

Well, it’s May 29. According to an ominous-looking billboard on Hwy 14, the world was supposed to come to an end May 21. That billboard is one of thousands across the country put up by followers of a California radio evangelist named Harold Camping. Mr. Camping used clues he found in scripture to mathematically determine that Judgment Day would begin at precisely 6 p.m. a week ago Saturday. Now, I’m not one to be particularly on time, but this is running late even for me. Clearly, we’re all still here. After last weekend came and went a new crop of billboards popped up. They quoted Matthew 24:36: “No one knows the day or the hour ...” – and in big letters at the top, read, “That was awkward.”

So, what do you think about all this talk about the end of the world? Do you find it amusing? Silly? Intriguing? Maybe little frightening? You’d better get used to it. Predicting the world’s end seems to be a fairly regular occurrence. (think about that for a minute) It’s been foretold by Nostradamus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And Baptist preacher William Miller and the Great Disappointment of 1844. And in Hal Lindsey’s book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. And the *Left Behind* series. Y2K. The Mayan calendar pointing to 2012. These things are all forms of eschatology. That’s a fancy church word for talk about the end of the world. It comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, which means ‘last’ or ‘end.’ Eschatological predictions often stem from on the belief that this world is a mess. It’s out of control and filled with evil and sin. Our only hope is that God will break in and make things right. And so it anticipates the day when Jesus will return. On that day, the righteous will be saved and the wicked will be destroyed, and the world will be filled with violence, bloodshed, and chaos so it’s clear that God is punishing evildoers.

Why does this grab our attention, even for a few minutes? Because we live in a world that feels very scary sometimes. It's a world ravaged by tornadoes and floods and earthquakes. It's populated by terrorists and child molesters and drunk drivers. Its people are subject to market crashes and cancer and nuclear meltdowns. And we cannot control any of it. At any moment life might bring us overwhelming fear or heartbreak or sorrow. And maybe there's a little part of us that wants to believe that when the world is falling apart God is on our side.

This isn't a new story. The disciples experienced many of the same emotions that night in the Upper Room. Jesus told them he was going to die. One of their own was going to betray him. His closest friend would soon deny him. Life was about to get a whole lot worse before it got better. The disciples were sad, and scared, and confused. That's why they wanted reassurance. They wanted a sign that God was still in control, that God could be trusted. But let's be honest, even after Easter things didn't really change. Remember, the gospel of John is written some 60 years after Christ's death. Paul and many of the other apostles have been martyred. The Temple has long since been destroyed. Christian believers were still a radical fringe minority who were frequently targeted for persecution. Things in this world didn't exactly look like heaven on earth. Is it any wonder that the Bible frequently asks, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?"

Part of the appeal of the idea of God is that there is someone else, something else, watching over this great cosmic drama we're a part of. We want to trust that when we turn in for the night someone else has got the wheel. We want to believe that even when things don't make sense to us they somehow, somehow, make sense to God –

and that God can bring good out of even the most nonsensical situation. As Harold Camping and others like him see it, the only way for that to happen is for Judgment Day to arrive and the faithful to be snatched up into heaven.

But the irony is, listen to what Jesus promises his disciples. His message in John 14 is that even when the world is turned upside down, God is still in control. And we don't have to worry because God is with us. Listen to this passage again: [John 14:1-21] *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust in me...I am going to prepare a place for you. I am the way ... someday we will be with Jesus in heaven ...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father ... the Father lives in me and does his work through me ... we know what God looks like because we have seen Jesus ... Anyone who believes in me will do even greater works than I have done. You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it ... God has already shared his power with us ... So if you love me, obey my commandments, and I will give you another Advocate who will never leave you.* The Spirit of truth will abide with us and fill us with love and power. That means that we are already a part of God's kingdom. We are already connected to God. Whenever we offer words of hope, speak the truth in love, stand up for the poor and oppressed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger – whenever we do these things, we are bringing God's Spirit to the world. In other words, if you want to see what God's kingdom looks like, take a look around and see all the ways Christ's love is being shared right here in Rochester – things like Channel One and IHN and LINK and the Boys and Girls Club. And if you want to see what the Holy Spirit looks like, take a look in the mirror because you are the hands and feet and face of Christ in this world. I'm sorry, Harold Camping, but we don't need to look to the rapture to get back to God

because God has already come close to us. God came close in the form of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is spilling out all over in our world right now.

Doesn't that change everything? Knowing that God is here it means that instead of buying into those who speak of fear we can speak a word of peace. Knowing that God is here means that instead of wishing to escape this world, we can do something to change it. It means that instead of worrying about when the end will come, we can see that God writing a new future through us right now. When we show love to one another, we see God in our midst. The kingdom of God grows closer right where we are. And we trust that it is possible because God promises to make it so.

People, that's a promise God makes again and again. Genesis 26:24: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you." Romans 8:39: "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper and not harm, plans to give you a future with hope." We have a good, good God who has made a good, good world – and through Jesus God has given us the Holy Spirit so that with his help we can take care of it.

We haven't heard the last of folks like Harold Camping. As long as there is fear and suffering in the world there will be people who want to escape it. And I suppose longing to be with God sure beats the alternative. But I don't believe God put us on this earth just to wish we were off of it. There's work to be done here. There are children to raise and hymns to sing and broken hearts to mend and people to care for and encouraging words to be spoken and God's love to share. People, get ready – but not for the end of the world. Get ready for God to use you. Because God's future starts right now. God needs you to make it happen. Amen.