

First days

Acts 2:42-47

May 15, 2011

Adrienne Martinez is a twenty-seven-year-old wife and mother living in a rented house in Orlando, Florida, with her husband, Joel, and their two-year-old daughter. A year ago, they were living and working in New York City and she dreamed of going to medical school. But then they both quit their jobs and moved to Orlando, making a deliberate choice to spend all their time together, they and their little girl. They are not working, but are living on their savings, which they have carefully budgeted to run out by next Saturday, on May 21, 2011.

Why did they leave their jobs? Why are they making no plans other than just being with each other? Why don't they think they'll need any money after next Saturday?

Because that's the day the world as we know it will come to an end! Haven't you been paying attention? Haven't you seen the announcement displayed on the electronic billboard on First Street in Cedar Falls?

May 21, 2011 is judgment day! On that day, all true believers will be raptured, taken up into the clouds, taken up into heaven, just as Jesus was, and those who are left, left behind, will endure five long months of terrors and horrors, hell on earth -- great earthquakes, rampant disease, terrible wars, fire -- until this world, and with it, the entire universe, is utterly destroyed on October 21, 2011.

That's what Adrienne and Joel believe as do many like them: Brian Haubert, a thirty-three-year-old actuary from New Jersey; Kevin Brown, a husband and father and small business owner; Marie Exley, a thirty-two-year-old Army veteran from Colorado; Allison Warden, a twenty-nine-year-old payroll clerk from Raleigh, North Carolina. These people, and many like them, are leaving their families, quitting their jobs, changing their plans, making no plans ... all because they are convinced that these are the last days, all because they are convinced that the world is ending on May 21, all because Harold Camping has convinced them!

Harold Camping is an eighty-nine-year-old radio preacher from California. Based on his own study of the Bible, he has worked out a precise -- very precise -- timeline of history.

According to Camping's calculations, creation occurred in 11013 BC and the flood which only Noah and his family survived took place in 4990 BC. To be most precise, the flood began on May 21st in 4990 BC. And so Judgment Day will fall on May 21, 2011, exactly 7000 years to the day after the great flood!

Camping has complete faith in his calculations. He has said: "Beyond the shadow of a doubt, May 21 will be the date of the Rapture and the day of judgment." He has no doubts, no doubts this time, even though his earlier prediction of September 6, 1994, proved untrue. And Allison Warden says: "If May 21 passes and I'm still here, that means I wasn't saved."

And if May 22 comes and we're still here? If we are still here together in church next Sunday, what does that mean?

You're not convinced? Why not? A sister organization to Harold Camping's Family Radio Worldwide, called eBible Fellowship claims that "it has become obvious to the serious student of the Bible that we are now living in the last few days of earth's history."

But we have serious students of the Bible here in our church. Why don't you believe that the world will end on May 21? Because you are serious students of the Bible! Because as serious students of the Bible, you take the Bible seriously!

When we treat the Bible as a code book needing to be deciphered, when we treat the Bible as a book of secrets needing to be unlocked by discovering the right keys, we don't take the Bible seriously. We do it violence! It is violence and an affront to God of the highest order to take a text and to suggest it really means something utterly different from, and often contrary to, its plain meaning, its common sense meaning. It's like saying: when God gave these words to the Hebrews, when God gave this message to the first Christians, God didn't really mean what he seems to mean. It really wasn't for them at all. It was a coded message for us!

This kind of study makes the Bible into a puzzle book for spiritual sleuths and codebreakers, instead of what it is, good news for regular folks like you and me and all of us, good news for us where we are and how we are because it was good news for the folks to whom it was first given where they were and how they were, good news that we can understand and are meant to understand, good news that means what it seems to mean, good news that means what is says!

It is wrong to do such violence to the scriptures God has given us, and it is wrong to do such violence to the lives of vulnerable men and women. What will Joel and Adrienne Martinez do on Monday, May 23? What will they do with no money, no jobs, no plans? How will they take care of each other and their infant daughter and the new baby due in June? And what will become of their faith?

They thought they were living in the last days, but what if these aren't the last days? Doesn't that make the choices they have made, the things they have done seem foolish?

Then what about the choices the early believers made? What about the things they were doing? Weren't they making the same mistakes?

The book of Acts tells us that those early believers shared everything they had with each other. They sold their property and possessions and distributed the income among the whole group, according to what each one needed! Doesn't that seem foolish? It sounds like ... communism!

They met in the Jerusalem Temple daily. Daily? Don't they ever work? Who's taking care of business? Doesn't that seem foolish? And didn't this foolishness stem from a similar conceit, from their belief that the end of all things was at hand?

It does seem that, especially at the beginning, many of the new Christians expected Jesus to return to earth in their lifetime, bringing an end to the world of sin and death and inaugurating the new age of the kingdom of God. If they were anticipating Christ's imminent return, it might make sense to them to abandon normal routines.

Only that's not what I think was going on. I don't think the lives of these first Christians were changed so radically because they were convinced they were living in the last days. I think the lives of these first Christians were changed so radically because they were convinced they were living in the first days!

They were living in the first days of the age of the Spirit, the first days of the new existence into which God had brought them through the gift of God's own Spirit, the first days of the new life God had given them through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

They had been set free! Free from guilt and shame, free from fear, free from anxiety, free from despair. They had been set free! Free to live! Free to live joyfully, generously, justly, hopefully, fully!

And that's just what they were doing. Living joyfully -- eating with glad and humble hearts and praising God together. Living generously and justly -- sharing what they had on order to give a full and good life to those who had little. Living fully -- eating, worshipping, praying, learning, enjoying each other's company.

Far from "checking out of this life" in order to prepare for its imminent end, they were celebrating this life, enjoying this life to the fullest, and doing everything that was in their power to do through the love God had planted in their hearts to ensure that everybody could celebrate this life with them! These were not the last days, but the first days -- exhilarating, intoxicating, full of possibility, full of promise.

That's what I felt last Sunday, on Confirmation Sunday -- the excitement, the exhilaration, the promise of first days. And I sensed our seven confirmands felt it, too. I cannot put myself in their minds and hearts, but I do know what I saw. I saw them excited, proud, engaged, feeling the weight, the weight of the meaning of their promises to God and God's promises to them.

I saw them filled up, filled up with the honor and joy and meaning of the occasion, filled up with the passion of first days, the first days of the new chapter of their lives initiated by their affirmation of their baptism, initiated by saying "yes" to God. They were filled up with the joy of being joined to God, with the joy of joining you, and with the joy of being joined to each other by what they had experienced together. It sounds a lot like Acts 2!

Not because it's the last of days, but because it's the first of days, it is important that they and we hold on to that excitement, that they and we nurture that sense of promise, that they and we cultivate joy.

In the book of Revelation, the Lord says to the people of the church in Ephesus: "This is what I have against you: you do not love me now as you did at first." We must not lose the sweetness and passion of our first love! "How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!" Grace is precious. There is nothing more precious than the love of God for us.

And we will hold on to that love, we will hold on to the passion and excitement and sweetness of our first love for God, if we do what the first Christians did.

They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.

They spent time learning. They did Bible study! They paid attention to growing their faith. They made a priority of broadening their knowledge of God's way and strengthening their commitment to God's way.

They took part in the fellowship. They didn't drop by from time to time. They took part in the fellowship! They were here -- for their own sake and for each other's sake.

They shared in the fellowship meals. They ate together! They had a great time eating together! It's a good way to cultivate joy.

And they prayed. They prayed with each other, for each other, for the world.

Learning, meeting, eating, praying. That's how you hold on to the passion and excitement and sweetness of first days.

So we spend time, lots of time, learning and worshipping and eating and praying. We spend seemingly foolish amounts of time, just being together. Not because these are the last days and we have nothing better to do. But because these are the first days and we have nothing better to do!