

THE TOWER

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A NOTE FROM THE MINISTER

“The End of the World: Destruction or Renewal?”



December 21, 2012, has come and gone and the world did not end. The ancient Mayan prediction has not come to pass. The world calendar has not reset itself to zero. We are in a new year, 2013, with new possibilities and opportunities awaiting us.

When we think of the end of the world, what images come into our minds? Images of doom, destruction, and despair? Where do we get these ideas? Are Christians supposed to be cultural optimists or pessimists?

Much of American Christianity is culturally pessimistic. This arises from a twisted interpretation of the scriptures that actually looks forward to the end of the world. These fundamentalist and evangelical Christians seek to hasten the end of the world because they believe that they will be “raptured,” that is, removed from the world before the apocalypse wreaks its destruction upon the earth’s remaining inhabitants.

According to this view, the return of Christ is not a one-time event. In fact, it comes in three stages.

First there is the aforementioned “Rapture,” which comes like “a thief in the night,” when all true believers suddenly disappear from the world. This occurrence precipitates a series of horrifying episodes that leads to the rise of a tyrannical world ruler, the “Antichrist,” who sets himself up as the world’s savior, demanding ultimate political obedience and religious veneration as God.

Seven years after the Rapture, when the world is at the height of its chaos, the second stage occurs when Jesus Christ returns to earth to defeat the Antichrist and to set up his literal 1000-year kingdom, ruling the world with an iron fist from Jerusalem.

But wait, this is still not the end. Despite this period of time referred to as the “Millennium,” there is yet a final failed rebellion instigated by Satan to overthrow Christ’s kingdom at the end of the 1000 years. Only after Satan is conclusively defeated does the end of the world arrive, the third and final stage of Christ’s Second

Coming. At this time, the dead are raised, some to everlasting glory in heaven and others to everlasting torment in hell.

The above scenario has been reinforced in our culture by Tim LaHaye's best-selling *Left Behind* series of 16 books (1995-2007), which have sold over 70,000,000 copies. Three of the books have been made into full-length feature films: *Left Behind: The Movie* (2001), *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (2002), and *Left Behind: World at War* (2005).

Is this really what the Bible teaches? Don't be alarmed. The answer is no. God's ultimate intention for us and the world is not destruction, but rather, renewal. Nevertheless, prophecies, even misinterpreted ones, can be self-fulfilling. That's because how one views the world influences how one acts. Disagreement among Christians over the "end times" is not just an academic matter. How one thinks about the end times determines one's whole outlook in the present.

If we believe that God intends to destroy the world, then we won't have much regard for creation right now. We won't concern ourselves with climate change, pollution, recycling, and the environment. We won't concern ourselves with overpopulation, hunger, poverty, and all the social, political, and economic problems in the world because Christians will be suddenly snatched from the world and not need to deal with these issues.

But what if the Rapture is an illusion? What if Christ is not going to remove his followers from the world in an instant? What if instead Christ gives us the responsibility to care for the world for future generations?

There are two passages in the New Testament that those Christians who believe in the Rapture and God's destruction of the world at the end of time love to quote. It is worth briefly analyzing them to show that these scriptures are in fact being misinterpreted, if not misquoted.

The first is a favorite of evangelical Christians to substantiate their belief in the Rapture, Matthew 24:36-41, where Jesus says:

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will

be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. (New Revised Standard Version)

Right there in this passage, the evangelicals insist, is the teaching of the Rapture. But wait a minute! Let's look at this passage more closely. Who is taken and who is left? The evangelicals tell us, "Why, naturally, the believers are the ones taken and the unbelievers are the ones left!" But that's not what this passage says. The analogy with Noah that Jesus is making here makes it clear that the ones who will be taken are similar to the ones who died in the flood. The ones who are left on the earth are the ones who survive, just as God graciously allowed Noah and his family and the animals to survive in the ark when the flood arrived.

So much for the Rapture! The ones who will be taken out of the world are those who will be killed, just as those who were taken in Noah's day were the ones who were killed in the flood. The ones who are left are the ones who will be allowed to remain living in God's creation, just as Noah and his family and the animals were the ones who were allowed to live as they replenished the world once again.

Rather than teaching that God desires to take Christians out of the world, this passage says just the opposite, namely, that God desires the world to continue, and those commissioned by God to be the caretakers of the world for the future are the followers of Jesus Christ.

The second text that evangelicals love to quote is 2 Peter 3:10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. (New Revised Standard Version)

I can somewhat see why evangelicals quote this passage to reinforce their view that God intends to destroy the world at the end of time because the last verb has not always been translated properly. The New American Standard Bible and the Revised

Standard Version translate the verb as “will be burned up” and the King James Version says “shall be burned up.” The New International Version is somewhat better in its translation, “will be laid bare.” We must remember that our English Bibles are all translations from Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament). There is no exact word for word correspondence between any two languages. This is why translation is such a difficult and very often an inexact science.

There seems to be a big difference between “to be disclosed” and “to be burned up.” Is God’s coming judgment at the end of the world to be a cosmic annihilation of the present created order or a smelting process from which the world will emerge purified? The Greek verb used here, *heurethisetai*, is a metallurgical term appropriate to smelting and refining. When a metal was placed into the fire, it came out purified of its dross and impurities, so that its genuine self became “disclosed” or “laid bare.”

With this understanding of the verb, we get an altogether different idea of the end of the world. God does not intend to destroy the world, but rather, to purify or renew it, just as a metallurgist plunges the gold into the fire so that it may emerge in a purer, more refined form.

God’s aim is always a redemptive one. Even God’s judgments are always in the context of redeeming or saving. So will they be in the future. The end of the world, therefore, should not conjure up images of doom and gloom, but rather, joy and gladness as “we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Peter 3:13).

Blessings in Christ,

Pastor Gary

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**GAME NIGHT WILL TAKE PLACE ON SATURDAY EVENING, JANUARY 12, AT 7:00PM
AT THE CHURCH IN THE LEE ROOM**

Bring your favorite board games! Bring your friends! Bring snacks! It’s lots of fun!
Youth and children are welcome! It’s a great way to socialize!

**MOVIE MATINEE ON SUNDAY,
JANUARY 20, PRESENTS *TO KILL A
MOCKINGBIRD***



Considered one of the greatest films ever made, based on Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, this 1962 movie features an Academy Award-winning performance by Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, a lawyer in a racially divided Alabama town in the 1930s. Despite fierce objections from the white community, he agrees to defend a young black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman. The story unfolds in a very poignant manner from the perspective of Finch's young daughter, Scout. Appropriate for youth 12 and older. Don't forget to bring your lunch to the Roy Room as we will eat together following the worship service and proceed to watch the film about 11:30am.



Heartfelt Thanks

Dear Church Family and Friends,

Thank you so much for the beautiful Christmas card and extremely generous gift tucked inside! Bless you all for your meaningful expression of appreciation and love. With the Lord's light guiding, may each one of our Park Congregational Church family members be held in His love in the New Year as we continue to serve Him in our faith.

*With love always in Christ,
Pastor Gary and Linda*

**MISSIONARY EXECUTIVE DR. PETER MAKARI TO SPEAK ON THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE
IN ISRAELI/PALESTINE ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 10**

Dr. Peter Makari will be speaking on the Christian presence in Israel/Palestine and the context of the conflict there. His talk will focus on the occupation and the many injustices inflicted upon the Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, by the Israeli government. He will be speaking at 3:00pm on Sunday, February 10, at 6 Institute Road, Worcester, the building formerly owned by United Congregational Church, now owned by the Worcester Area Mission Society, who is the co-host of this event along with the Israel-Palestine Task Team of the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ, of which Pastor Gary is a member. In preparation for this visit, there will be a series of three weekly studies on the Friday evenings of January 18, 25, and February 1 at 7:00pm, using "Call to Action: US Response to the Kairos Palestine Document," a 16-page handout that responds to "Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth," a confession of faith and call to action from Palestinian Christians. The "Call to Action: US Response" document can be downloaded from KairosUSA.org or Pastor Gary can email it you or give you a hard copy. The January 18 study will take place at First Baptist Church in the Lee Room. The second study will take place at 6 Institute Road. The third study will take place at the Quaker Meetinghouse, 901 Pleasant St, Worcester. If you are interested in attending the lecture and/or the study sessions, please inform Pastor Gary. Dr. Makari is the Executive for the Middle East and Europe with the Common Global Ministries Board of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

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★ Thank You! ★
THANK YOU!

TO OUR PARK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH CHOIR for their annual Christmas Cantata. The beauty of the narration and the choir in chorus as well as in solo was outstanding! Thank you, David Rose, for producing such a lovely musical presentation.

TO SANTA CLAUS AND ALL HIS ELVES who planned and presented the wonderful Sunday School/All Church Family Christmas Party. Such a fun afternoon!

TO OUR SUNDAY SCHOOL CHILDREN, or should we say "little critters," who presented the play "Sampson's First Christmas" as a gift to their Park Church family. Who knew even the forest animals celebrated?!

Thank You!
THANK YOU!

TO THE SUNDAY SCHOOL AND YOUTH GROUP for their loving and thoughtful gifts to Pastor Gary and Miss Linda. Beautiful and delicious! Bless you!

TO ALL WHO PURCHASED CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FOR THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH OF Y.O.U., INC., making Christmas brighter for many children because of YOU!

TO MY PARK CHURCH FRIENDS for your kind words when I need them and your friendship. It was such a surprise when I received the Thanksgiving gift card. It could not have arrived at a more appropriate time. Thank you so much!

A Grateful Recipient of a Thanksgiving Gift Card

TO OUR PARK CHURCH FAMILY for all the visits, cards, phone calls, and prayers.

Francis and Daphne Spear



Mark your calendar and make your reservation for the Sunday School/Youth Group **VALENTINE FELLOWSHIP DINNER!** Saturday evening, February 9, at 6:00pm in Gordon Hall. Watch for more news to follow!



PLEASE REMEMBER OUR SHUT-INS:

Liz Cape
Holden Nursing Home
32 Mayo Drive
Room #11
Holden MA 01520

Charlotte Thalín
Quabbin Valley Healthcare
821 Daniel Shays Highway
Room #171
Athol MA 01331

Daphne Spear
165 Austin Street
Worcester MA 01609
508-757-3037
sony_daphine@verizon.net

DEAR PARK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

Heifer International is fortunate to have the support of so many congregations like yours from across the country that are eager to extend hope and share their blessings with the world's poorest communities.

Know that your gifts start a transformation as families receive the resources and training they need to lift themselves out of poverty. Things like adequate clothing, medicines and even school fees are all too often out of reach for a struggling family before they receive the gift of opportunity from generous Heifer International supporters.

And the blessings you give will continue to make an impact as families who receive animals and training pass on an animal's offspring and other resources to another family in need. This helps transform entire communities. What an amazing experience to see your congregation's generosity spreading hope throughout the world.

Heifer International's mission to help the hungry become self-reliant first began in 1944 when a Midwestern farmer and church leader, Dan West, rallied the support of his congregation to donate heifers to families in need. Many congregations have continued in that same spirit by giving selflessly to Heifer International.

Thank you for your continued support.

With gratitude,
Pierre U. Ferrari, President and CEO, Heifer International
(Heifer International is one of the budgeted items in Park Congregational Church's Missions Budget)

DEAR FOLKS OF PARK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

As we approach the end of 2012, I would like to take this time to thank each and every one of you who supported Carty Cupboard over the past year. Your weekly and monthly donations are always appreciated. With your help, this year's Feinsein Challenge was a big success! Food items donated to Carty Cupboard during the months of March and April were matched by Alan Shawn Feinsein, a Rhode Island multimillionaire. We really could not do what we do without your help.

Thank you for thinking of us while you shop!

Sincerely,
Nancy Spencer, Carty Cupboard Food Pantry Coordinator

DEAR PARK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

Thank you for your gifts that allow us to continue to serve the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' veterans and their families in their time of need. In Massachusetts alone there are thousands of homeless veterans. Many others are at risk due to poverty and lack of support. With thousands of troops returning home from our latest conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, many with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other combat-related problems, our local facilities are uniquely poised to provide housing and support services for soldiers who often have nowhere else to turn.

With your help, "We will not falter . . . we will not fail."

Sincerely,
Vincent Perrone, President and CEO, Veterans Inc.
Denis Leary, Executive Director, Veterans Inc.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

Thank you for your gift which will be used to support the Severe Storms and Hurricane Relief Fund to help those affected by Hurricane Sandy.

Your gifts to the UCC Hurricane Sandy Relief Fund are providing for immediate needs in communities impacted by the storm. UCC congregations in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey have flung open their doors to provide shelter and meals to the displaced. Several of these congregations have received grants to help defray the financial costs of their extravagant hospitality.

UCC pastors in the disaster communities are doing an amazing job of caring for their flocks. They, too, need care and your gifts have enabled a UCC Disaster Ministries Chaplain to be present for them.

The road to recovery from Hurricane Sandy will be long and difficult. The United Church of Christ seeks to accompany our sisters and brothers on this journey. Your generous gifts help make this possible. Thank you.

Peace,
Susan M. Sanders, One Great Hour of Sharing Administrator

DEAR PASTOR GARY AND MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF PARK CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, wishing all of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. The Lord's blessings be with each and everyone.

Sincerely,
Doris Newlands

THE CHILDREN'S TOWER

January 2013



Dear Children,

Have you made any? Do you have a list? I'm making mine now. Oh, wait a minute, I guess I already made one and forgot. Yes, here it is . . . the famous New Year's Resolution List. Let me read it over. Yup. . . yup. . . yes. . . right. . . BUT WAIT!! This list is from LAST YEAR! Good heavens, what went wrong here? How come many of the things on my 2013 resolution list are the same as ones I listed last year? Well, I think I know the answer. It is because except for a few, I gave up trying, thinking they were too hard to keep and kept only a few. Has that ever happened to you? You *want* to, but think you can't?

"I will clean my room. I will do my homework as soon as I come home from school. I will come when called. I will help out at home when needed." Each one of you knows what your particular "resolutions" include. Does your list from last year look just like the one you are making this year? Well, not to fret.

Keeping "promises" which are sort of what "resolutions" are is not always easy. It is hard because we are trying to do something new, something different, maybe even something we don't really WANT to do but know that we should. We should clean our room because it helps Mom, but it is easier to let her do it. We should do our homework as soon as we come home from school, but it is more fun to go outside and play. We should come when called, but that would mean maybe leaving our friends. Oh, who needs "resolutions" anyway? They are just too hard to keep!! No sense to make a promise if you are not going to keep it, right? Wrong!

Christmas has just passed. A baby born in a manger came to change our world. A baby who grew up just like you and me. Jesus was the Son of God and made promises to his Father, and although they were hard to keep, with God's help, he kept those promises. Jesus kept his promises for you and for me. God will help each and every one of us keep ANY promise if we only ask. Ask in prayer; ask with your whole heart; ask for strength and guidance. With God, all things are possible and when you come to God with your needs, God will never fail to be there for you. So, make those "resolutions" and know that you have the greatest helper by your side always and look forward to your happiest New Year ever! Now, back to my list.

Your friend . . . Linda

JANUARY BIRTHDAYS



- 6 Jennifer Jordan
- 6 Jaquilyn Bohn
- 9 Jacob Cogoli
- 10 Mark Dorsey
- 13 Betty Connor
- 14 Jessica Baronas
- 16 Shirley Elbe
- 16 Jocelyn Bohn
- 17 Priscilla Rea
- 22 Julie Rumrill
- 23 Brittany Fisher
- 28 William Ness



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