

## The End of Time

January 4, 2009

I think it fair to say, at least from my perspective, that I have never entered a New Year with as much hope as I hold entering 2009. But I admit that I am concerned about too much hope being placed on one man, not only by me, but by people around the world who believe that the Obama election not only redeems America, but is a catalyst to finally making a perfect world. Surely no one can be that naïve, yet that is the message we hear broadcast from around the world as NPR holds interviews with people in faraway lands on their interpretation of what a new American presidency means to them.

For many this is a time of great hope even as the world spins out of control in its aggressive wars in the Middle East, its global economic meltdown, and the scientific certainty that climate change will end life as we know it. And as surely as there are those who feel the hope despite these circumstances, there are many who would describe the political and economic and environmental breakdowns as clear signals that we are fast approaching the end of time.

Two months ago the LDS Apostle, Boyd Packer stirred things up in his ward in Sandy by giving an impromptu speech, saying that it's about time the Lord taught us a lesson and that a great catastrophe is coming. Since he was not scheduled to speak, many felt this message was important and inspired. Boyd Packer has a lot of company these days as people are getting worked up by the signs of the time indicating the end-of-the-world and the Second Coming of Jesus as outlined in the Book of Revelation.

Helping to fuel the belief that the end of history is at hand, the winning lottery number recently in Obama's home state of Illinois was 666 – the sign of the beast also known as the Antichrist. Many Christians believe that a great battle is imminent between God's armies and the armies led by the Antichrist. The Antichrist is described as a sweet-talking world leader who gathers governments and economies under his command to further his own evil agenda. In this world view, the spread of secular progressive ideas is a prelude to the enslavement of mankind. Consequently, Newsweek Magazine on November 24<sup>th</sup> posed the headline "Is Obama the Antichrist?"

The article tried its objective best to quote evangelists who believe Obama is the Antichrist and those who think he probably is not. However, the piece was fixated on a guy named Todd Strandberg, editor and founder of RaptureReady.com where he tracks current events and links them to biblical prophecy. He offers something called the rapture index, a calculation based on signs and prophecy of the proximity of the end. According to Strandberg, any number on his index over 160 means "fasten your seatbelt." Obama's win pushed the index to 161.

But before we dismiss these apocalyptic soothsayers as demented or irrational or fanatic, let us first understand that the subject called eschatology meaning a discussion of last things, is a major theological focus that also spills over into the sciences. It seems evident, from religious sociologists, that as humans we are just plain curious as to what will happen at the end of time, or "after" the end of time. We have always been concerned – and still are – about the ultimate destiny of the world; the ultimate destiny of human beings; and of course our own individual destiny: What happens when we die?

Religion offers certain answers that range from Isaiah's vision back in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE of a world finally at peace with social justice prevailing...a kind of contemporary Unitarian vision of humanity reaching perfection someday. Isaiah did add universal recognition of the one God of Israel, with people

streaming to Zion to learn Torah from Israel. But Isaiah offers us a warm and fuzzy, non-threatening view of our destiny as opposed to Armageddon and the clash between good and evil as put forth by the writers of Revelation and by the politics of George W. Bush.

Devout Christians such as Bush believe that God cannot establish His Son in Israel as King of the Jews unless the Jews are living in Palestine, their promised homeland. So it is God's plan to restore the Jews to Palestine before the Second Coming of Christ. The Mideast policies for the past eight years have been driven by what the Bible has to say about the second Coming.

It's not just fringe religious beliefs that deal with the end of time, but science, too, is preeminently concerned with the ultimate destiny of the earth. Until ten years ago, science posited that gravity would eventually overtake the expanding universe and the forces unleashed by the Big Bang, causing the universe to fall back upon itself, ending with the Big Crunch. Although that ending was always a comfortable distance away, I never particularly relished the concept of my future progeny ill-fated to be alive at the wrong time in history, crushed by the universe.

I find greater serenity in the prevailing view that the universe will continue to expand and the world will end ten thousand trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion years after the Big Bang which only occurred roughly 15 billion years ago. After the epoch of proton decay, as science calls it, the only large objects remaining will be black holes which will eventually evaporate into photons and other types of radiation. One scientist giving his account of the last things yields a very human response to the bleak projection that all of this will end someday. He said: "From here into the infinite future the universe remains cold, dark, and dismal."

Religion, I believe, arose to offer a contrast to that which feels so futile and ultimately meaningless – that this will all just end some day. Done, finished, kaput. Religion is all about finding purpose in the cosmos, and thus it offers a vision of a New Heaven and a New Earth. Contemporary theologian, Jurgen Moltman speaks of God offering us a new beginning which brings this perverted world to its deserved longed-for end. Religion seeks to replace the despair inherent in the vision of a cold, dark, and dismal universe with hope of a New Beginning.

Let us not forget the many different scientific eschatologies concerning the fate of our planet that include being hit by an asteroid as we were just 65 million years ago or a supernova explosion in our galaxy which would bombard our planet with highly damaging radiation, and the most prominent theory to date about Global Warming rendering us all extinct...very soon. An inconvenient truth we have managed to repress.

It is not my intent to judge religion as right or wrong in its efforts to provide us with various versions of the Kingdom of God. It is not my intent to judge science as right or wrong as it provides us with a scenario of ultimate extinction. But it is my intent to show that both religious and secular worlds are discussing the end of time and we need to reflect on the implications of that for our own understanding hope, life's meaning, and the demands of following an ethical life.

But why raise these questions now? Perhaps because we are entering not only a new year, but what feels to many of us as entering a new era altogether. T.S. Eliot made references to what he called "the dis-ease of time that arises in failing to integrate our past, present and future." The current "dis-ease" of time is practically palpable, and thus it feels very much like standing at a crossroad of hope and despair.

For many, the biblically "promised end" is very close at hand, and for secular humanists, the future does not look too rosy, either. How do we understand, then, the burden we carry to move forward to

creating a just world? T.S. Eliot offers a framework in his poetry that I find extremely compelling, and it makes integration of the past, present, and future paramount. Eliot, a Unitarian by birth who later converted to Anglicanism in the Church of England, makes repentance absolutely pivotal in his framework expressed in his religious poetry. Only by confessing our sins of the past can we begin to live more divinely in the present, which then enables us to face the future with hope.

That's a model, however religiously based it feels, that we all somehow carry with us into the New Year. Our incessant greed so blatantly manifest in the recent past must now end (let us repent)...and we must learn to live with less today if there is any hope of a future. We repent for our American global arrogance of yesterday, and pray we can rejoin the nations of this world as equal partners today...and thus forge a future of mutual cooperation leading to peace and justice.

Even Boyd Packer used Eliot's model when he spoke in his ward that we will learn from the catastrophe that is coming. Our prayers will be different, he said; our prayers will be less selfish. Is not repentance in our hearts this New Year as we realize how our transgressions in the past have led to economic devastation and a contaminated environment? Don't we feel a need to repent our foolish ways and our ignoble sense of entitlement?

As evangelists look to the sign of the times, the meltdown that points towards a cataclysmic ending, are they not really saying, along with Yeats, that "center cannot hold?" Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. And when we think of the endless number of Wall Street executives and insurance CEO's and mortgage brokers and ponzi schemers, it feels like Yeats saying the worst of us are full of "passionate intensity."

Surely the Second Coming is at hand. And what rough beast, Yeats wonders, "its hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Yeats described the historical moment of 1921, believing that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation .

Yeats was not unique in holding this belief. This is what Jesus' message was really all about. It was actually the Unitarian, Albert Schweitzer, who in his 1906 book *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pointed out that religious liberals had a very wrong impression of Jesus. Jesus was not this radical guy trying to make the world a better place, but was focused purely on eschatological concerns about the end of time. The Kingdom of God was not only coming, according to Jesus, it was coming very soon. Jesus tried to make clear to anyone who would listen, that God interacts in history, and thus when the center no longer holds, God intervenes. So we better be ready to receive this New Beginning. Repent for the past, live holy in the present, and the future will redeem us.

Intellectually, this religious model proves challenging for us liberal types. What we have in common, however, with the folks who work at RaptureReady.com, is agreement that at this point in time the center does not hold. And we all yearn for a just world that reflects "god's will" if we can share that language for a moment.

The major difference between religious liberals and evangelicals is that liberals do not believe that God actually intervenes in history to bring about the Kingdom, but that the Kingdom of God (or the idea of a just world) is built gradually by human efforts. For liberals, God is seen as the spirit or power that enables humanity to work towards perfection, giving women and men the imagination, inspiration, and mandate to work towards a global transformation.

Is there any wonder then that the entire liberal population and all the liberal establishments are ecstatic about the Obama election, feeling that we finally have the tools now to build a better world? Is there any wonder that an unprecedented hope fills us with the inspiration needed to save the planet and save ourselves?

If the liberal premise rests on the fact that human hands, not God but human hands shape the destiny of the world and our own destiny as well, then we believe, entering 2009, that we can in fact change the course of history. We have moved from indifference to hope...determined to impact every facet of our dire world from alternative energy, to making peace happen, to health care for all people, to a redistribution of money and justice, to affirming the inherent dignity of all people. And if that does sound like the Kingdom of God, I don't know what does.

I want to conclude with a rather profound observation by Norman Cousins: He said "Hope is a gift, and hope is magic, but hope cannot exist either in the individual or society, without the prospect of regeneration."

2009 has come to mean a regeneration of hope. Happy New Year to us all.