

THE END OF THE WORLD?

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Jesus said, *“And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”* (John 14:3)

Let's begin today with a statement of the obvious: Harold Camping was wrong. Or was he? Perhaps he was right, and the rapture has occurred, and we have been left behind. Who is Harold Camping, you ask? Camping is an 89-year old talk radio host and president of Family Radio, a Christian broadcasting network out of California. For the past few weeks he's been all over the news because of his prediction that the rapture would occur on May 21, 2011 – yesterday. What is the rapture, you ask? The rapture is a belief among some Christians about what will happen when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. In his First Letter to the Thessalonians (4:16-17), Paul the Apostle wrote: *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.*

I believe that Paul was trying to express poetically a conviction that words ultimately cannot grasp: that those who have loved the Lord and died shall not be left out – or left behind – when Jesus returns. Indeed, we shall all rise to meet him. Unfortunately, what Paul intended to be a poetic encouragement, many Christians down through the ages have taken for a literal script. Jesus, they say, will descend vertically from a localized, spatial heaven to meet in mid air his elect who have ascended vertically from the earth. If such a belief isn't too far-fetched already, Harold Camping still won't leave well enough alone. Over the years he has aspired to be one of the world's foremost raptural scholars by trying to calculate the date. Camping was wrong back in 1994, but that didn't stop him from crunching more obscure Biblical numbers that were never meant to be crunched, and arriving at May 21, 2011 – 6 pm yesterday. Yesterday was supposed to be the second coming of Jesus, but apparently, Harold Camping was wrong again. Or was he? Where, for example, are my clergy colleagues, Linda Bartholomew and Ted Pardoe? Perhaps the rapture has occurred and we have been left behind.

Jesus said, *“And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.”* The setting of today's reading from the Gospel of John is an upper room of a house in Jerusalem at the Passover meal on the night before Jesus died. Throughout the evening Jesus had been saying and doing things that the disciples simply couldn't understand. He'd washed their feet. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he'd broken the bread and passed the cup, commanding that from henceforth his friends and followers should eat the Passover meal in remembrance of him. According to John, Jesus was doing all this as he was announcing and explaining his departure. He was leaving; he was going to a place where the disciples could not follow, at least not immediately. The disciples hearts were understandably troubled. To this point they'd given three years of their lives to following Jesus, fully expecting that God was going to restore the kingdom to Israel through him. But now, at what seemed to be the critical moment to make a move, the only move that Jesus was making was to announce his departure.

In today's reading we've heard how Thomas and Philip were particularly perplexed and frustrated. They didn't know where Jesus was going. They didn't understand how his leaving

could possibly accomplish God's purposes in their immediate need. They didn't know how, or even if, they could follow him. "*Lord, we know not where you are going; how can we know the way?*" said Thomas. If Jesus were going away, Thomas wanted a road map to follow across geographical terrain in pursuit. If all he could do was wait, then he would want a timetable to watch on an earthly calendar. Jesus tried to comfort and encourage them with words that have since become all too familiar to us: "*Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*" The reason the words are familiar is because we usually hear them at funerals; we hear them in the context of someone's death. I think that if the disciples had fully grasped that by his departure Jesus meant his death, and that where he was preparing a place for them was in heaven, they would have thrown up their hands in defeat right then and there.

Thomas and Philip were only the first in a long line of people stretching through the ages to be confused by the coming and going and returning of Jesus. Throughout the first century the earliest Christians lived in keen anticipation of the second coming of Jesus, which they believed was immanent and would bring all of history to a close. In succeeding generations and still today certain individuals claiming special knowledge have declared that the end of the world is near. For reasons that are troubling, perplexing, and at times amusing lots of people buy into the messages of these would-be prophets of the end, sometimes orienting their lives completely around what they say. In the past few weeks we've seen billboards on buildings and in the subways, vans driving the streets, and people handing out pamphlets declaring that the rapture will occur at 6 pm on May 21, 2011. Friday's *New York Times* told the story of a family in which the parents quit their jobs, stopped paying into their children's college funds, and devoted themselves to spreading the message of Harold Camping. The teenage children are even more embarrassed than teenage children already are of their parents. One group has organized an effort to link non-Christian animal lovers with their pets which will be left behind when the rapture occurs. You can visit their website and sign up for only ten dollars. What a ridiculous face this man and these people put on the Christian faith. I'm not being uncharitable; Harold Camping needs to be taken to task because he's led people astray, damaged the cause of Christ, and made the church's mission harder, not easier.

Meanwhile, at the same time that most of the country was snickering at misguided Christians, and painting us all with one silly brush, people were paying attention to someone else in the news this week: the renowned theoretical physicist, Stephen Hawking. Hawking is the author of the 1980's best selling book, *A Brief History of Time*, and most recently, *The Grand Design*. Brilliant and engaging, his far reaching mind searches the universe for scientific answers to life's ultimate questions. He's also confined to a wheelchair due to the ravages of ALS, and he can now only communicate through a special computer. All of this adds to his mystique as something of a modern-day seer. In an interview last week Hawking made some sobering pronouncements, "*I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.*" What is more, Hawking writes that *spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.*

Hawking would take it as a statement of the obvious that Jesus was wrong: wrong about going to heaven, wrong about returning, wrong about the existence of any such place at all. And it goes without saying that on the spectrum of belief, Hawking would occupy a point that is light years away from Harold Camping. In *A Brief History of Time* he tells the amusing story of a noted scientist who was giving an elementary lecture on astronomy. At the conclusion of the talk a little old lady stood and announced, "What you have told us is rubbish! The world is really

a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.” The scientist gave a superior chuckle and asked, “What is the tortoise standing on?” And to that the old lady replied, “You’re very clever, young man, very clever. But it’s turtles all the way down!” There you have a gross parody of the stand off between science and religion. Yesterday’s non-event surely shines a light on Harold Camping’s mythical tower of tortoises. But what of the rest of us who believe in heaven? Do we have any sure place to stand?

We do. Jesus said, “*And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*” The first thing we might say is that Jesus did indeed fulfill his promise to return to the disciples following his departure. It’s appropriate that we often hear this passage at funerals, and it’s fitting that we hear it today in the midst of the Easter season, the fifty-day celebration of Jesus’ resurrection. The resurrection is where we stand. During Easter we declare that he who spoke these words on a Thursday night and died the next day, was alive again on Sunday. Did Jesus come again? Indeed he did. God breathed life again into his cold, dead body. Jesus appeared to his disciples and numerous other witnesses. What is more, fifty days after Easter on the Day of Pentecost, they would all experience another, powerful coming of Jesus, this one of a different sort. The Spirit of God, also known as the Spirit of Christ, fell on them and filled their souls with such a life, such a love, and such a joy that they could only conclude they were sharing in God’s life. Did Jesus come again and take them to himself? Indeed he did through the giving of the Holy Spirit, who is forever available and accessible to you and me.

But what about heaven? Who is right on this one – Jesus or Stephen Hawking? Hawking says he can find no place in his universe for heaven. Well, the place that Jesus prepared for his disciples is not a place anyone can locate on a map, even if you could chart the universe and the multiverse. I believe that what Jesus meant by place is more a relational than a spatial reality. The place Jesus takes us to is a new, even eternal relationship with God that transcends any boundary of time and space. Death doesn’t put a stop to it. Biblical scholars – not of Camping’s sort, mind you – tell us that in the dialogue between Jesus and Thomas about knowing the way, John records the two using different words for knowing. Thomas seems to be talking about knowing in the way we know with our five senses, knowing in the way Stephen Hawking and other scientists measure the universe, knowing in the way Harold Camping wanted to see signs and wonders yesterday. But when Jesus responded to Thomas we find a much different word for knowing. Jesus talked about a deeper knowledge that results from prolonged, close, intimate, living experience. Jesus referred to an intuitive knowing that transcends the five physical senses, a knowing that perceives love, a knowing that allows us to dwell in the new place Christ has prepared for us even under the most dire of earthly circumstances.

In today’s reading from Acts (7:54-60), I believe we can see how Stephen, the first Christian martyr, dwelled in the new place Christ had taken him to even as his enemies were stoning him to death. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Stephen knew that he shared the life that God shared with Jesus. Stephen knew that he already dwelled in the house of the house of the Lord, and would dwell there forever. And thus, as Jesus was able to pray for God to forgive his executioners, Stephen also was able to pray with his dying breath, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Stephen knew that he was with the Lord.

Someone else who comes to mind is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian before and during World War Two. Bonhoeffer was implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. He was arrested by the Nazis, and sent to prison with others who had tried to resist one of history’s most brutal regimes. One man who shared Bonhoeffer’s life in prison wrote that *he was one of the very few persons I have ever met for whom God was real and always near.* On

Sunday, April 8, 1945 it was the week after Easter. The Nazis were in retreat and disarray. The prisons and concentration camps were being liberated. The prisoners themselves began daring to believe that they might live. Bonhoeffer conducted a worship service for them, and just when he concluded the door to the room opened and two men ordered Bonhoeffer to go with them. They all knew that this meant Bonhoeffer was being taken to the gallows. They said good-bye, and Bonhoeffer replied, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life."

For all of us who know Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life, yesterday was not the end, but the beginning of life. Jesus said, *Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*"

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