

***Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.***"

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Pity poor Harold Camping.

Last week, the world was abuzz with the prediction made by Camping that the world would end on May 21<sup>st</sup> at 6:00 p.m., on the 7,000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Flood. It would happen through a great earthquake that would be far beyond anything ever experienced in our world. As I understand it, the earthquake would have gone through each time zone at 6:00 p.m., ushering in the beginning of the end of the world.

But here we are, a full week later. The end did not come. When Camping finally did make a statement, he explained that he had made an error, and that the end will come on October 21<sup>st</sup>. So, do we just delay everything a few months, and then go through the whole nonsense all over again? Personally, I don't think Camping has any idea of when the end will come. As people have pointed out over and over again, God the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to tell us: ***For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*** (1 Thessalonians 5:2 - ESV) Jesus went so far as to tell His followers: ***"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*** (Matthew 24:36 - ESV) While we are always told to be ready for the end, we cannot know when it will be.

And pity Harold Camping's followers. Some of them sold all that they had, in preparation of the end of the world. They used those resources to post the billboards and advertisements that were to warn others of the coming day of judgment. We just sang the hymn, *Herald, Sound the Note of Judgement* (LSB 511). Maybe Harold Camping misunderstood, and thought that he was the herald who was being called. Regardless, there are those who did listen to Camping, and who are now the poorer for it.

But even though Camping and his followers were wrong in regard to when the end would come; even though they may not have the right, godly response to the reality of Christ's return, at least they did get this right: it will happen. Paul is very clear when he speaks to the scholars and philosophers in Athens: ***"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.***" We are not to worry about when the end will come, yet we are to be confident of this: the day is coming when Jesus will keep the promise He made to His disciples in the Gospel lesson today: ***"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*** (John 14:18 - ESV) The day Christ said would come *will come*. But for the baptized people of God in Jesus Christ, this is a glorious day and a great promise, for we know that when He does come, we will receive the full revelation of the life that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I wonder how many people in these days saw Harold Camping and his followers much like the people who walk down the street with the sandwich signs declaring, "Repent, for the end is at hand"? For many in our world, the fiasco that surrounds these empty predictions becomes a way of judging all of God's truth. For many, the whole idea of the end of the world and a time of judgement, is just nonsense and silly talk. Peter spoke of such people, even in his day, and said: ***[know] this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."*** (2 Peter 3:3-4 - ESV) The scoffers of our day say, "Once again, we heard all those doom and gloom predictions. But did it happen? No, because it's not going to happen!"

Pity these people, my dear friends, for they are truly misguided and unaware of the truth of God around them. Pity a world that is blind to the signs that God has provided, which point to the day of His appearing. Pity those who think that they can go on any way they please. There is a day of judgement. God will bring all the nations before His presence. It will happen.

In our text today, Paul is speaking to the people of Athens at the Areopagus, the *hill of Ares*. It was the centre of government, but it was also a place of discussion—the place where people blogged or twittered and tweeted in the old days. From where he stood, Paul could see the Parthenon, the temple of Athena, the patron goddess of the city. He also saw other signs of the multitude of deities that the people were worshipping. This irritated and angered Paul, and we are told: ***his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.*** (Acts 17:16 - ESV) Paul knows that ***we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.*** This moves Paul to speak the truth of the God who created the world and everything in it. He also talks to them about Jesus, the God made flesh, who suffered for us on the cross. He spoke boldly of the resurrection. Paul pulls no punches in his message. He makes it clear that they have been lost in ignorance in the past, worshipping gods they did not know. He tells the people that God has been

understanding. Yet now, in Christ, God has revealed both His judgement against sin and His gift of salvation. And so Paul says: *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*

That call to repentance, and to an awareness of the end of all things is important. This past week a series of tornadoes made its way across the US, from Indiana to Tennessee. These tornadoes have resulted in the largest death toll from such storms in a generation. I imagine that the people of Joplin, Missouri, thought that the end of the world was at hand when the fury of the tornado destroyed their community. But it wasn't the end. The people of Slave Lake may have thought the terrible forest fires were the end of the world. But they weren't. The hurricanes and earthquakes that have ravaged the world of late have not been the end. But they do signal that the end is at hand. They call us to repentance, lest that day find us unprepared.

The problem is that for everyone who is so caught up in the end that they keep looking to know exactly when the day will be, there are thousands of others who do not believe it will ever come. In our Epistle Lesson, Peter spoke of God's patience, as He waited in the days of Noah, yet the unbelieving world did not repent. The floods came, but then it was too late. God's judgement was at hand. Will that happen in our world, too? Are people aware that the end will come? Do even Christians truly understand that the day of the Lord will happen, just as God has planned and purposed?

Some years ago a tourist was travelling along the shores of Lake Como in Northern Italy. He wanted to visit especially one castle called Villa Arconti. When the tourist reached the castle, a friendly old gardener opened the gate and showed the tourist the grounds, which this old man kept in perfect order. "How long have you been here?" the tourist asked. "Twenty-four years," replied the gardener. "And how often has the owner of the castle been here during that time?" "Four times." "When was he here the last time?" "Twelve years ago." "Never since then?" "Never." "Does he write to you?" "No." "From whom then do you get your instructions?" "From his agent at Milan." "Does this agent come out here quite often?" "Never." "Who, then, comes here?" "I am almost always alone—only once in a great while a tourist comes here." "But you keep this garden in such fine condition and take such excellent care of all the plants, just as though you expected your master to come tomorrow." "No, I expect him today, sir, today," the old gardener promptly replied.

I cannot stand before you and tell you when the world will come to an end. But I know God has assured us, through the resurrection of Christ that it will happen. The Lord will come again. Rather than worrying about the when, let us remember what the Lord expects of His people in these days. The grandmother looking out the front-room window for the family to arrive for dinner on Christmas Day is not going to be nearly as ready as the grandmother basting the turkey in the kitchen and only now and then listening for the car coming into the driveway. You cannot always be looking heavenward for the personal appearance of our Lord, but it is possible for you to be prepared and ready for His coming.

That preparation starts with Paul's call to repentance. Even as we walk by faith, sin still shows its ugly grip on our hearts and lives. That is why living in the light of our baptism is so important. Peter, in our Epistle, reminds us that *Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* (1 Peter 3:21 - ESV) Paul declares: *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.* (Romans 6:4 - ESV) Our Baptism is a daily repentance, whereby we drown the old, sinful us, so that we can rise with Christ to newness of life. We come with humble hearts before our God to find the forgiveness that is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We see the cross, and remember it is our sin that brought this judgement. But then we take hold of the life we have through faith in the living Lord Jesus, who rose again from the dead. We come and hear His Word regularly, faithfully and diligently, so that it may help prepare us. We come and feast at His table, to be one with Him and to find His grace for this life. We live in expectation of His glorious appearing, even as we look to each and every day that we have in this world as a gift of His grace.

We also want to share the hope in us with others. We don't want to confuse them, as those empty predictions do. We cannot be content, knowing that there are those who are not prepared for that coming day, without doing what we can to point them to the dying and rising Saviour. Yes, there will always be scoffers. Yes, there will be those who ignore us or ridicule us. But there will also be those who listen, and as the Holy Spirit works in the Word, He will lead them to repentance and faith. What a joy it will be, then, to know that one more brother or sister in Christ will join in that great and glorious day of deliverance.

Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the Lord would come tomorrow. He said, "I would go out and plant a tree." Each and every day, we live under the grace of God. We don't live in fear of the Lord's appearing. We live in hope. We know that the Jesus who rose from the dead, and who has ascended to His glorious throne in heaven will come again. And when He does, what a great and wonderful day that will be! Amen.