

“And the Rumor Shall Be Quelled”
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Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus exited the Temple with his disciples, one of them commented on the extraordinary architecture of the place. We can only imagine what it must have been like, since the Temple was almost completely destroyed by Roman soldiers to quell a violent rebellion in 70 A.D. Even those who have been fortunate enough to visit the great pyramids of Egypt or the Coliseum in Rome cannot make comparisons, because a tomb or a place of entertainment could hardly stack up to man-made mountain dedicated solely to the holy rites of an ancient people worshipping a mighty God.

Yet Jesus seems singularly unimpressed. He dismissed the disciple’s awe with a prophecy that the Temple would someday be dismantled. Obviously, they were curious about when and how, but Jesus never answered their question. He only warned them against people who make claims far above their station. He cautioned them not to worry when the world appeared to be coming to an end. Wars, famines, and earthquakes occur in nearly every generation. They indicate nothing more than the constant coming of the Kingdom of God, which will eventually arrive to right the wrongs and restore the innocent.

Since then, some Christians have developed bad habits when it comes to predicting the end of time. No need to bore ourselves with the details of the endless train of false prophets who thought they knew with great precision what is, in fact, unknowable. And certain of our brothers and sisters have been joined by those outside our faith in foretelling of the final hour.

For instance, much has been made of the Mayan calendar, set to expire – purportedly along with the Earth – on December 21, 2012. A movie was released this week dramatizing the

last day of the Mayan long-count cycle that will bring either renewal or destruction to our planet. No one seems sure which. Maybe the event will include a little of both. Scenes from the trailer include images of an aircraft carrier being tossed onto the White House by a mega-tsunami and the great dome of St. Peter's Basilica collapsing into its own forecourt.

Such speculation, Christian and otherwise, seems based on a failure of hope and a fondness for fear. There's a part of that likes being scared: the rush, thrill of it; the forebodings of doom. And there are certainly plenty of people who like to scare others. Some people are eager for the end, because they find the world so faulty that only a complete shutdown or restart could possibly settle things. This is chiefly a failure of hope in the promise of God that the purpose of God will be worked out, despite the horrors and evils that surround us.

What we know through faith, however, is that our hope has not been betrayed. The author of Hebrews assures us that we are made able, through the sacrifice Jesus made of himself, to approach with boldness the mercy seat of God. We learn elsewhere in scripture that we are empowered to do so through the Holy Spirit, which knits us together in the Body of Christ, Jesus being the head, and each of us members, essential to the fulfillment of Christ's mission by the exercise of our spiritual gifts for ministry.

Hence, Hebrews encourages us "to provoke one another to love and good deeds." In other words, we exist as a Body to build people up, not tear people down, because the fullness of God dwelled in Jesus, and Jesus through the Spirit has chosen to dwell within the Church and within each person who accepts him for who he really is: an agent of creation, not destruction; a source of forgiveness, not a scourge of condemnation; an advocate for peace, not violence.

To provoke each other to love and good deeds, though, we need to embrace tightly the hope that what we do in the name of Jesus really matters. Waiting around for a gory and

glorious end, focusing our attention on the last day instead of this day, dilutes the hope we rightly share in what the grace of God can do through us. Without hope, we cannot provoke, but with hope, we can encourage one another to expend our energies in building up an edifice made, not of stones and mortar, but of souls united by love to offer shelter to those buffeted by the storms of life; to offer shelter for who seek refuge in the healing arms of our compassionate Master.

Indeed, we could argue that the last day will arrive only once the job is finished. The descent of Jesus on clouds of glory is meant as a victory parade. Many interpret scripture to say that rivers of blood must flow before the triumph of God can be complete, but Hebrews tells us plainly that the only blood necessary to change the world and bring about God's victory over evil has already been poured upon a cross. Perhaps widespread killing will occur before the victory is complete, but that will be a reaction of the world against the coming Kingdom of God, a last gasp of resistance from a world so confused by sin.

This is good news for those who do not celebrate carnage or take delight in vengeance. This is good news for those who have trembled in fear at the prospect of Jesus' return. It is good news for those who remain faithful to Jesus by remaining faithful to his presence in people, both near and far, who through the Church and beyond the Church, offer a witness to his kindness. For in truth, the kingdom of God is being built: one brick, one cell, one saved soul at a time. Once the Body has been brought to completion – and we cannot pretend to know what that will look or feel like – then Christ will come because Christ will already be present. That may sound like nonsense, but sometimes paradox is the only way we can describe the mystery of a God who is eternal and able to be fully present in multiple places at once.

So we wait, not with passive glee, complacent in our self-righteousness, but we wait with active joy, full of hope at what will be, because we are aware that what will be is already becoming a reality, as we build up the Body on Earth in which Christ has seen fit to dwell. You see, Jesus is not as distant as some may fear; not as distant as others may prefer. Jesus is right here, right now, and everywhere always. And once he's done, he will return, to the groans of those who lost hope in the present moment and lost out on the presence of Jesus here and now.

He will return also to the cheers of the faithful, who neglected not their hope, who gave their all in honor of the all Jesus gave, who refused to indulge in the speculation of those who claim to know more than can be known. He will return, not to launch a crusade of violence, but an era of peace, and those who have woefully misinterpreted scripture – which would be all of us at some point – may be forgiven, and a glory inconceivable will descend, but in God's good time, in God's good time. Amen.

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