

About the End

Proper 27 a
Mt.25.1-13

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As the weeks of November close in on Advent each year, our lessons for the Church Year begin turning to the subject matter of the end times and being ready for the great day of Judgment and Salvation. Even though Jesus says quite clearly in our gospel for today that about that day, you will “know neither the day nor the hour,” that sure hasn’t kept a lot of preachers and dooms-day-sayers from doing just that.

I remember back in 2006, I had just parked my car in a big shopping mall and was walking up to a big department store entrance when a woman outside shoved a brochure in my hands. I took it and glanced over it as I walked. It said, in big bold letters, that the end of the world was coming on January 13. Actually I don’t remember the exact date that was printed in that brochure, but I do remember thinking, “Well, gee, I wonder if I should still do my Christmas shopping. I mean, what’s the point, right? People clearly won’t need what I buy them if the end is right after Christmas.” But of course I pretty quickly dismissed this and went on with my life. And of course January 2007 came and went without the world ending.

But there is a seriousness about this in the scriptures. The end WILL come sometime. And Jesus HAS indeed promised to return for us. The whole book of Revelation is all about that. And Revelation isn’t the only book that talks about this. There are apocalyptic scripture passages in the Old Testament as well, particularly in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel. Even the prophets Isaiah and Amos have some things to say about it, as we heard in our first lesson today. So does Zephaniah, who we will hear from next week. But when exactly will this great day of Judgment be?

It’s clear from today’s second lesson that St. Paul expected Jesus to return even while he and some of the Thessalonians were still alive. Other New Testament letters have a similar expectation that Jesus will return “soon,” and they all follow Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians to “encourage one another with these words” about Jesus’ imminent return.

But it’s now two thousand year later, and neither the end of the world nor Jesus’ expected return have occurred yet. And as for people who have predicted specific dates or years in which this is supposed to occur, Wikipedia has a copious list that takes 28 pages of paper to print out, it’s so long.

Notable in that list are two famous writers of the fourth century church – Hippolytus of Rome and Irenaeus – who predicted Jesus would return in the year 500. In fact, several Christian preachers and writers along the way have linked Jesus’ return with the turning of significant years like, 500 – and again in 800 – and again in 1000 – and many of us remember the hubbub around the year 2000. The noted TV evangelist

Jerry Falwell told everyone that God was surely going to pour down his judgment on the whole world on January 1, 2000, you may remember. That date passed, and Jerry lived on until 2007.

Also notable in the Wikipedia list is Pat Robertson, another TV evangelist who is still with us and who is distinguished enough to have predicted TWO dates for the end of time, both of which have passed. This first date he announced was 1982, which he announced six years in advance in 1976 so that everyone would have time to repent and prepare. When that end didn't happen, Pat went back to his studies and wrote a new book called *The New Millennium*, published in 1999, in which he predicts the earth's destruction on April 29, 2007. That didn't happen either, but somehow ole Pat is still on television preaching regularly.

Few such predictions were as consequential as that made by New Englander William Miller from his study of scriptures back in the early 1800s. According to *Christian History* magazine, which we will be perusing in the Monday night Bible class, William Miller was a former captain in the War of 1812, and a Christian convert from Deism in 1816. Miller was so excited about his new faith, that he began a two year study of the scriptures to understand their truth. By 1818, he had come to some particular understanding, especially about a passage from Daniel 8:14 that speaks of a 2,300-day cleansing period that would come before the restoration of the sanctuary of heaven. William took this to mean a purging of the earth by fire at the end of the world. Says *Christian History*, "By interpreting these prophetic days as years and beginning from the date of the prophecy (placed by James Ussher at 457 B.C.E.), Miller concluded that the end of the 2,300 'days' would fall in 1843."

At the time Miller drew these conclusions, 1843 was 25 years in the future, and Miller was mostly a quiet man, so he kept these things to himself initially. But in 1828, says *Christian History*, he felt an inward call to tell the world of his discovery. "I tried to excuse myself," he wrote. "I told the Lord that I was not used to speaking ... that I was slow of speech and slow of tongue. But I could get no relief" from this calling.

So he started sharing his insights about the coming end of the world with neighbors and friends. A nearby church asked him to speak more about it, and through this invitation he discovered that he could be quite eloquent on the topic. Invitations multiplied, and Miller became something of a local hit up in Vermont. In 1833, he was regularized to preach by the Baptist church.

In 1838, he published his "Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843," which really seemed to light up interest more broadly in New England. At the same time, he began a lecture series in the large cities of New England. That caught the attention of a Boston Baptist pastor by the name of Joshua Himes, who took Miller under his wing and put his advertising expertise to work on his behalf, ramping up tracts and books and pamphlets and charts and speaking tours.

Almost overnight, William Miller the preacher-farmer had been transformed into the head of a Millerite movement with many other speakers and evangelists being sent out on his behalf to preach about the coming end. Says *Christian History*, as the dreaded year of 1843 approached, "more than 50,000 believed Miller, and as many as a million others were curious and expectant."

But Miller had not provided a specific date, only a year. And all these new followers wanted something more specific for when the Lord would appear. “Miller was reluctant to be more specific,” says *Christian History*, “but in January 1843, he announced that ... March 21, 1843 to March 21, 1844 must see the end of time. BUT, he pleaded, if the estimate should prove slightly inaccurate, his followers should have faith that their deliverance would come soon, in God’s appointed time.”

As it turns out, William Miller was sick through most of 1843, but that didn’t stop his lieutenants from soldiering on and being even bolder in their predictions. As 1844 began, Miller, who by then was 62 and resting at home from a strenuous speaking tour, was writing to his followers to have faith as the March 21 approached. The date came and went, and nothing happened. Miller was silent for a month, then stated that he had not factored in a “tarrying time” of seven months and ten days. So a new date was arrived at for Christ’s return, which would be October 22, 1844. It too came and went, and Miller died five years later as a discredited and almost forgotten man.

And yet despite the “Great Disappointment,” as this came to be called, many in the movement remained steadfast and the Millerite movement came to be known as the Adventist movement, out of which was born the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 1863, which still exists as a significant Christian group today, having more than 21 million members.

So what are we to make of all this? Surely the parable that Jesus tells today gives us several points to adhere to. First that there is an expectation of the return of Jesus as “the bridegroom” and that we can all expect a great feast like a wedding banquet with all the saved and all those who have gone before us. We can look forward to that in faith and truth.

Second, about that day we “know neither the day nor the hour,” and we should not waste our time trying to figure it out. BUT

And this is the third thing to remember, we are to live our lives in preparation and expectation, being WISE in having what we need to sustain us – the “oil” of a good and ongoing relationship with our Savior that includes daily prayer, daily confession, daily thanks, daily scripture reading and regular worship and communion. And never being so foolish as to think that other things are more important than this preparation and this banquet.

Such is Jesus’ lesson for us for today.

Christian History, Issue 61, 1991, on “The End.”

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/issue/a-history-of-the-second-coming>