

Advent 2B – SJ – While Awaiting the Thief

2 Peter 3:8-15a 12/4/11

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

Not very long ago we had a reprise of the prediction by Harold Camping that the world was going to end – this time on October 21st. It was not, of course, his first such prediction, though, his now being 90 and not in good health (He recently had a stroke), it well may be his last. Actually, he proposed at least three dates for the end, the first in 1994, and then two dates this year, the first of which, May 21st, had gotten the most press coverage. Since he wrote books about the event and made a lot of money off the sales of these books, one could be quite cynical about his motives, but I think it more likely that Camping, who had been educated as a civil engineer, was simply acting out his interest in calculation. Indeed, in an interview with a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Camping put it this way: "I was an engineer, I was very interested in the numbers. I'd wonder, 'Why did God put this number in, or that number in?' It was not a question of unbelief, it was a question of, 'There must be a reason for it.'"

Such predictions, to be sure, didn't originate with Mr. Camping. I once spent a month in an old colonial city in the Andes: Cuenca, Ecuador. I'm afraid that my efforts to learn Spanish there weren't as successful as I would have liked. But one phenomenon I encountered there has stuck with me, so intriguing was it. Not one, but several different people there associated with the language school I was attending, asked me quite independently of one another, what I thought of the various predictions of Nostradamus – which themselves allegedly foretold various disasters that would purportedly lead to the world's destruction.

December 21st of next year, 2012, is another date that has been suggested as the end of the world as we know it, because of an interpretation of the Mayan calendar and through calculations of both Chinese and Indian origin. Now, believe me, I'm not promoting any of these predictions. They are all the products, I firmly believe, of folks with too much imagination and time of their hands – and a far too ready tendency to think that there are hidden messages in what they have read. You've got to be awfully literal, and I think, gullible, in the way you read things to accept what was written eons ago, and in another language, to predict events that might occur in the world around you today. In fact, one of the most serious issues with approaching what you read that way is that, to do so, you have to set aside the scientific method of analyzing data, which attempts to develop a theory that explains the data you have acquired, while always being ready to tweak that theory – sometimes rather radically – as you acquire new data.

People who read our scriptures too literally, I'm afraid, fall into a terrible trap. The Bible becomes the center of Christianity rather than Jesus. And the rejection,

furthermore, of science puts the literalist in the odd position of one who benefits from the modern world without an understanding of how we got to it. I don't know how many of you have availed yourselves of the Internet to Google your name so as to discover what is out there in cyber land about you, but every so often I do that – only to discover the other day that because I signed on to a list of Christian clergy who have declared that we believe that Christianity and the theory of evolution can safely coexist I am now, at a site named Christipedia – along, by the way, with the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, several of my seminary professors, and over 12,000 others – labeled a “false prophet.” I wear that badge proudly!

But back to end-of-the-world predictions. In today's epistle, as in several other places in the New Testament, in fact in the reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians just three weeks ago, we are told that it's coming “like a thief in the night.” It's going to sneak up on us, not announce itself with sandwich boards on every street corner proclaiming that tomorrow is the end: get everything accomplished today. I was a fairly impressionable youngster, and I remember reading a novel when I was perhaps 12 years old that scared the bejeebers out of me. It was called *The Big Eye*, the subject matter of which was the imminent demise of the earth from a comet or asteroid that was headed our way. I frankly don't remember how the disaster was averted – or even if it was. I just remember how frightening the concept was to me at that age. But, of course, it may not take an extraterrestrial body to end the world. There have been enough post-apocalyptic novels and films to remind us that we are perfectly capable of doing it ourselves. To that vision, you may remember Robert Frost's chilling little reminder, *Fire and Ice*, penned as long ago as 1923:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

It is now Advent. The second letter attributed to Peter is read, consequently, in the context of the tension that is inextricably the keynote of the season. As we look forward to the birth of our savior at Christmas, we are also supposed to look forward to his return at the end of time. Whether that return is to occur one day with Christ descending from the clouds surrounded by a band of angels, or in the context of a global calamity brought on by human means, or whether it remains for the earth's demise many, many eons from now as a natural consequence of the way the universe works we do not know. What remains for us today is most importantly

the question of how we should live while we are here. And Peter's repetition of the image of the thief in the night is a wonderful reminder that, rather than sitting in front of our computers trying to calculate when the end is going to arrive, we would do far better instead to live our lives consistent with the possibility that the world's end – indeed, that our *own* end – could arrive at any time. May we not, however, do anything – any of us – to hasten that day, but, instead, may we always live our lives consistent with how Jesus – and John the Baptist, for that matter – would have us live them. Those who came out to be baptized by John, we are told, did so to confess their sins and repent – that is, to turn their lives around, so that their lives might be more Godly. Can we do the same? Well, ask yourself, as I ask myself, whether there are not many things we all have done that fall far short of the lives of true disciples of the Lord. Is it possible to do better? If Christ should return tomorrow, can we greet him with at least some degree of assurance that we might, in Peter's words, "be found by him in peace"? John has given us the answer. "I have baptized you with water," he said. "But he (that is, Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." That Spirit is a reliable guide to help us live up to God's standards. Listen for its still small voice while you patiently await Christ's return and trust it.

AMEN