

In 1988, at the age of 17,
I felt like I was on the brink of everything.
I was a high school junior,
newly licensed to drive—
no longer a kid, not quite an adult—
with my whole life stretching ahead.
The future was bright.

Then, in March
friends of my parents came to our home with a message:
Jesus was coming back...this year
in 1988.

A booklet titled,
88 Reasons why the rapture will be in 1988,
profoundly shook these friends of my parents.
The author
a former NASA engineer,
claimed to have uncovered biblical clues
predicting Jesus' return between

September 11-13, 1988,
to be immediately followed by the start of World War III.

For those who are unfamiliar with the term

The rapture is a concept

an end-of-times belief

held by some Christians,

though it is not explicitly found in the Bible.

It is described as a sudden, instant, and unannounced event

where all deceased Christian believers

will be resurrected and,

along with living Christians,

will ascend into the clouds to meet Jesus in the air.

My parents' friends were so captivated by this book

They purchased 1000 copies.

They gave copies to all their family and friends,

handed them out at malls,

The book became ubiquitous.

Consequently, by the time September 11, 1988, arrived,
a significant number of people I knew
were utterly convinced the world was about to end.
I distinctly recall individuals giving things away
Desperately pleading with their non-"Born Again" friends and family
to "get saved" before they were "left behind"
and the "Great Tribulation" commenced.

September 11th arrived,
and no Jesus
September 12th came and went.
September 13th arrived.
There was no rapture,
no end of the world.

Since Jesus ascended into Heaven,
Christians have been trying to predict his return.
Throughout history,
numerous predictions have been made,
but all have ultimately proved incorrect.

Pope Innocent III, in 1213,
saw the rise of Islamic expansion in the Holy Land
as a sign that the end was drawing near.
His apocalyptic beliefs
served to mobilize Europe behind the cause of a great crusade.
The goal was to retake Jerusalem and push out the Muslims,
an act the Pope believed would precipitate the Second Coming of Jesus.
Though the ensuing crusades succeeded
in pushing back against Islam and recapturing Jerusalem,
the prophesied end of the world did not materialize.

In this country
William Miller,
a Baptist preacher,
prophesied
that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844.
Convinced of this prophecy,
his followers, the Millerites,
Gave away their possessions.

The failure of the prediction to materialize
resulted in profound disillusionment among the many followers,
an event now referred to as the Great Disappointment.

Not too long ago

Christian radio broadcaster Harold Camping
made multiple predictions for the date of the Rapture
based on a formula he derived from scripture.

His initial date was May 21, 2011.

After this date passed without incident,

He revised the date to June 3, 2017.

When that date also came and went,

He confidently set the final date

for September 24, 2020.

He died of a heart attack a year later.

We may chuckle at the naivete,

but there is something about the idea

that God will step in

to end the world

that continues to draw us.

In this country

It's a big business.

Who remembers The Late Great Planet Earth?

Think about the millions of copies the Left Behind series sold.

Christians are still seeking signs of the end:

Who's in the White House

global warming,

Natural disasters

the mess in the middle east,

and the wars all over the planet.

We love to speculate

This week's epistle lesson teaches us

that our fascination

with the end of the world is nothing new

What has Paul worried is not a sermon from the pulpit

but a frightening whispering campaign,

racing quickly and quietly through the congregation.

“The end of the world is here. We’re all going to die.”

Paul’s response is patient and calm:

Don’t let anyone deceive you.

Remember that God has chosen you.

Hold fast to what we taught you.

Many Christians, then and now,
become consumed with trying to figure out
the exact timing
or the exact identity of
the "man of lawlessness."

Throughout history,
believers have used
the newspaper in one hand
and the Bible in the other
to determine who this lawless one would be.

Paul’s intention in sharing these signs is

not to create a detailed end-times calendar,
but to reassure the believers
that the Day of the Lord
is an event of such magnitude
that it will not come secretly or unexpectedly.
It will be preceded by clear, public signs.
Therefore, they could be certain they hadn't missed it.

Instead, Paul seeks to calm their fears.
Don't let fear of the future, he says
paralyze your ministry in the present.
Trust the clear teachings you have received.
Someday, God will have the final word.
In the meantime
Put your trust in God.
Forget the scary speculation;
remember your secure standing in God's love!

We have been chosen by God
Chosen for salvation

Called through the gospel of Jesus Christ

Through the "sanctification by the Spirit"

and "belief in the truth."

Our faith is a gift and a process

that is *already* at work within us.

"So then, brothers and sisters,

stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught..."

When the world is shaking with anxiety about the end of the world,

our stability comes from standing firm

in the truth of the gospel we first received.

We anchor ourselves not in speculation about the *future*,

but in the truth of what God has *already done* in Jesus.

We are sealed and marked as Christ's own.

Nothing in all of the universe can separate us from God's love.

The Bible says,

For God has not given us a spirit of fear

But of power, love, and self control.

Jesus says about his return,
that no one knows
Not the angels
Not even the Son of Man
But only God knows
When the end of the world is to happen.

God's promise is that evil will be defeated
Evil will not rule this world.
That is a promise
A comforting, hopeful, and challenging promise.
God has the final say in all things

Until Jesus returns,
Live as if the day of the Lord has already come.
Love God
Love your neighbor
Feed the hungry
Visit the sick and imprisoned

Work for justice and peace

Seek the dignity and worth of every human being.