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Transitional Pastor

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*“Starting off with a Bang”*

Acts 7: 55 – 60, Ps 31, John 14: 1-14

I suspect if the Pew Forum on Religion would’ve taken a poll, they would’ve learned that more mainstream pastors than not took pause mid-week before beginning their sermons for today. While few of us thought that the rolling rapture was likely to take place yesterday, why stare fate in the face? So, what? you write a sermon about the good news to be delivered a day too late? ...but that implies that I will be left behind, myself. At the same time, it’s not like I could call on someone to preach for me, because *that* would imply that I thought that he’d be around and *I* wouldn’t.

Then, there was the other question circulating amongst my colleagues, “Do you think we can get away without mentioning “it”?” A lot of us were saying, “can you believe the arrogance of this guy, devising some calculations from scripturally mined variables to determine the will of God for the end time?” We agreed the whole thing was just plain heretical. But there were enough people out there on the edges of their seats with worry that something had to be said, if simply, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

So, yes, it’s been a tricky week haunted by a perpetual conversation about the end times – even if we didn’t believe it was about to come. So here we are. May 22, 2011. I have to say that it’s good to see us all in one place. And since 17 wasn’t jammed the whole way North, I have to believe that we’re either still right here in Bergen County on a Sunday or we’ve all gone straight away to heaven. Thank be to God.

It’s not only recently that people have been talking about the rapture. There’s been a lot of energy devoted to the end times forever. In the last 20 years, this has translated into Tim LeHey’s NY Times best selling book series, *Left Be-*

*hind*, and many movies, such as *Armageddon*. Televangelists have been pounding the pulpit about the rapture for decades. But radio celebrity Harold Camping started this latest craze (even though this time –like the last – he was dead wrong).

Last week, as I was pacing around my home office, I looked down to see a book I'd had out a while ago and never put away. It was Stephen Hawking's *The Theory of Everything*. My interest in his book was renewed when I noticed for the first time, really, that he'd subtitled his book, "The Origin and Fate of the Universe." I took the bait. How would arguably the most intellectually charged human being in the world today – one whose written an exhaustive theory about the beginning times – hold up his end of a conversation of the end times – albeit a scientific theory of the end times and not, purportedly, a religious one. So I thought.

If you haven't read the book, I highly recommend it. It's a compilation of lectures through which Hawking describes his theory of how everything in the universe began with a bang. This effected all of the particles of the universe to eventually come together. Over the millennia, rotating galaxies were born and here we are today. But at the base of all of this astounding level of detailed, scientific insight Hawking begins to interweave language such as "what happens next is not completely clear (102)." While he draws intricate scientific conclusions, he redresses his theory with several important questions, all beginning with "Why." Eventually, he lands on this. "It would still be up to the mind of God..." "We should not try to understand why or question his reasons ...the whole history of the universe can said to be the work of God (137)." "(W)e have come to realize that events cannot be predicted with complete accuracy but that there is always a degree of uncertainty (161)." He argues against any notion that would infringe upon God's freedom to change God's mind and to intervene in the world (160). Hawking concludes his theory as the finest physicist he is, recognizing the incomprehensibility of it all, scoffing at humankind's quest to fully understand the beginning or the end. For then, he says, "we would know the mind of God."

Now we've had a creationist using careful calculus to conclude that he knows the intentions of God and an evolutionist using human resignation to conclude that it is not ours to disallow God to change God's mind.

All the rapture build-up of these last few months is capitalizing on one of humanity's most basic emotions: fear. It's big business in certain circles. What will happen to us if we don't repent in a particular way (never mind the many dwelling places Christ promises that God has made for us)? Gehenna, the fiery furnace, and the bottomless pit await the 97% of us who don't have our Christian life in order. We'll be separated from loved ones. We'll be tortured forever. Not that all of this isn't documented in scripture. Read 2 Chronicles, 2

Kings, Joshua 15, and Jeremiah 19, then move to Matthew, Mark and James: yes, it's there. In many places and with many descriptions. So while I'm admittedly a bit tongue in cheek about it all this morning, I intend no disrespect, dishonor, nor disregard for the truth of the Word of the Lord. I'd just like to encourage us to focus our energy on the *Good News* of the Word of the Lord, through which Jesus Christ tells us to live into as the grace we've been given until that most unpredictable moment described throughout scripture is upon us. Because it's true that we don't know the day nor the hour of the rapture, no matter what anyone proclaims from the top of the radio tower next week. But we also don't want to be caught short dwelling on the worst-case scenario for anyone.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is *good* news, grounded in a completely different emotion from the fear that the Camping crowd was leveraging. The good news of Jesus Christ is grounded in love. The good news of Jesus Christ to which scripture attests is that ours is something we've talked about a lot around here. Ours is a God of love whose perfect love casts out fear and empowers our extensions of self to create the great heaven on earth the world is really waiting for. As Jesus tells us, "the one who believes in me will do greater works than (he)" so that God may be glorified.

I'm going to bet that a lot of you saw *The Bucket List*, a movie released in 2007 starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. These two characters are roommates in a hospital, each battling what was diagnosed to be a terminal cancer. Through a course of events, they set out to conquer a list of things they'd like to do before they die. Traveling the world, they do things like skydiving and mountain climbing while they count down their days on earth (I'm not telling you anything you wouldn't hear from an ad. I know that's true because I didn't see the movie – but I have added it to my list.). While it might've sounded like a sappy film, I'm gonna bet that the travel industry, *and* the greeting card industry, saw an enormous surge in receipts the weeks following *The Bucket List's* release. Millions still talk about it today. What would you do if these were your last days on earth?

The more compelling question for me takes this question just one step farther. Because while we all have a God of love who wants only the good news of salvation for each of us, Christ's hope is that through our living out a life in his love, we glorify our Creator God. While we are living our lives in personal joy, we can each live our lives even more to God's glory when we live our lives in love to others' benefit. So, the more compelling question is one that some of you have

heard me repeat over the last few weeks.

What would you do to the glory of God if you knew you could not fail?  
What would you do to God's glory with the rest of your days if you knew it was 100% failsafe?

- I think about the whole communities of homes that would be built for children without parents. And I think of the house parents who would move in with each nesting of kids to lend them guidance through their school years.
- I think about the health screening teams who'd set up shop in Paterson parking lots on Saturday afternoons.
- I think about abundant gardens, meticulously maintained, yielding fresh vegetables for the Center for Food Action.
- I think about the computer clinics in church buildings for the unemployed from all walks of life to learn new skills and tighten up their resumes
- I think about the recycling project we could initiate to eventually save even one hillside in West Virginia
- I think about the labyrinth we could construct on the chapel lawn to give the community a resource for prayer and contemplation.
- And I think about the apartment we could secure and furnish for the mom and her *two* daughters, 13 and 8, who will begin to stay here this afternoon as part of Family Promise's Overflow Homeless Shelter

What would you do to the glory of God if you knew you could not fail?

When we act with the glory of God as our primary motivation, we bring the kingdom of God near in a powerfully loving and very great way. One whose life is focused on the glory of God is engaged in the world in a way that effects the world's exposure to the presence of Christ at hand in the world today. Then, each of our experiences of the present or days spent on earth are not planks on a bridge toward our death. Instead, each experience or day presents a unique unfolding of God's presence in our lives.

Our focus *on a life to come* affords us a dis-engagement with life here and now. A focus on the rapture like we've witnessed a focus on the rapture this past few months renders much of the world hopeless and helpless. An expressed solidarity in grace through our tangible expressions of glory to the Lord become a

perpetual unfolding of hope in the world that expands the horizons of heaven for all who are eager for even a taste of grace.

The way we die reveals a lot about how much meaning our lives held. When we think about our own end time, which *will eventually* come, will we have lived our lives in fear, focused on some unpredictable, only-imaginable possibility? Will we have lived our lives enthusiastically checking off experiences from our personal bucket lists? Or will we say today that we've lived into Christ's love-based reality at hand, the multiplier effect from which would surely be felt through all eternity?

Scripture describes the many effects that will indicate the end times. And we've sure experienced a good dose of them this year. We've got a wave of war spreading throughout the world on the holiest of soil. We've had devastating earthquakes in the most unusual of places. We've had unheard-of floods that've swept away the *homes* of communities, if not their hearts. Scripture describes in careful detail the prospective demise of all but a tiny handful of saved. But scripture also tells us that we won't know the day nor the hour and he who tries to calculate a guess is treading on thin ice, tantamount to suggesting that he knows the mind of God. And this, we recall from our Sunday School days of reading the creation stories, is the basis for what is often called original sin.

As I was reworking some of our sermon yesterday afternoon of the prospective rolling rapture, a guy with a fancy name tweeted: "Well it's 13 minutes past the Rapture here in New Zealand. I'm still holding out hope for the trumpet call..." Looks like we dodged another bullet. Thanks be to God. Let's celebrate all of our time on this earth as a gift from God and expand the boundaries of heaven on earth with our acts intended to glorify God forever. As a Big Bang might have propelled elements toward one another, may our actions bring us closer to one another in this kingdom and the next, never knowing the mind of God but always hoping to please him. What would you do to the glory of God if you knew you could not fail? May we leave this space with the reassurance that our Lord will do what we ask in his name, to the glory of our creator God in heaven who has created a place for us there forever.

Amen.

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