

**Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, Revelation 13:16-18, Matthew 24:36**

**word count 2,321**

I didn't really prepare a sermon for today, what with the world coming to a violent end yesterday. I read about it in the paper. What tipped me off that it might not be as bad as all that was the fact that while the Los Angeles Times put the story on the front page, if I really needed to be concerned, they would have put it "above the fold."

Harold Camping and his followers, assisted by his 200 radio stations as well as his television outlets, got people all around the world convinced that the world was going to end on May 21; based on his own careful mathematical formula having to do with the time that has passed since Noah's Flood. At 6:00 p.m. on Friday, the first earthquakes would begin in New Zealand, and then at every subsequent hour, the lands in the next time zones would be destroyed.

People gave up paying their mortgages, timed when they would leave their jobs, stopped saving for their kids' education, and many people gave up their money to put up billboards announcing that the end of the world was upon us. One enterprising person started her company, "aftertherapturepetcare.com," where you can register your pet for care after you have been taken up to Jesus. The premise is, that there are some nice non-Christians out there who have volunteered to take care of the pets whose owners have been raptured, and they are on alert. The site features a video of cats and dogs looking wistfully out the windows at the souls of their good Christian owners rising into the air.

This stuff doesn't come from no-where. I thought I would explore the evolution of end-time theology with you today. The scripture that I had planned to use from the lectionary today features the stoning of St. Stephen, and since we commissioned our Stephen Ministers last week, this just seemed to be unkind and confusing. Therefore, I am using some texts that are lifted up to support, as well as to deny, knowledge of the end time.

What is 666—the mark of the beast? The Book of Revelation is poetry and liturgy. Many scholars believe that the number 666 is a code that denotes the emperor Nero, but the fact is that we really don't know. What we do know is that the treatment the Book of Revelation gets today in some circles that identify as Christian, is new and quite off base.

How far have attitudes changed about this? "666" is the original telephone prefix for the area around my former church, Mt. Hollywood. The fact that some one changed the number because it was the sign of the beast is exactly the point of what I want to get to today—the creeping mainstreaming of a kind of belief that was foreign to our churches for most of our history. Keep in mind that the whole community had the pre-fix "666" for eighty years, and because of the mind-set of that day, no-one would have thought to have even made a joke about "the prefix of the beast."

So, I have a few marks of the beast for you today that will no doubt let on how much stock I put in this stuff. 666: A Collection of Numbers of the Beast

666	Number of the Beast
668	the Next-door neighbor of the Beast
\$665.95	Retail price of the Beast
Route 6-66	Get your Kicks on the route of the Beast
665	Older brother of the Beast
666 <sup>0</sup> F	Oven temperature for cooking the Beast
666k	Retirement plan of the Beast
Lotus 6-6-6	Spreadsheet of the Beast
666I	BMW of the Beast

Formula 666  
WD-666

All Purpose Cleaner of the Beast  
Spray Lubricant of the Beast

The contemporary American version of end-time theology is based on the writings of John Nelson Darby. His writings describe a view of history called dispensationalism, which segments God's relationship to humanity into periods of time during which we are subject to different laws and criteria for salvation.

According to Darby, the current dispensation began with the Crucifixion; the next will begin with the Rapture of the Saved, leading to a seven-year period during which the Antichrist will rule the earth; after which will come Armageddon and the Last Judgment. Darby wrote that this was the literal truth of Revelation.

Darby's dispensationalism was adopted in fundamentalist C. Schofield's First Reference Bible, and is the standard reading of Revelation among those Christians who believe in biblical inerrancy, including Billy Graham, Hal Lindsey, the authors of the "Left Behind" novels, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

Now, we have this incident involving Harold Camping and his 200 radio stations that broadcast May 21<sup>st</sup> as the day the world would end. The billboards reach across North America, and extend far into South America, as well as into Europe, Israel and Jordan, where yesterday's end of the world was highly awaited.

Dispensationalism teaches that Christians should distrust their government, and expect decline as the end times draw nearer. End time readings of prophecies teach that the Antichrist will appear to the world as a peacemaker, and causes suspicion of all forms of power, especially of human attempts to form international organizations for peace, such as the United Nations. Almost all end-time folks reject the idea that peace can be attained in the Middle East, and believe instead that "wars and rumors of wars" (Matt 24:6) will increase as the end times approach. They support Israel because they believe that God provided the nation of Israel with specific promises which will be fulfilled at a future time for the Jews, and that the end times can only begin when the Jews have returned to Israel.

We should be very clear that dispensationalism finds no place in the entire history of the church before 1830. No one has yet found any credible evidence that anybody believed or taught such a thing in any Christian church before this date.

There is nothing "Christian" in the belief that one day, very soon, the select will suddenly rise up and disappear into the clouds, leaving piles of clothes behind to be picked up by the rest of us. For the last 180 years, this continually discredited story has been told, and as you may have read, peoples' lives were harmed by it yesterday.

On March 21, 1843, William Miller brought his followers, called "Millerites", to a hilltop to pray together through the tribulation that he had figured, based on the book of Daniel, was coming that very afternoon. After their knees became soggy and stiff from praying for something that clearly wasn't happening, Miller decided that he had simply gotten the year wrong, and so they all trod up the hill again on March 21, 1844, and repeated the whole thing with the same result. This event is recorded in history as "The Great Disappointment." One source says that at the time, there were about 100,000 adherents, but that many drifted away. The Seventh Day Adventist Church rose from this group of people.

The coming Tribulation has been prophesied in the events leading up to the Civil War, the assassination of the Arch-Duke Ferdinand, certainly in Hitler, the Cold War, and the destruction of 9-11. The last big end-times writer, Hal Lindsey, scared a generation with his book, "The Late, Great Planet Earth" in the 1970's. For Lindsay, writing in the midst of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China were the agents of the Antichrist. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, "prophets" like Lindsay had to reconfigure their apocalyptic calendars to resemble a sort of "Beast of the Month Club" focused

on the international *villain du jour*.

Other ideas that mark this kind of thinking in our country today: ATM machines and other revelations in global banking foretell the Mark of the Beast, and barcodes and micro-chips will become the actual “mark” that all humankind will eventually wear on their right hands or foreheads. The U.N. is a precursor of the One World Government prophesied in the Bible.

What Lindsey, LaHaye, Jenkins, and now Harold Camping and his followers, are selling isn’t new. They are among the latest and most successful of the Dispensationalists that have been around for 180 years or so, painting their prophecies from the palette of current events and a selective look at scripture. They will always have an audience. The difference this time is that they have been mainstreamed instead of being on the outside looking in.

It’s the “*sensationalism*” in “*premillennial dispensationalism*” that sells. Many Christians seem to love the idea that the trials of this world can be escaped by being selectively sucked skyward into the great beyond with one rapturous pass of the Holy Heavenly Hoover.

It’s the stuff great thrillers are made of. Good wins out in the end and enemies are left smoldering in the ashes. But is this really the point of the whole witness of scripture? That we simply fly off to heaven in the end and too bad for you if you’re not on the plane? Is that all there is? No validation to this life other than as a torturous preparation for the life to come?

Is the primary theme of our Christian life, “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off”? If calling oneself, “Christian” is merely about going to heaven, then why are Bible stories so many and so varied? Why does it take 66 books to give us all that stuff about loving your neighbors and enemies, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, being stewards of the environment, and taking up our crosses? Why are there so many admonishments to look after each other and show real care and concern? Is it merely something to do, like chewing gum, while we await the sound of the last vuvuzela, or is there more to it than that?

For well over 90% of Christian history, there have been no theologians or scholars who have espoused any aspect of the theme in the LaHaye and Jenkins books, or the radio and TV shows of Harold Camping. Every generation of scholar that came before the Millerites first walked up that hill would not have recognized it as sound theology; in fact they would have derided it, if not as heresy, then as the ravings of bizarre cultists.

When the church fathers were arguing over what books should be in the canon, many wanted to exclude Revelation. It was St. Augustine who argued for incorporating it, but only if it was read symbolically as the piece of liturgy it was, as a story of the struggle between good and evil. To literalize poetry, and then fictionalize it in the same breath by making a perceived “one world government” into the U.N. and the anti-Christ into the Secretary General is nothing more than all-too-carefully constructed paranoia, as most paranoia is.

In Genesis, God creates the world, the humans in it, and calls it “good.” Humans have tried for their whole history to make it less than good through their missing of the mark, their corruption, and their own creative ways of messing up creation. The biblical prophets constantly called people back to God and back to the work of being God’s people. They believed that despite our repeated attempts to the contrary, God is constantly renewing, remaking, and reforming God’s creation; even in the revelation of Jesus, here to give us a lesson on how to properly live in that creation with God and with each other. The church’s role is to be the agent through which God is already at work in the world. John’s revelation simply announces to churches struggling with the task, with opposition on every side, that the work will eventually be completed, whether it’s tomorrow or 10,000 years from now.

But how do we work for a vision of a world in 10,000 years or even 100 years from now, if the metaphors of our faith change so that we accept the idea that there are very real, immutable signs and prophecies that point to a world that will end in our lifetimes, and we do not have to be constructive members of society, in fact, *all* we have to do is to passively accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and

Savior and await the trumpet that will lift us up to heaven. If that is true, then our religion depicts a capricious god that creates in order to destroy, and the “saved” need only to convince others that they alone have the truth.

If we look to the Bible for repudiation of end-time religion, then you need go no further than Matthew 26—“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

After finally renting, “Left Behind, the Movie,” I saw a short trailer, in which an actor in the film described two of the other actors as being “great Christians” because they told her about meeting two hungry, homeless people during the filming, and they spent an hour with them witnessing about their faith in Jesus Christ. There’s the difference—wouldn’t great Christians have simply gotten them some food and not talked about what they did afterwards?

World events will continue to unfold, and we’ll continue to focus on what we can do — what we’re called and commanded to do: forget about escaping the world and get on with engaging it by being a healing balm. A bumper sticker says, “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” The question is, what would Jesus find us busy doing? Will we be caught looking up for signs, or busy doing the work we are supposed to be engaged in? Like his disciples and the great cloud of witnesses before us, will we be found doing the work of the realm of God here and now, making this world more and more into what God created it to be in the first place? Let’s hope so. AMEN.

*Sermon Resource:*

[www.aftertherapturepetcare.com](http://www.aftertherapturepetcare.com) It is worth a look!

### **Scripture for Sunday, May 22, 2011**

#### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-17**

**13** But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. **14** For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. **15** For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. **16** For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

#### **Revelation 13:16-18**

**16** Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, **17** so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. **18** This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

#### **Matthew 24:36**

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.