

## **"The End is Here!"**

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, June 5, 2011

Harold Camping, the Family Radio host, told us that the world would come to an end in Jesus' name on May 21, 2011. He used his radio platform and millions of dollars to advertise his apocalyptic prediction. Of course, that date has come and gone, but according to what many are calling "Doomsday Math," he is saying he was six months off, and the apocalypse will actually occur on October 21<sup>st</sup>. So we can enjoy our summer! But then, we'd better get ready for the end of the world. It was ironic, when Camping was interviewed on the day after, when the world was still here and there was no cataclysmic destruction, he said, "As you can imagine, I'm very surprised and very disappointed." He was disappointed that the world did not end in a fiery ball of devastation with billions of people killed! But I must tell you, I too am looking forward to the apocalypse. I think I'm becoming more Oklahoman all the time. I've discovered since moving here eleven years ago that Oklahoma's are a hearty people – they're fearless. In most places, when people hear a tornado is on its way, they take cover. In Oklahoma, people run outside with their cameras to take pictures. If a natural disaster is going to strike, it seems like some of our fellow Oklahomans want a ringside seat, if they can get one, and that's how I feel about the apocalypse. I want to be sitting near a window when it happens! I want to see it with my own eyes.

I want you to understand, that I actually agree with the pastor that the end times are here. The only distinction (and it's a big distinction) is that I have a completely different understanding of what is meant by "the end times." I want to do a little teaching this morning to put this whole apocalypse idea in perspective. I hope that's okay. The thing is that there have been preachers, doomsayers, false prophets, Chicken Littles throughout time, and it's helpful to put this phenomenon in context. For those who know the Bible, before there was Jesus there was John the Baptist. John went around preaching that "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" and calling people to come out into the desert to repent of their sins. Thousands of people follow him out into the desert

from Jerusalem and Judea, and are baptized by him in the Jordan River. It's a little hard for us to imagine what John the Baptist was like; don't think Billy Graham or Joel Osteen in a suit and tie, preaching and eating steak and eggs for breakfast. John the Baptist is wearing a camelhair robe, and his breakfast, lunch, and dinner consisted of locusts and honey. This is not the "Prosperity Gospel" of Creflo Dollar, in his Gucci suits and Rolex watches. But even without the designer watch, John the Baptist is able to gather more than any mega-church preacher in American could imagine.

Here's what was happening: there were a lot of false prophets preaching "the end is near," and calling people out into the desert to repent. Why would anyone do it? Well, you may remember how the Jews were once slaves in Egypt? Back then, Moses came along and, with God's help, let the Jews into the wilderness, and they eventually crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land of milk and honey. Which is a little better than locust and honey (at least I think, I'm not really speaking from direct experience here.) What was happening in Jesus' (and John the Baptist's) time was that the Romans were occupying Jerusalem and Judea, and were oppressive rulers and imperialists. And each false prophet told people that God had called him (like God called Moses) to lead them out into the desert to the Jordan, and once there, God would miraculously free them from their Roman oppressors.

Just like today, with Harold Camping, people who believed gave up all their possessions and followed these false prophets – in many cases, to their death in the desert. And we've seen this in American cults like Heaven's Gate as recently as the 1990s, when thirty-eight followers committed suicide on the same day, each with a \$5 bill and three quarters in their pocket, with the belief that this was what was needed for their souls to board a UFO and be transported into heaven. But John the Baptist was different from these other prophets; he led people out into the desert, and then sent them back baptized and sanctified. He sent them back spiritually prepared for a new, just world to come. A world in which the Roman oppressors would fall, and God and love and justice would rule on Earth as it is in Heaven. The Romans killed John – he was dangerous! He was not just some crazy guy leading people out into the wilderness to die. He was creating expectations of justice in people and preparing them to the creators of a new

world, in which values rather than violence would rule. Once John the Baptist was dead, Jesus picked up the ministry and reshaped it, but Jesus was also apocalyptic, saying numerous times in the gospels, “The Kingdom of Heaven is upon us.”

At this point, you might be thinking, “Ok, nice history lesson, but what does that have to do with me?” Especially those who do not think of themselves as Christians, or followers of Jesus or the Bible. Why should we (or anyone) care about this? Here’s why: the word apocalypse actually means “unveiling;” it is a revelation. It’s about revealing, or uncovering, the truth and exposing falsehood. We’ve been seeing beneath a lot of the veils lately. Remember the Enron scandal, then the Madoff scandal, and finally the economic meltdown that implicated the biggest financial institutions of our times and the corruption nearly took down the world economy. That was a lifting of the veil, of serious illusions and corruption at the highest levels of business.

Remember Katrina (that was only five years ago): the whole world saw on their television screens the incredible inequality based on race and poverty in our country. It is something that often remains hidden, but it couldn’t be denied in that moment. The recent nuclear catastrophe in Japan was the lifting of the veil of the dangers and ill-preparedness of Japan’s – and our own – nuclear industry. The Catholic Church pedophilia scandal that continues to reveal thousands of cases of abuse of children by priests all over the world...another painful lifting of the veil. Test scores have proven the incredible disparity in our public school systems that exposed the deep inequalities based on race and economic status in this nation. Recent medical research in Tulsa showed that people in North Tulsa die fourteen years younger, on average, than people living just a few miles south in the same city. Another lifting of the veil.

We keep seeing over and over the veils of falsehood and illusion lifted on some of the major institutions of our country: government, business, religion, education, health care. But we are so easily distracted that the veil gets lifted, and then we quickly put it back down and go on with our lives. There seem to be two primary responses: religious fundamentalists see these as signs that the world is coming to an end, and most other people simply ignore the signs and try to go back to a sense of “normal.” In this church, we need to be better than that! We need to make sure that our religion does not

become just another form of distraction that lulls people back to sleep. We need to realize and publicize that what has been considered acceptable is being exposed, and we need to do our part to imagine a new way forward. It means that we need to be part of the apocalypse: the unveiling of illusions.

We live in a time when we are potentially seeing the coming of the end of male dominance, white supremacy, homophobia, religious exclusivism, blaming the poor, and wanton destruction of the environment in the name of progress and profits. It is the end of the days when democracies can make deals with dangerous dictators in the Middle East without it being seen as hypocritical. And hopefully it is a time of reform on Wall St. and Capitol Hill. But we have to make sure that we don't fall back asleep and allow the veils to come back down. The world as it has been woven for a long, long time is unraveling, and our job is to pick up the threads and weave a new tapestry. And that means we need to have personally and spiritually prepared people in place, who have the character, the courage, the creativity to reimagine how power can be shared more justly, and society and religions can be organized so we don't destroy the planet or each other. And the question is: are you in or out? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution? Are you part of the culture or destruction and distraction and illusion, or are you consciously countering this culture with your creativity and compassion?

Now, we don't do altar-calls in this church for a lot of reasons, and I'm not going to this morning, but I could. Because I want to know whether you see yourself as one who's willing to dedicate your life to the re-creation of the world. Are you going to be a person who spends your life supporting the culture and the status quo, or are you going to dedicate your life to countering the culture and creating new ways of being, new communities. We need to create a world that does not hold one race above another, does not place men over women, does not confuse wealth with virtue, does not denounce people for their gender or who the love, does not put their religion as superior to all others just because it's the one they were born into. A world in which the President of the U.S. can be black, or Muslim, or atheist, or female!

I want to tell you a story. This week, I had the great privilege of attending the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation National Symposium here in Tulsa. It was

outstanding, and I learned more in two days about American history than I did in twenty years of formal education. But equally as compelling were the personal stories that were shared, and the relationships that I made in and between the sessions. One man in his 80s, who is African American and grew up in North Tulsa, said something that brought me to tears. You have to understand the context, too: I was sitting between a 62 year-old Native American man who had just told a story of being a child and watching a Tulsa bus driver stop the bus and force a black woman to move to the back, and on my other side was a 75 year-old black woman who raised her hand and said she remembered when it happened to her. And now this gentle, elderly black man was explaining how he was taught to live in two worlds.

He told us how his parents and grandparents taught him how he needed to behave when he was north of 1<sup>st</sup> Street, and how to act when he crossed into the white section of Tulsa. As a teenager, he found a job at the Adams Hotel downtown, and he remembered one day seeing a record player in a shop along 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. It cost \$125, so he started putting money down each week. He had done this for a number of months but had a long way to go, when one day the owner of the shop (who was a white man) said to him, "Here, take it home with your and just keep coming in and making the payments." Which he did, for over a year until it was paid off.

The elderly man who was telling us this story explained how he eventually was married, and served in the military, and moved to California for his career, but returned to Tulsa a few years ago with his wife. One day he was in St. John's Hospital, and he kept hearing someone saying his middle name, which nobody uses anymore so he didn't think it was for him. Then he finally came upon an elderly white man who was in a hospital bed. The man asked him if he had bought a record player from a shop on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street in downtown Tulsa many years ago. It was the owner of that long-gone store. The two men talked and cried, and the man telling us the story was glad to have this chance to thank the other man, and to explain how much it meant to him that he trusted him and helped him out back then.

And then he looked at all of us who were listening and he said, "I've been through a lot, and I've been treated in ways no one should be treated, even while wearing an

American military uniform. But I'm here to tell you that there are good people of all ethnicities and backgrounds, and don't let anyone tell you we can't come together, because I know we can do this." And he started crying tears from deep inside, and watching this 89 year-old man break down weeping, there was not a dry eye in the place. Even in the midst of a city that was divided by race and violence and injustice, the encounter between these two human beings, in that music shop many years ago, lifted the veil of falsehood. For that young black teenager, despite all he had experienced and heard about white people, he saw that there were decent white folks too. And obviously, the shop owner had seen beyond the veil of his culture and his times, and he knew that a young black teenager could be trusted.

And when the veil is lifted and the light of truth erases the shadows of falsehood, one world ends and a new world begins to appear. This is our calling as a people, if we are willing to undertake it. It's to not simply accept the culture we've inherited, but to continue to see beyond the veils of our society, and to expose the lies and injustices and partial truths. It's our job to live on the edge of change, on the edge of what is possible between human beings. Just as that area around 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Streets in Tulsa was the edge of two worlds – White Tulsa on one side, so-called "Black Tulsa" on the other – but it was on those edges, between those worlds, that transformation happened. It was in the encounters between cultures that the veils were lifted and new worlds were discovered.

My message to our graduates on this Graduation Sunday is: find your place on the edge, on the borders, on the horizons, "en la frontera" as we say in Spanish. Because it is at the edges that the world is remade and reimagined. Or in the words of the poet Lisa Martin-Ovic:

*The Edge is Where I Want to Be*

so [you say] you just want to take the edge off  
one beer  
one joint  
one teeny weeny Prozac  
  
get rid of the edge?

the edge is what Columbus sailed straight into  
it's the launching pad for every space shuttle  
the edge is Eve contemplating the apple

and what's life without an edge?  
guess what, it's DULL  
the edge is the cliff you've dangled from in a hundred nightmares  
you never know what's over that edge  
and there's only one way to find out

Brothers and sisters  
where are we –  
who are we –  
if we take the edge off?

Lose the edge  
and all you've got is middle  
middle aged  
middle class  
middle of the road  
middle management

you're dribbling along in the uncooked vanilla pudding of life  
all fat –  
no lean hard edge to drive you  
to sharpen your skills  
your wit  
your senses

the edge holds the answer to your question  
the question to your answers  
it's the trailhead to the road not taken  
the edge is everywhere  
you've never dared to be

baby, if you're not on the edge  
you're sleepwalking through *been there done that*  
you're stuck watching reruns of somebody else's life  
in the great mushy middle – where all the droning, moaning masses live  
and eat and act and dress and think alike  
and see the same movies  
so they can have the same conversations and then  
dream the same dreams  
if they dream at all

on the edge you don't know  
what anybody is going to do or say or think  
the edge is not available on your cell phone, iPod, satellite dish  
or anywhere in the google-able universe  
[...]

and there are no disguises here  
on the edge, everyone is naked  
all bets are off  
and the game's not rigged  
the air is clean and brisk  
your heart's pounding  
you're shaking  
you're lightheaded and queasy  
you're scared  
because everything is initiation  
on that sharp and unforgiving edge

[darn] right it's uncomfortable  
the edge is change!  
it's what you don't see coming  
so get out of your comfort zone and deal with it!

sure, the middle's safe  
it's safe like hot cocoa, life jackets and training wheels  
if that's how you want to live  
if you don't ever want to break the rules  
take risks  
grow up  
past your precious fears and life-strangling limitations

if you want to spend your life  
drinking lite beer  
smoking another joint  
eating what's put in front of you  
and home entertaining yourself  
till you suffocate on the vacuous paucity of your miserably crippled  
existence  
then go ahead – have a virtual life

but if you're tired and weary and battered  
if you can't take one more [jerk]  
riding herd on your wild and precious life  
if you're mad or sad or bored enough  
to wake up and do something  
if you're ready to feel the pain of the great

gaping would your life has become  
then [my God], friend!

quit your job  
quit smoking  
quit whining  
leave that jerk  
write that poem  
go dancing  
get sober  
take a road trip – a dare – a spin – a lover – a chance  
honey, break down and cry if that's what it takes  
then pick your [butt] up  
and for all you're worth run  
don't walk  
to the edge

Amen!