

## Sermon

11/13/22

*The Day after Doomsday*

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It was supposed to be the end of the world.

In 2005, Harold Camping – a famous American Christian radio broadcaster and evangelist – identified May 21, 2011 as the date of Christ’s return. Drawing upon a view of the end-times popularized by C.I. Scofield in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Camping not only predicted when this fateful day would occur. He also predicted the order of events that would take place.

First, believers would be “caught up in the clouds,” as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “to meet the Lord in the air.” They would be taken up to heaven in the rapture. For those who were *left behind*, things would not be pretty. Five long months of “fire, brimstone, and plagues on the Earth [would occur], with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21, 2011, with the final destruction of the world” (Kane, “Harold Camping ‘Flabbergasted’; Rapture a No-Show,” *SFGate*, accessed 11/12/22).

The prediction brought our prophet enormous popularity – and considerable profit. Millions of dollars in donations from all over the world poured into the coffers of Family Radio, the massive ministry Camping led from 1958 until his retirement on October 16, 2011, just five days before the great tribulation he predicted would presumably occur.

Of course, we know how it all ended, if not for the world, at least for Camping’s career. The day of Christ’s supposed return came and went. Nothing changed, albeit with the exception of one *minor detail* in Camping’s prophecy. A “spiritual” judgment must have occurred, he reasoned, one which (conveniently for him) no one could see. The “physical” rapture would happen five months later on October 21, 2011.

When nothing remotely close to a “physical” rapture came to pass on October 21, 2011, the mainstream media excoriated Camping. They dismissed him as a fraud, a religious charlatan who, like so many others before him, told nothing but lies only to gain from them financially.

And they were right.

The popularity of Camping’s prediction lined the pocketbooks of his organization, amassing “more than \$80 million in the three years preceding [May 21, 2011]” (Margolis, “Followers of Rapture Evangelist Lost Millions,” *People’s World*, accessed on 11/12/22).

It also hurt a lot of people.

One woman, a teenager living in Russia who listened to Camping’s broadcasts, apparently committed suicide. She could not bear to experience the end of the world that he described.

Here in America, people sold all they had and gave the proceeds to Camping's ministry. When reporters gathered at Camping's door in Alameda, California, on the day after doomsday, he told them he was stunned that the Rapture had not occurred. Now he was "looking for answers," but would say more after he returned to work on May 23.

There was sound and prophetic fury, yes, but in the end all of it signified nothing.

### **Important Questions**

Camping's false prophecies (he actually predicted the end-times multiple times) raise an important question for all of us. In a world of for-profit prophets, conspiracy theorists, and media outlets that cater to consumer demand rather than truth, how do we know who to trust? Where do we go to find answers to the questions we have, say, about our faith in relation to politics, abortion rights, race-relations, or universal healthcare?

Do we search online? If so, what informs our selection process?

Do we read books? If so, how do we vet them? If we want to learn more about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, do we know that his most famous 21<sup>st</sup> century American biographer is a man who thinks the 2020 election was stolen?

How do we know who to trust?

It's the question Martin Luther's friend, Philip Melanchthon, raised in 1522 when three men came to Wittenberg claiming God directly told them to initiate Luther's reforms *by any means necessary*.

### **Chaos in Wittenberg**

Last week you heard the story. In 1521, Luther was condemned as an outlaw for refusing to recant his teachings. This meant that outside of his home territory in Saxony, Germany, anyone could kill him on the spot as a service to the Holy Roman Empire.

Thankfully, Prince Frederick the Wise of Saxony wanted his "prized professor" at the University of Wittenberg (Luther's hometown) to live. And so, his men "kidnapped" Luther and hid him in a remote castle until things would be safe for his return. This meant Melanchthon, a professor of ancient languages whose gifts were much more suited for the classroom, was left in charge until Luther could return.

Things quickly got out of control.

One of Luther's colleagues at the university insisted that changes be made immediately, without regard for peaceful and orderly reform. Violence soon broke out, thanks in part to the arrival of three men from the nearby town of Zwickau who regarded themselves as prophets. They encouraged students and townspeople to ransack everything from saints and shrines to icons and altars.

The end-times were about to arrive, they declared, and God had spoken to them directly through visions. They were accordingly beyond reproach. No one could challenge them.

Melanchthon, in turn, had no idea what to do. Were these men to be trusted? Maybe they did receive direct revelations from God. Yet why did they incite violence among the townspeople? Surely the reform of Christ's church would be peaceful.

Although other people, including some of Luther's colleagues, were won over by the sensational claims of these so-called prophets, their message and presence ultimately did not seem right to Melanchthon. Luther must return, he felt. Soon enough, Melanchthon's wish was granted. Luther came back to Wittenberg and preached eight sermons on eight consecutive days.

In his sermons, Luther challenged with Scripture the visions and dreams of the men from Zwickau.

He denounced them as fanatics or "spirits who swarm about" like a beehive gone mad (Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, p. 188), opting instead for a vision of reform that coincided with the biblical picture we have of Jesus as the Christ.

What, he asked, would Jesus have us do? Would he who resisted violence from beginning to end call us to take up the sword to reform his church? Would he who identified himself as the "Good Shepherd" lead his followers to their own destruction?

By no means!

The reform of the church must occur in a peaceful and orderly way. "Take me as an example," Luther would later write. "I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything" (*Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2ed., p. 287).

How do we know how to trust?

For Luther, it's Jesus as he appears to us in the biblical record, he who lives among us when we love one another as he first loved us.

## **Today's Gospel**

Luther's response to the Zwickau Prophets finds confirmation in our Gospel reading for today. Notice first what Jesus says about people who talk about the last days and when they will occur. Beware that you are not led astray," he says in v. 8. "For many will come in my name and say, 'I am he' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." Watch out, in other words, for those who draw attention away from Christ and onto themselves. Watch out for videos, DVDs, seminars, and books by apocalypse watchers who provide specific details as to where and how the present order of things will come

to an end. Watch out for Christian radio and television personalities who represent an industry of prophets-for-profit like Harold Camping, each of whom seeks your contribution so they can amass small fortunes at the expense of your curiosity and good-will.

Turn instead to preachers like the Apostle Paul who admit that they only see in part, even as they long someday to see in full (see 1 Cor. 13:9).

And when people tell you they know when the end will occur, consider what I did several years ago in Denver.

I was at a conference, and a friend of mine was the pastor at a nearby church. He preached a great sermon and the overall mood was good. After the service was over, I entered the line of people on their way out of the sanctuary to greet my friend, the pastor. As I got closer, a man standing to the side of the line asked me a question.

“Do you believe in prophecy?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, “although it depends on what you mean by prophecy.”

“I watch prophets on YouTube,” he replied. “The end is coming.”

“Well,” I asked, “how do you know these prophets are trustworthy?”

“I just know,” he said uneasily, not expecting to be challenged.

“That’s interesting,” I remarked, realizing that he was getting upset and thinking I should probably end the conversation even though I proceeded anyway.

“Did you know even Jesus admits his own ignorance concerning when the end of the present age will occur? Only the Father knows according to Mark 13:32. I guess if I have to choose between your prophets and Jesus, I’m going with Jesus.”

You can imagine the response. My interlocutor became so angry that my friend, the pastor I mentioned, had to intervene. “I can’t believe you have a member of your congregation who believes that kind of stuff,” I said afterwards, to which my friend replied: “I’ve never seen that dude before in my life.”

## **Take Away**

What’s the point of my story?

First, sometimes it’s best not to engage people who fervently believe they know how the world will end!

That said, you should know your Scripture so that you can assess what you hear. If Jesus, according to Mark and Matthew, does not know when the end of the age will occur, how can we?

Second, try to ascertain the disposition and motive of the person teaching or preaching. Is it all about them? Do they place their supposed experience of God above who and what we see God doing in Jesus Christ? Are they a for-profit or for-neighbor?

Third, pay attention to what they endorse. Do they encourage or justify violence, sedition, or the sword?

If so, then what they teach does not conform to Christ, and if what they teach does not conform to Christ, the man for others, the prince of peace, the Good Shepherd, then theirs is a voice we cannot trust.

Whenever, on the other hand, you hear of love and consolation, of peace and generosity, or of giving without seeking anything in return, then you have the answer to the question of who you can trust!

Here you have a person who knows Christ's heart and his gospel, the good news and reassurance that he is with us even in our most desperate hour.

We hear it today in our reading from Luke's Gospel. "Do not be frightened," Jesus tells his disciples in the face of persecution. Whatever happens, "not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls." "Stand firm," another translation of the last verse reads, "and you will gain your life." You will secure your life. You will win life [itself].

These words, my friends, come from the one you can trust, Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord.

### **How It Ended**

It was supposed to be the end of the world.

When reporters gathered at Harold Camping's door on the **day after doomsday**, he indicated he was "flabbergasted" that the Rapture had not occurred. He stated in response that he was seeking answers and when say more when he returned to work over a week later.

Well, what did he find?

Shortly after his doomsday debacle, Camping admitted that he no longer believed anybody could know the time of the Rapture or the end of the world.

In March 2012, he added that his attempt to predict a date was "sinful," and that his critics had been right in emphasizing the words of Matthew 24:36: "of that day and hour no man knows." Now, he said, he was searching the Bible "even more fervently...not to find dates, but to be more faithful in [his] understanding."

Unfortunately, that search would end.

Camping died shortly thereafter of complications resulting from a fall.

He repented for his "sin," even though he died a rich man. None of his donors were ever repaid. His legacy raises a question for us all: how do you know who you can trust?

The answer is simple. Turn to Christ and leave the Campings of this world behind. Amen.