

Chris Currie
Sermon: The End Is (Always) Near
Text: Psalm 100
November 26, 2023

Psalm 100

¹ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² Serve the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;^[a]
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him; bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Do you remember Harold Camping? He was the Christian minister and broadcaster who predicted the end of the world to take place on May 21, 2011. After time continued to move forward relatively smoothly, he readjusted his forecast and predicted the end of the world for five months later, October 21, 2011. Again, such events never came to pass and in May of 2012 in an article located in the weird news section of the Huffington Post, Harold Camping posted an online letter “conceding he has no evidence of an impending apocalypse and will no longer predict global doom.” Camping said he was asked for forgiveness for his failed attempts to predict Judgment Day, and acknowledged that he has stopped trying to pinpoint future dates. “We realize that many people are hoping they will know the date of Christ's return,” Camping wrote. “We humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing.”¹

Harold Camping was certainly not the first to miscalculate on Christ's return and eschatological fulfillment of all things. More than 150 years ago in Vermont of all places in the antebellum North, a local religious revival converted a farmer named William Miller to preaching, with a special concern as to when Christ would come again. William Miller's calculations and lectures were published with the date set for March 1843. The historian Sydney Ahlstrom writes that Miller's preaching and predictions influenced thousands, even

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/09/harold-camping-admits-hes-wrong_n_1335232.html

hundreds of thousands who began to prepare for Christ's Second coming.² March 1843 passed, calculations were readjusted for March 1844, it passed, and the final date of prediction, October 22 1844, came and went.

According to Ahlstrom, "the mass movement collapsed amid a general feeling of betrayal," profiteering, and discouragement, which led to this whole episode being dubbed, 'The Great Disappointment.'³

It is easy to ridicule such flawed efforts to prepare for and indeed predict the coming of the son of Man, and so we play it safe and scrub out any apocalyptic rhetoric or beliefs in Christ's return at all. We are dignified and staid Presbyterians after all. No need for wild apocalyptic visions and Left Behind type predictions in our midst. Worse than miscalculating, we grow jaded, never expecting Christ to come or to do much of anything to shape the life of our world or to show up in our lives. The kingdom of God is just equated with some kind of heavenly realm you go to when you die but nothing to do with this world; or it's just something we equate with progress where human development, technology, and life just get better and better for everyone until we achieve heaven on earth. One of the real challenges of reading the New Testament, including the earliest letter of the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, is coming to terms with the reality of the earliest Christian communities, which was their belief that the return of Christ, while not predicted like Harold Camping or William Miller did, by running the numbers and calculating a particular date and time, was nevertheless expected to happen in their own life time, to such an extent that it was surprising to members of the Thessalonian Christian community, that members of their community were dying before Christ's return and inauguration of a new age happened. This was a pastoral issue in that early Christian community that Paul felt compelled to address. What happens if we die before Christ comes back?

As we are in the 21st century since Christ's first coming, living our lives with a sense of Christ's imminent return might seem misguided at best or at worse, that we are looking at world events and reading our Bibles and doing mathematical equations and fixating on all the wrong things, rather than feeding the poor and being about the people and work that seem to matter to Jesus. Many years ago, one of my children's school curriculum was guided by Stephen Covey's book, the 7 habits of highly effective people. And let me assure you that I have not read the book and generally have an allergic reaction to the snake oil of self-help whether it comes in the form of

² Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 480.

³ *Ibid.*

William Miller, Harold Camping, or Norman Vincent Peale and the power of positive thinking, Joel Osteen and our best life now, or even Covey and his seven habits. The gospel of Jesus Christ is less about self-help than it is about self-forgetfulness or finding something beyond self or even to paraphrase Jesus, losing ourselves in a movement, a community, a way of life, that takes us beyond our preoccupations with our selves. But nevertheless, I do remember habit #2, which is this one: begin with the end in mind. Begin with some vision, some idea of what the final outcome or hoped for end product will look like. And I wonder if the 'end of the world,' or the 'end is near,' that we often hear in apocalyptic predictions and fears, might be better served by emphasizing and re-claiming the alternative meaning of the world end, not so much as destruction, calamity, and collapse, but in the sense of purpose, fulfillment, and indeed to use the exact words of the Westminster catechism, discovering that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. You can't get more eschatological and apocalyptic than that. And like the early Christian community, living life makes little sense without our chief end in mind, which is been graciously steered in a miraculous yet unpredictable direction by Jesus Christ. Christ is our end. Not only our beginning and end, Alpha and Omega, but also the one whose presence is always near and who sprinkles meaning on many things we would prefer to ignore or airbrush out of our lives to make things more efficient and less complicated. 'A Declaration of Faith,' which was written by one of our forebear denominations in 1978 and which serves as our affirmation of faith today, reminds us that 'in Christ God has given us a glimpse of the new creation God has already begun and will surely finish,' but that 'we do not know when the final day will come.' In our time, we are reminded, 'we see only broken and scattered signs that the renewal of all things is under way.' The declaration reminds us that we do not yet see the end of cruelty and suffering in the world, the church, or in our own lives,' but 'see Jesus as Lord' over all of it. As Jesus stands 'at the center of our history,' our lives, as he is near even now, the declaration also reminds us that 'Jesus will stand at its end.' And using words from the end book of the Bible, Revelation, the declaration says 'Jesus will judge all people and nations. Evil will be condemned and rooted out of God's good creation. There will be no more tears or pain. All things will be made new. The fellowship of human beings with God and each other will be perfected.'⁴

⁴ 'A Declaration of Faith,' from *Our Confessional Heritage*, The Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1978, 178-179.

When we hear that the 'end is near,' we think of some big splashy event covered by NBC and CNN and Fox, something like Taylor Swift's Eras concerts that we hope we will get raptured into when it comes to town, but it is very unlikely that the kingdom and world Christ is at work making real will make its entrance in such dramatic fashion. In an article several years ago in the *Christian Century* by Kyle Childress, a Baptist minister from East Texas, he quoted the well known Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney who was listening to young ministers who were seminary students at the time, explain their ministry plans for their first congregations. After hearing enough, Marney said, 'These guys were going to bring in the kingdom with bulldozers.'⁵ Childress reminds us that the kingdom of God is not and cannot be brought in with bulldozers. "It cannot be imposed and still be the kingdom of God. The means God uses to bring about his reign must fit with the (ends) of justice, peace, harmony, and reconciliation...it cannot be coerced with bulldozers, tanks or guns or with prayers ordered by the state, laws passed by Congress or manipulations engineered by Madison Avenue. God calls us to do the work of ministry that fits with the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant, Jesus."⁶ The end comes, not through dramatic pyrotechnics or technological advancement or through coercion and destruction, but through a prodigal Father willing to risk humiliation to welcome a wayward child home, it comes through receiving limitations and asking for help from others as the best thing that ever happened to us, it comes from being inspired to find the unique gifts in every human life and stir them, draw them out, and encourage them, for the sake of using our God-given gifts to serve others and to find our own true end in this world, but also, to realize that we can only make sense of our lives with the end in mind, that we are made to flourish before God and to try to knock down whatever barriers there are that keep our neighbors from flourishing too.

I think it might seem odd that our psalm today is psalm 100, which may strike you as not very fiery or apocalyptic but kind of comforting and joyful. 'Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him; bless his name.' Not exactly paint-peeling, tear the doors off the hinges, stem-winding rhetoric that we have come to expect with the 'end of the world.' You know Martin Luther was once asked if he knew he had only one day to live how we would live it. Perhaps another way

⁵ Kyle Childress, "Good Work: Learning About Ministry from Wendell Berry, *The Christian Century*, pp.28-33.

⁶ Kyle Childress, "Good Work: Learning About Ministry from Wendell Berry, *The Christian Century*, pp.28-33.

of asking about the imminent return of Christ. If you knew that Christ's return was imminent, how would you live? Luther's response was far from a long bucket list or a get right with God death bed confession or even a frantic try and fix everything and move heaven and earth before the sun goes down fervor. Instead, he responded by saying if he knew that tomorrow was the 'end,' he would 'say my prayers, plant a tree, and have a drink of my favorite German beer.' In other words, praise God, do something for the sake of those in the present and the future, and rejoice in the gifts of God's good creation. That Jesus Christ comes to judge the quick and the dead, as we say repeatedly in our Apostles' Creed, is not something to be feared, but in the words of theologian Karl Barth, 'Jesus Christ's return to judge the quick and the dead is tidings of joy.'⁷ And so is the end. Not something to be feared or avoided or to keep us in line, but something to greet with open arms, open hands, and open hearts, today, tomorrow, or whenever the end is near. In the meantime, may we say our prayers and live out our faith with joyful abandon, may we plant trees and take risks and invest our resources in the things that matter, and may we enjoy the goodness of God's good creation and flourish in the pursuit of our God given callings. Today, tomorrow, and until Christ's kingdom comes. Amen.

⁷ Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 50-51.