

The End Shall Be

By Barbara G. Wheeler

In the rural hamlet of Low Hampton, New York, twelve miles from the slightly larger village upstate where I usually spend my weekends and go to church, is a strange outcropping of glacial rock. I know northeastern New York, and I have never seen anything else like this spot, a huge open space on a wooded hill, the stone striated and pockmarked like a moonscape, with a commanding view of the mountains of nearby Vermont.

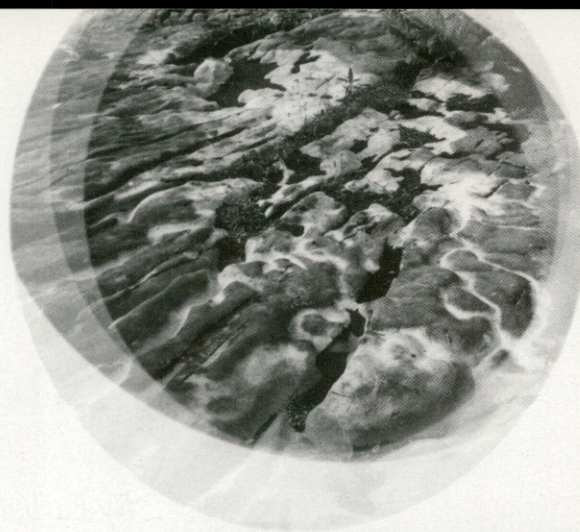
It was here that William Miller, the farmer who owned the property, waited through the night of October 22, 1844, for the Lord to return to the earth. Miller had predicted the event with certainty. At least fifty thousand followers believed him. Many watched with him that night on what came to be called Ascension Rock; others gathered in excited clusters at sites around New England and beyond, certain that the Lord was coming to judge the earth and, as they put it, to take them home.

William Miller was a veteran of the War of 1812 who had had vague religious beliefs until one Sunday morning in 1816, when, as a favor to a minister called out of town, he read aloud in church someone else's sermon, on the commandment to honor one's father and mother, and was so overcome with religious conviction that he could not continue. Miller began close and constant study of the Bible, and as he read caught an idea that had lingered in the air since the turn of the nineteenth century: that the world was about to end and that the Scriptures provided all the clues needed to determine exactly when.

Miller began to preach about the results of his calculation—the appointed time, he said, would occur between March 1843 and March 1844. He gained a local reputation as a prophet, then attracted the attention of a skilled organizer who promoted his views more widely. There was a severe financial panic in 1837, which fed the millennial fever. For those who had been ruined, the end of time looked like relief. When the designated twelve months passed and nothing special had happened, Miller and his followers were baffled. Miller checked his figures, became convinced that he had missed a step, recalculated, and joined another prognosticator in proclaiming October 22 the last day of history.

That night the Millerites prayed, and sang—the first hymn we sang today (“Watch Ye Saints”) was almost certainly used during the vigil on Ascension Rock—and they wept for joy. When the Lord did not show, they were crushed. Today the descendants of the Millerites, the Advent Christians and Seventh-day Adventists, still refer to the event as the Great Disappointment. Miller was banished from the Baptist Church that had licensed him to preach. Some of his followers joined another millennial sect, the Shakers. Others built him a chapel on his farm, from which he delivered a revised message: the Lord will return soon, but no one, he now knew, can name either the day or the hour.

Miller's chapel still stands, lovingly maintained along with his home by the Adventists, one of whose denominations, the seventh-day branch that hopes to speed the Lord's return by worshipping on Saturday, which they believe is the biblically mandated Sabbath, has grown into a powerful worldwide movement focused on the



end of the world and healthy vegetarian living. (Breakfast cereal was invented by an Adventist named Kellogg in Battle Creek, Michigan.)

I find myself drawn to the Miller home and chapel. I am impressed by the diversity of Adventists: they come from all over the world—the West Indies, Africa, Asia—to see the chapel, the farm, and the rock. I am moved by the warmth and watchfulness of the Adventist volunteers who take care of the site. They politely ask even me, a Presbyterian whom they must know eats meat, accepts evolutionary theory, and goes to church on Sunday, whether I see any signs of the nearness of the Lord. And I am riveted by the words from the book of Daniel painted on the wall above the pulpit in Miller's chapel: "For at the time appointed the end shall be" (8:19 KJV).

The end shall be. Do you believe that—that the world will end, by God's decision, in scathing judgment, and that God's reign will be established once for all, on earth as in heaven? If you are like me, millennial religion—Christian faith that is fixed on the end—makes you uncomfortable. Much of it seems trivial. Does it really matter whether the Lord will rescue the saints ("rapture" them) before, during, or after the tribulation of the earth? Millennialists have argued about that for centuries.

You and I chuckle at bumper stickers that say, "In case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned." (Our liberal sister denomination, the United Church of Christ, once produced its own bumper sticker that said, "In case of the rapture, can I have your car?") Other features of millennial religion are alarming: it provides ammunition for demagogues who stir up hopes and fears of the final reckoning among desperate people in order to steal what little they have; it gives justification to greedy opportunists who strip the earth for their own gain, on the grounds that the end will come soon so it doesn't matter.

Parts of end-of-the-world religion are silly; others are scary. But I suspect that we edge away from the Second Coming of the Lord for a more fundamental reason. Many of us simply don't believe that either phase of the scenario of last things—the Day of

Judgment, when sins are repaid with a vengeance, or the return of the Lord to establish, once and for all, a rule of comprehensive justice, perfect righteousness, and peace without end—is true, at least in any way that makes a practical difference. A colleague of mine, a Presbyterian theologian, said as much when I took her to see the Miller chapel. Those words that transfix me ("At the time appointed the end shall be") did not move her at all. "I don't see why it matters," she said. "The Lord has already come and God's spirit is still here, hard at work. Why focus on something more, when God has given us so much of God already and there's so much to do?"

Many Presbyterians agree with her and have agreed for a long time. Our predecessors at First Church and Auburn Seminary thought that Miller and the other millennialists were dangerous fanatics. They and their mainstream allies proudly labeled themselves postmillennial: they believed that the millennium, the thousand-year reign of peace, will not be held off until God's judgment and return. It has already started, and humanity, with God's help, can take part now in ordering the world as God intends.

Like our forbears, we are progressives. We believe we are privileged to work with God to improve the world, to arrange it so that God can one day be fully present in it. It makes no sense to us to blur the focus on steady, slow but real progress with speculation about some myth of unsparing judgment and instantaneous change. So we've dropped the subject. We accept the scientific fact that the world won't last forever, but we focus our faith on the present and the future we can help to create.

We have turned Advent—our major liturgical opportunity to look squarely at the end of the world—into a Christmas countdown. For us, the first coming of the Lord far outweighs the second. Warm prenatal sentiments edge out the cold fear of judgment. Indeed, the final judgment and the end of time have been

edited out of our worship, including the new Presbyterian hymnal. To set a millennial tone for this service, we had to revert to the Millerites' songbook and an older Presbyterian hymnal compiled before our denomination got so squeamish about the end of the world.

The end shall be. Is it true? Does it matter? Jeremiah thought so. His king and his kinsmen in Judah wanted to believe that the status quo that had so enriched them at others' expense would continue indefinitely. They threatened, and nearly took, Jeremiah's life for pronouncing the "great and hidden" truth (Jer. 33:3 NRSV): the world they knew is about to end. The Lord, Jeremiah said, working through the Babylonians, will strike down all of Judah, in anger and wrath because of its wickedness, and soon. Even worse for the corrupt rulers of Israel and Judah, the Lord will establish a state of righteousness that cannot be broken.

Luke also warned of the end of the world against his better interest. The first Christians had been certain that the Lord would come back for good during their lifetime, and the early Gospels, Mark and Matthew, freely predict the end. Luke, writing four or more decades after Jesus' death, was under great pressure to help his contemporaries come to terms with the fact that they might have to wait a long time to see their enemies punished and their Lord installed in triumph. Yet Luke forecast days of vengeance and redemption "before this generation passes away" (Luke 21:32 NRSV). It puzzles modern scholars that he would include material so poorly attuned to what his community's wanted and needed to hear. We can only conclude that Luke wrote that the end was coming because he believed it.

The end shall be. Are we missing something important by ignoring the end of the world? I think so. Jeremiah, Luke, and the Adventists who tend the Miller historical site have convinced me that there are real benefits to be gained from paying attention to last things, even—or perhaps especially—for us practical postmillennialists. The Scriptures and the example of my Adventist friends suggest several ways that keeping the end in sight might correct and deepen our kind of faith.

Watching for the end, for instance, reminds us that only when it's all over will there be an end to wrongdoing, including our own. Jeremiah longed for this in Judah, an end not only to evil, but also betrayal, the power to help used to hurt instead. The kings of Israel

and Judah had been promised the ultimate kind of power for good: righteousness that came by covenant from God.

The traditional title of the king was Yahweh-sidqenu, "the Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6 NRSV). Jeremiah watched a whole series of these kings do terrible things with their God-given power: take bribes, enslave their own countrymen, worship idols, inflict themselves on unwilling women, "like fat stallions," he says, "neighing after their neighbors wives" (5:8). He saw Josiah, the relatively good king, undertake a religious reform that became a nationalistic charade; then Jehoiakim impose tyranny; and finally the hapless Zedekiah (the name means Lord [Yaweh] is righteous [sedaqah]), who was pressured into imprisoning Jeremiah, sanctioning his attempted murder, and bringing the kingdom to ruin by defying what Jeremiah told him, in no uncertain terms, was the will of God.

What can stop this continuous perversion of God's mandate to execute justice and righteousness? Only the final judgment, an ultimate cleansing that debreeds the festering wound of wickedness, so that, the prophecy says, there can be forgiveness, "healing," and "cure"—that word translates a Hebrew phrase that means "growth of new skin." "In those days," it says here, "Jerusalem will live in safety": the new Jerusalem, the final one, cannot be damaged by its kings. The change is signaled by a transfer of title: Now the city, not the kings, will be called "Yahweh-sidqenu—"The Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 33:16 NRSV).

So here is one reason for us progressive Protestants to keep an eye on the end of the world. We place so much confidence in human potential, including our own, for goodness, justice and peace. We call ourselves a covenant people, intended by God to be "a praise and a glory" (Jer. 13:11 NRSV). Yet most of the time we are anything but a praise and a joy to God. Like the kings of Judah and everyone else, we regularly break the covenant. We use at least as much of our power to secure ourselves and to pay off various idols as to help others and honor the righteous God. We as much as anyone are ripe for judgment that readies the world for the covenant that no one can break, for the city that gives God the glory our world does not, for the time when, as we will sing in a moment, the "rude work" of humankind will no longer "deface the



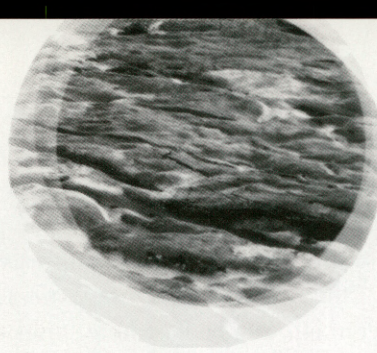


Photo: Gary Shearer

paradise of God.” Only against the backdrop of such an end can we see and perhaps limit the damage we all are doing.

Another benefit of believing that the world will end as Jeremiah and Luke predict is hope. We are rightly alarmed by the way that texts like these have been used to dupe the poor into trading what is theirs by rights for false hope, for pie in the sky. But the danger of despair is equally great, and most of the world lives at desperation’s edge, unable to believe that things will ever get any better. If the truth be told, it does not take much for us optimistic progressives, who are well positioned to expect progress and improvement because we have so much to give, to fall into hopelessness too. In fact, because our plans are so ambitious and our hopes so high, sometimes we fall very hard indeed.

We need to know what Luke’s audience and Adventists after Miller discovered. Both groups thought they had lost everything. Luke’s community pinned its hopes on a Savior who kept failing to meet their expectations, who first had died, then disappeared, and still had not returned. At the time Luke wrote, the Christians were derided and persecuted by other religious groups. Likewise the Adventists, greatly disappointed, are to this day regarded askance not only by liberals but also by more orthodox conservatives. Still they keep faith.

My Adventist friends wait and watch, calmly and cheerfully certain that the Lord is nearer today than ever before. I think their faith is well placed, as was Luke’s, who had no reason but faith to write these words: When there is fear and foreboding, he said, distress on the earth and chaos among the evil powers of sea and sky; when the cities made by human hands are trampled by godless avengers; then you will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. . . . [Then] your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:27-28 NRSV). When things unravel and there is nothing left but faith, the faithful Lord will return and save us.

Thinking about the end limits harm and increases hope. One last reason to take the end of the world more seriously than we usually do: the closer we get to

it, the closer we get to each other. What surprised me the most about the Adventists, as I got to know them and their tradition, was how much they care about unity. They not only talk about it, and sing—as in today’s last hymn—about reunion (about the last day, on which we’ll “never part again”), they also practice it. Why, I wondered, do these other-worldly Adventists, like millennialists before them, cross national and cultural lines with more ease and enthusiasm than Christians like us, who pride ourselves on specializing in diversity and reconciliation here and now?

I think that the Adventists, for all their ideas that seem outlandish to us, have discovered the profound truth of the Second Coming story. In the end, we will be permanently united. Left to ourselves, in ordinary time, we seem bound and determined to commit precisely the sins—taking more than our share, imposing our will—that cut us off from others, that isolate us in private hells of loneliness and fear. The truth is that the judgment to come is not God’s spiteful retribution, but self-inflicted vengeance. “Your ways and your doings,” says Jeremiah, “have brought this on yourselves” (4:18 NRSV). As a consequence of its choices, the world will have to share in the Passion, the lonely suffering of its Savior. But the further truth of the story is this: we will also be raised with him, all of us joined together at last, in healing and glory.

How do we know the Lord will come again? We know it because we can taste it and see it at the Lord’s table, where we join with God’s people in every time and place to take part in God’s suffering and in God’s glory. This is what the end shall be: perfect unity, joyful, righteous, and just, an end to every estrangement, every kind of harm.

Friends, on this first day of Advent, the first day of a new church year that enters a new millennium, here at First Presbyterian Church, a major center of the postmillennial Christian world, let us hear and believe the profound truth. At the time appointed, this mystery will be finished: the Lord will come, and we will be safe with God—and with each other—forever.

Barbara G. Wheeler is president of the Auburn Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian theological institution in New York City. She delivered this sermon at the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York on December 3, 2000. At the service, early Adventist hymns, including “Watch Ye Saints,” were sung. bgw@auburnsem.org

Seventh-day Adventist black camp meeting, circa 1930.



*I feel raised by the
... morning. You can see how
... years ago and I have
... to the Father which is
... that the name is
... but now I feel that
... truth
... of this
... God
... for*

Reading Adventist History

