and a new earth. To point to the end, then, is not speak of fear and of horror, but rather of hope and of triumph. We are not talking about the destruction of the world, but the fulfillment of it, by our God who, from the very beginning, has declared creation to be good.

Even when we speak of judgment it is for the world, not against it. The biblical concept of judgment is one in which the role of the judge is not to act as a dispenser of rewards and punishment, but as a restorer of justice and what is lost: justice over injustice, love over hatred and greed, peace over hostility—this is what we pray when we say, Come, Lord Jesus, Come. For the judge is the very one who has redeemed us.

To speak of the end is to assert our belief that evil will not prevail, that this world is not the final word, and that God's purposes will be realized in the end. The new heaven and the new earth that scripture speaks of is the promise of realizing what God has intended for us all along. And this is good news indeed. And we know this is good news, as Jesus further reminds Thomas and Philip, because this God who will accomplish all this has already been made known in Jesus Christ, who had redeemed us, who loves and the world in all our imperfections.

This leads to another confident claim we can make: In Jesus Christ God is already moving us toward that hopeful end that God intends.

As a result, our belief that we are moving toward the redemption that God has intended from the very start, makes a claim on us and how we live in the here and now. While we are clearly guided away from distracting idle speculation about dates and years and sign and symbols, we are also just as clearly not supposed wait passively as idle spectators while the world passes us by. That is because we are not simply waiting for some future event to happen. It has already begun: the Kingdom of God is being realized, even now, in the redemption made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus makes this point in our scripture today in his response to Philip's questions, which follow fast on the heels of Thomas' uncertainty. When Thomas gets upset that he doesn't know where Jesus is going, or how to get there, Jesus responds that they do know where they are going: to God's presence, the house with many places that Jesus is preparing for them. But then Philip takes the baton of apostolic obstinance from Thomas and responds: "yeah, but we haven't seen God yet, so we don't really know; we can't imagine that-- so show us God the Father and then it will all make sense." Jesus responds, with a bit more exasperation even than in his response to

Thomas: I've been with you all this time and you still don't get it? "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In Jesus, the future is already present!

This is the reality that must shape our eschatological thinking. Our response to the promise of Jesus' return is to work to make visible the reality of God's love and to declare the good news that in Jesus Christ the future is secure. Our response to the Kingdom of God that has begun, even as we await its completion, is to live out the work that God has begun in Jesus Christ: we work to end suffering because God has come to end suffering, calling and empowering us to do the same. The way we live our lives makes known God's purposes for the world. As Jesus reminds Thomas and Philip, our focus, our way, is to continue the work that Jesus has done in God's name. We have the courage to get going now because of the hope that frames our long-term view—the confidence that God will triumph. The new life that God has promised compels us to start living it now. As one theologian puts it: Eschatology prompts ethics. The way that we live today is rooted our hope for tomorrow; Our hope for tomorrow shapes the way we live today.

Above all, thinking about the end is a call to be in relationship with Christ, who has made God's redeeming love for the world known to us. "do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."