

When my family was in Charleston a couple of weeks ago, we spent the first few hours in town walking along the battery. The battery is the walkway that hugs the shoreline of the historic city. You walk alongside the 200 year old houses and military cannons. In our walk, we were approached by a woman who handed my family a pamphlet. The pamphlet announced that on October 21, 2011, the world would come to an end.

Inside the pamphlet was a select reading of Scripture and mathematical calculations proving that May 21st, 2011 would be the time of the rapture when Jesus would return for his followers and then on October 21st, 2011, the world would no longer exist. Those who had rejected God would spend their life eternally separated from God. So don't make any long range plans.

I was particularly intrigued by this pamphlet because I have just completed a class in my doctoral work in which I had to read the first of the Left Behind series books and lead a class discussion on this topic. The Left Behind series is a literary series which has captured the imagination of many folks and has appeared on the New York Times best seller lists. In addition, some movies have been made based on these books.

The premise of the series is that people are carrying out their normal activities when suddenly the real Christians vanish from the earth. Airplanes crash, chaos erupts, and the people that are left try to make sense of it all. In the book that I read, an airline captain, a flight attendant, and a business man who are left on earth after the rapture go through a spiritual journey trying to figure out what has happened. They try to discern what God wants them to do in their remaining time on earth before Jesus returns again in 7 years.

As I read this book, I remembered a time when I was about 14 years old. The year I turned 14 was 1980. And never telling my parents, I ordered this book and the album that came with it that was advertised on TV. I listened intently as Hal Lindsay told me why the 1980s were a countdown to Armageddon. Listen to what I heard

Read excerpt from p.8 of why 1980 would be the last decade on earth.

As far as I know, the 1980s were not the last decade on earth. As far as I can tell, Jesus did not return to earth and sweep the Christians up and leave the rest behind. Unless we are the ones that are left behind.

Over the next few weeks, the lectionary, the Scriptures that are chosen for each Sunday of the year that I turn to many times to read and which guide worship, have texts from the book of Revelation. I am also aware that the women's circle Bible lesson for the fall is also on the book of Revelation. And with people predicting next year being the end of the world and the Mayans predicting 2012 being the end of the world, it might be a good idea to enter into this discussion.

The book of Revelation is a difficult book to read because it is written in code. It was written to a Christian community undergoing a tremendous amount of religious persecution. They were fearful for their lives at the hands of the Roman authorities. They could be killed for publically practicing their faith.

The book of Revelation was written by these Christians who wanted to communicate with one another in such a way that the political authorities could not understand what they were saying. And these Christians were telling each other that the kingdom of God would outlast any kingdom of Nero or any future Roman commander. They wanted to reassure one another that ultimately God is more powerful than an evil they were encountering.

So when we read words like what we found in this morning's Scripture about how salvation belongs to God and how Christ receives power and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing, these are words of assurance to the Christian community that the pain that they are enduring is worth it. That Jesus does win in the end and is stronger than any other force out there including any demonic forces.

Prophecy books like this one that I ordered from Hal Lindsay and the Left Behind series written by LeHaye and Jenkins are helpful in that they remind us that we are to live each moment on earth as if it is our last. The Left Behind books help to instruct us to not let a moment pass and to review our actions. We are to ask ourselves, "If Jesus returned right now and checked in on what I am doing, would he be happy with what he sees?"

The way we treat others, would Jesus be happy with what he saw? The way we treat the poor and outcast and those in prison, would Jesus be happy with what he sees? The way we use our time when we are alone, would Jesus be happy with what he sees? So, yes, these books can be helpful to remind us to never take our time for granted. Each moment is a gift from God and should be used wisely and faithfully.

But in spending time reading the first of the Left Behind series, I was struck by how narrow the author's reading of Scripture is. In this series, the authors pick and choose the Scriptures that fit their well organized narrative of the end of time. They pick and choose world events and create a world where the good guys and the bad guys are easily defined.

I found myself reading this book and thinking to myself, "Is God really this boxed in concerning the future? Is God really this narrow? Is God really this predictable? Because in my faith journey, God never is all that predictable. God surprises me each and every day. Sure, it would be nice to have the future all mapped out and predictable. But reading Revelation for signs of a predictable future will leave us disappointed.

I want to lift up a different way to read present and future events and how God may be alive and active. I recently heard Tami Hayes and her daughter Dymond tell about Tami's experience in surviving breast cancer. Tami Hayes says that the person who helped her make it was her daughter, Dymond.

When she received her breast cancer diagnosis, Tami was a single mom raising Dymond, who was then 13. In this interview with her mother, Dymond asks her mother, "What did it feel like to hear that you had cancer?"

Tami responds, "I was afraid that I hadn't given you all you needed, and that we hadn't had enough time together."

Tami confessed that she was worried about how Dymond would react. After all, she herself was hysterical, she remembers. But her daughter helped her face the cancer, and her treatment.

"I remember getting out of surgery and coming home," Tami says. "I'm bandaged up, and I'm in all this pain. And it was me and you -- and there you were, being a mom to me."

Dymond helped her mother through the nausea that chemotherapy brings, keeping things clean and tidy. Tami told her daughter, "you just kept on, and I kept thinking, 'My God, she's only 13,'".

"Then the next day I wake up to an empty house, and I looked around thinking, 'Where is Dymond?' And you had gone to school! My God, you had gotten yourself together and went to school, after being up all night with me."

That became the norm. As Tami tells Dymond, "You never wavered -- if you did, I never saw it; you never showed it to me. Where did you get the strength from?"

Dymond answered her mom by saying, "I remember all the times that I was sick and you would take care of me. You always were there, so -- you did it for me, why wouldn't I do it for you?"

Our journey ahead is not predictable.

No one can predict the events that lie ahead of us.

But as we continue on this journey, we are not alone. AMEN.

-“Mother’s Ally Against Breast Cancer: Her Daughter,” NPR, Storycorp, 4/23/10
and found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126195546>

-Text: Revelations 7: 9-17

-Given: April 25, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)