

## Carpe Diem

**“Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent .....” (Luke 21:36)**

In 1666, Solomon Eccles was jailed for streaking, stark naked, through Stanfield Market in London, carrying a pan of blazing sulfur on his head and prophesying that the *end-of-the-world* was at hand. In 1874, Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, predicted the *apocalypse* would come in 1914. He later modified the date to “very soon after 1914.”

In 1976, Anders Jensen appeared on the “David Frost Show” and announced to millions of television viewers that the world would be destroyed in a nuclear firestorm on Christmas Day of that year. And in 1988, NASA staffer Edgar Whisenaut published the book 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will be in 1988, which sold more than 4 million copies. But today, 21 years later, we’re still waiting for the *Second Coming/ Armageddon/the Parousia*.

(If you’re interested in viewing Hollywood’s latest blockbuster about global cataclysm, you can go see director Roland Emmerich’s “2012” now playing at your local Cineplex. And “The Road,” based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Cormac McCarthy about a post-apocalyptic world, opens Wednesday.)

Isn’t it obvious that, despite understandable curiosity about the world’s final days, trying to predict when it will happen is futile? Jesus addresses the issue in today’s gospel reading from **Luke**. Speaking in *apocalyptic* language about “end times,” what theologians refer to as “eschatology,” he says: “*Be vigilant at all times.... The day will*

*suddenly close in on you like a trap.... Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life...*” In other words, *Judgment Day* will happen someday, but we won’t know when. Only God knows, so predictions are useless... even his disciples, including Paul, got it wrong. And since we won’t know the date and time, we need to be ready all the time.

Jesus, in effect, is saying, don’t worry about things you can’t control. He’s also warning us about getting so caught up in the ordinary things of life that we forget about the most important things of life. And, most particularly, he’s warning us against attitudes and behaviors, choices we make, which prevent us from living a loved based, Christ-centered, purpose filled life.

Stay Awake! Make ready! Prepare! Pray! These are the themes of Advent, the season we begin today. The word *advent* means “coming,” which underscores what Advent is all about. It’s about making ready for the coming of Jesus -- today, tomorrow, and at the- end- of- time.

The Church’s liturgical year, in other words, begins with Advent to help us prepare to celebrate Christmas, when we relive the awesome mystery of God taking flesh to teach us how to live together in community; how to relate to one another – with loving kindness.

It’s not very likely that you and I will be around to witness the *Second Coming*, when Jesus returns in glory. For us the end will come, perhaps a heartbeat from now, when we breathe our last in a manner a lot less dramatic than what we read about in the Book of Daniel or the Book of Revelation. But just like our *descendents* in faith who *will* experience the apocalypse, in what ever form it takes, our lives will be judged not by

what we professed to believe, but how lived; what we did with the precious time we had here on this earth. And *quality* of time trumps *quantity* of time.

*There's a story told about a man who died after having led a thoroughly selfish, immoral life. Moments after his death, he found himself in a world of bright sunlight, soft music, and figures all dressed in white. "Boy, I never expected this." He said to himself. "I guess God has a soft spot in His heart for a clever rascal like me." He turned to a figure in a white robe and said, "Buddy, I've got something to celebrate. Can I buy you a drink?" The figure answered, "If you mean alcoholic beverages, we don't have any of that around here." No booze, huh? Well then, what about a game of cards? Pinochle, draw poker, you name it." "I'm sorry we don't gamble here either." Well, what do you do all day?" the man asked. "We read the psalms a lot. There's a bible class every morning and a prayer circle in the afternoon." "Psalms! bible study all day long! Boy, I'll tell you -- heaven isn't what it's cracked up to be." At which point the figure in white smiled and said, "I see that you don't understand. We're in heaven, you're in hell."*

Heaven, the story suggests, is learning to do and enjoy what makes you truly human, that is, living in accordance with God's will. By contrast, the worst kind of hell imaginable isn't fire, brimstone and little red horned devils with pitchforks. The worst hell is realizing that you could have been a *real* human being; you could have lived like a believer, but now it's too late.

For example, you could have known the satisfaction of loving relationships; of being generous, truthful and loyal; of having cultivated your mind and heart; of having done a better job of controlling your baser instincts, but you never did. Hell, in short,

begins on the day God grants you a clear vision of all that you could have been, of all that you might have done, but didn't. "*Of all sad words of mouth or pen,*" wrote poet John Greenleaf Whittier, "*the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'*" (Remember Marlon Brando's anguished lament in On the Waterfront?; "*I could a been a contenda!*")

It's not dying that most of us fear. Something else, something more unsettling, more tragic frightens us. It's fear of never having really lived; of coming to the end of our days with a sense we missed out on something essential. It's being haunted by the specter that our life lacked meaning; that it didn't really matter we existed at all.

A life of meaning, philosophers tell us, isn't achieved by great, heroic deeds, but by lots of little ones, like teaching a child a new skill; paying someone an honest compliment; comforting a grieving friend; reducing your carbon footprint. And, most importantly, it's achieved by pursuing justice, especially for the *least* and *weakest* among us-- the exploited child, the victimized adult, the homeless; the hopeless.

The Talmud says there are three things one should do in the course of a lifetime: parent a child, plant a tree, and write a book. What they share in common is that each is a way of investing our creative energy in something that will last after we're gone. Each offers us assurance that our lives have purpose; that the world's a better place for our passing through it.

Philosopher Horace Kallen marked his seventy-third birthday by writing: "*There are persons who shape their lives by the fear of death, and persons who shape their lives by the joy and satisfaction of life. The former live dying; the latter die living. I know that fate may stop me tomorrow, but death is an irrelevant contingency. Whenever it comes, I intend to die living.*"

My former high school Latin teacher of blessed memory, Irene Hess, was fond of telling us students – *carpe diem*, “seize the day,” live in the present moment. Although Jesus spoke Aramaic and not Latin, I’m confident he would embrace the concept. So let’s not fret about what’s past, not worry about what’s to come, but, rather...*carpe diem!*

Anthony J. Sciolino

Jeremiah 33:14-16: Thessalonians 3:12-4:2: Luke 21; 25-28, 34-36.

1st Sunday of Advent. November 29, 2009. (Cycle C)