

Millennial Spookery

The postcard read as follows: “Dear Dr. Meyers, I read something in the paper that said, ‘Already, more than 100 American Christians have moved to the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem to wait for the millennium.’ Would you please do a sermon explaining what this is all about?” Well, I do so gladly, and I would have talked about millennial spookery sometime this year even without that specific request because we will have no peace from this nonsense until the present millennium passes and we go sailing on into the next 1,000 years. I wish I could make some sense of millennial fever without having to talk about what is known to Bible scholars as apocalyptic writing, or about the book of *Revelation* as an **example** of that kind of writing, but I can’t, so please bear with me for a moment of introduction.

In the apocalyptic approach to religion, the present age is always seen to be so much under the influence of an evil god that the righteous can only wait for the good god to break dramatically into human history and change everything. The Jewish people apparently picked up this ancient Persian idea during their two generations of exile in what is now Iraq, and as they consoled one another during several centuries before Christ their scenario held that when things get bad enough God will intervene to inaugurate a kingdom of peace and goodness where the righteous will dwell happily forever after. Since the earliest Christians came from Jewish backgrounds, it’s not surprising that when times got really bad for **them** they, too, would fall back on this same

kind of comfort. Several verses scattered through the New Testament are influenced by this idea, but the classic Christian example is found in a book called either *The Apocalypse* — after a Greek word in its opening sentence — or more commonly called *Revelation*, which is what that Greek word meant.

Apocalyptic writing is characterized by some of the most bizarre and grotesque imagery you could ever hope to imagine, and the book of *Revelation* is no exception. Its author gets into the swing of things apocalyptic by Chapter 4 with his vision of a heaven where God sits on a throne that looks like jasper and carnelian, with a rainbow around it that looks like an emerald. Around this throne, he says, are 24 other thrones occupied by 24 elders dressed in white with golden crowns on their heads. Lightning flashes and thunder rolls from the throne, and burning in front of it are seven torches of fire identified as “the seven spirits of God.” Around the sides of the throne are four living creatures, one like a lion, one like an ox, one like a human, one like a flying eagle. Each of these creatures has six wings and they all sing non-stop praise to God.

But this is only for starters. If you keep going you encounter four horses — white, red, black, and pale — ridden in succession by **three** riders who carry deadly weapons and **one** rider who holds a set of scales. In this vision the sun turns black, the moon goes blood-red, the stars fall like leaves blowing in a winter storm, the sky vanishes like a rolled up scroll, and all the mountains (those great symbols of permanence) are shaken from their places. One of the falling stars (an angel, it seems), having been given the key to a bottomless pit, opens it, and smoke pours out — followed by terrible scorpion-like locusts who sting and torture all who do not have

the seal of God on their foreheads. These awful creatures have human faces, hair like women, teeth like lions, and stingers in their tails. I still remember picking up a howling prophet on my car radio years ago who knew exactly what those terrible locusts were: Boeing B-29 bombers, he told us, and the deadly stingers were the machine guns in their tail sections.

And just when you think it can't get any wilder, it does. When a woman wearing a crown of 12 stars shows up, crying out in the pains of childbirth, a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns sweeps down out of heaven to devour the child at its birth. God snatches the child away to his throne, while the woman flees into the desert where God has prepared a place where she can be nourished for 1,260 days. (The numerologists have had a field day with that figure!). War breaks out next between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels, and although the Satan dragon is defeated, he promptly goes off in search of that missing mother. She has now been given the two wings of a great eagle so she can fly away, so the dragon pours a huge flood of water out of his mouth to drown her, but the earth saves her by opening up to swallow the great river. Disappointed, the dragon goes off to make war on the rest of humanity, who presumably will be a little easier to defeat than the woman.

By now, you will not be surprised to learn that Christians were split for several centuries over what to do with a book as strange as this one. An influential Christian scholar living in Rome couldn't buy into all these weird images and so he rejected *Revelation* as part of the church's sacred library, but in 215 A.D. the great

Christian leader Hippolytus defended the book so vigorously that the Western church accepted it as part of the sacred canon. It was different with the Eastern church, and *Revelation* was not included in the list of books approved by the Synod of Laodicea around the year 360. It was specifically rejected by an influential bishop of Jerusalem (Cyril), who not only forbade that it be read in **public** but prohibited **private** reading as well. That the book of *Revelation* finally won out and became part of the New Testament is probably due to the power of Rome in the early Christian world.

I am not the only student of the Bible who wishes that the early church had united in tossing it out, like so many other books which were rejected before the list was finally fixed in the 4th century. Last summer, during a whale-watching trip among the San Juan Islands, I saw several times those great circles of water that literally boil in a feeding frenzy when predatory fish catch up with schools of prey. The book of *Revelation*, over the centuries, has provided a similar feeding frenzy for certified crazies and wild-eyed prophets of every hue and stripe. It has been used to create cults, to separate gullible followers from their money and their homes, to lead them at times, even, into mass suicides. When I weigh the *harm* this book has done against whatever **usefulness** anyone can plead for it, I wish with all my heart that it had been piled up somewhere with all the other apocalyptic literature of those centuries and forgotten except by a few inquisitive scholars.

With a brief definition of apocalyptic writing out of the way, and a brief introduction to *Revelation* as the most famous example of it, we can now turn to consider what the title of this sermon promised: millennial

spookery. It all derives from two closing chapters of *Revelation* in which the author has still another of his lurid visions. He sees an angel come down from heaven to seize the dragon who is Satan, bind him, throw him into the bottomless pit, and seal it for a thousand years — in other words, for a millennium. At this point all the martyrs who had died for their faith are resurrected to reign with Christ during that thousand years. It would be pleasant to think that this meant no more evil on earth, but at the end of the thousand years an angel comes to unlock Satan's prison so he can go out once again to deceive the nations, referred to as Gog and Magog — and O what a fertile ground for wild theories those names have provided!. You may wonder why when Satan is safely locked up he should be turned loose again by heaven to recruit still more followers, but it's all part of a nightmarish drama which the devoted Christian scholar William Barclay has described — charitably enough, I think! — as “subchristian.”

Unfortunately, people who like to play in the shifting sands of millennial theory, and set dates for dramatic changes in the world order, simply ignore what Jesus said to his followers when they wanted a time schedule for such a dramatic change. *It is not for you to know such things*, he told them. *That is God's business.* (Acts 1) But predictions have turned out to be good business for would-be prophets who tell the gullible of each succeeding generation that they **do** know, after all, what Jesus said no one knows.

So, the Berlin Wall falls, and for months radio and TV prophets tell us that this great event proves the world is about to end. It doesn't, but by and by Russia collapses in chaos, and that becomes the sign that God is

about to intervene. Ingenious minds, of course, can make anything appear to be a sign that the Last Days are upon us: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, volcanic eruptions, floods, famine, global warming, El Nino, scandal in Washington, the Y2K computer problem — the list is endless, and as the world plods on after each so-called “sign” fails and is forgotten, the Doomsday prophets simply wait for another one which they will confidently preach as a sign from God. Movie-makers exploit our fears with films like *Apocalypse Now*, and some charismatic screwball sees a comet signaling the End and forms a cult called Heaven's Gate which ends, as such groups have ended before, in mass suicide.

Even among the millions of Americans who read the surreal images of *Revelation* **literally** and struggle to figure out what they mean, the great majority are decent, harmless people. But over the centuries there has always been a lunatic fringe capable of turning deadly. You can hardly have missed reading about the latest one. A man named Monte Kim Miller talks 78 people looking for new hope and excitement into believing that the present age will end in a few months. He tells them that as it happens he expects to die and be resurrected in Jerusalem, to dwell in God's brand-new kingdom of righteousness. To the dismay of their relatives these people sell their belongings and disappear from Denver, 14 of them turning up in Jerusalem where they rent a couple of houses and wait for the world to end.

And they are not the only ones. In an Arab neighborhood overlooking the Temple Mount, other Christians have reportedly rented housing so they can be on hand when Jesus returns at the end of this year.

You have to pity the poor Israelis! As if their troubles with political terrorists are not enough, their police are convinced that some of these radical Christians intend to commit extreme and violent acts in the streets of Jerusalem toward the end of 1999 in order to hasten the coming of Christ. So, recently, they arrested the 14 from Denver and deported them. Others of the cult, including Miller himself, are hiding somewhere to escape the destruction they say is coming to the U.S., but they are **also** expected to try to make it to Jerusalem before the end of this year. It may all sound like the X-Files, but the government of Israel takes quite seriously the prospect that Miller's group, and other millennium fanatics, may try to force God's hand in fulfilling what they see as Biblical prophecy.

Adding to all this **millennial** fever is belief by millions of fundamentalist Christians in something they call the *Rapture*, an event which will have them snatched off the earth in the Last Days to be with God. Non-believers and lapsed Christians will be left behind to face the final plagues and terrors associated with the millennium, a prospect so horrific that a 4-book novel published recently chose the phrase "Left Behind" as its scary title. With all four books in top slots on the Publisher's Weekly list of religious bestsellers, sales have already passed the 3 million mark. The authors have cashed in big on the public's fixation with the approaching year 2000. The publishers' Web Site is said to be getting around 80,000 electronic hits per day. A spinoff from the book has a series for children, a music CD, and hats and t-shirts bearing the slogan, DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND. One of the authors, a fundamentalist preacher named Tim LaHaye, says the Y2K computer

problem could “very well trigger a financial meltdown leading to an international depression, which would make it possible for the Antichrist or his emissaries to establish a one-world currency or a one-world economic system which will dominate the world commercially until it is destroyed.” I’m sure the new Euro dollar is seen by Mr. LaHaye as proof enough that we are heading toward a one-world currency, a possibility which for whatever reasons seems to scare these people to death.

Even Nostradamus gets into this act. The 16th century French physician, who turned to mysticism and wrote books foretelling the future, prophesied in one obscure 4-line poem that in 1999 “from the sky there will come a great King of terror.” Since no one has the faintest idea what he meant, everyone can guess, and the guessing has turned into a sizeable industry as this millennium winds down. It’s true, as you may be thinking right now, that the millennium is after all only an entirely artificial mark on the calendar, but as one of America’s great magazine editors writes, our preoccupation with it shows a “deep psychological need to believe that we are not lost in time, that we are going somewhere, and that we can glimpse where.” The year 2000 will pass, he suggests, with no cataclysmic events, and “we will feel a little forlorn for a while” before the centuries-old guessing games start reaching toward the next great millennial round number of A.D. 3000.” (Henry Grunwald, former Editor-in-Chief of *Time, Inc.*)

Meanwhile, mainstream Christian denominations like the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists and others, accept the declaration of Jesus (Mk.13:32) that of the day and hour of the

Endtime, “no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” leave the guessing games to others, and go on quietly working as hard as possible to make the kingdom of God a reality upon this earth.

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I couldn't quite figure out where to put it, so there is a footnote to this sermon. Some of you must have read about the entrepreneurial spirit of the Israeli's as they prepare to cash in on the millennial fever associated with the year 2000.....but if you missed it, it's good to ignore. Israel's National Parks Authority has agreed to the construction of an odd kind of causeway on the Sea of Galilee, so that tourists can imitate the story of Jesus walking on water. Scheduled to be ready by August, this walkway will be just barely submerged under 2 inches of water, so as to make it appear that the tourists are performing a modern miracle. The walkway will be 13' wide, 28' long, and will accommodate up to 50 people at a time. To enhance the effect, it will have no handrails, but lifeguards and boats will be nearby in case a walker happens to slip. It does seem sometimes that in the spirit of unbridled free enterprise the Holy Land is more and more on the way to becoming the Hokey Land. I hope the Israeli's will be dissuaded by laughter from around the world, but if not — and they throw that party anyway — I rather hope nobody comes!

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Direct our lives this week, gracious God, toward the fulfillment of your purposes, and help us

always to be receptive to your will....in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.