

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.*

Montague 9/20/26

**Where do we stand?**

1 Corinthians 10: 11-15, Matthew 24: 36-42

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, it seems clear that he thinks the world is about to end. He refers to... "us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come". For lots of folks, including Paul, Christ's resurrection and ascension had signaled the beginning of the end of life on earth. Believers were anxious to inherit salvation and if Jesus was the first to ascend, that he was "first fruit", could the rest of the harvest be far behind?

Perhaps you remember about 15 years ago, when a whole lot of people were saying that the world was coming to an end? A fellow named Harold Camping had interpreted the book of Revelation and calculated that May 21<sup>st</sup> of 2010 would be the day of Rapture, the Day of Judgment. He said it would happen at 6 PM. This retired civil engineer had convinced thousands of folks to prepare for their final journey. Some even quit their jobs. Amazingly, billboards, postcards and other media all around the country announced that on that day believers would be swept up to heaven. Everyone else, all the folks who didn't believe, would remain on earth to be tormented until the end of time. That would happen in October, five months later. Understandably, most folks were hoping to leave sooner rather than later. Taking the earlier trip seemed like a better deal. Nothing happened. Maybe artificial intelligence could have helped old Harold with his prediction.

Scripture says that no one can know the day or the hour, but Baptist leader William Miller thought he had nailed it with his prediction of October 22, 1844. His followers gathered, wearing white robes, in a field in Pennsylvania, and waited for the promised ascension. Can anyone tell me what happened? Right.... nothing. That day came to be known as the "Great Disappointment." Actually, some of his followers broke away and founded the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

I suppose, on some level, all of this is interesting, and I won't make fun of it now because I am reminded by Mark Twain that there is nothing more offensive than showing disrespect for another man's religion.

### **So, where do we stand?**

Albert Bartlett worried a good deal about our future too. He has passed now, but he was professor emeritus at the University of Colorado. He gives a terrific lecture that helps us understand important things about our planet and some ugly truths about what we've done to it. First, he describes compound multiplication, you know, one kernel of grain on the first square of a chess board, two on the second, four on the third, eight on the fourth and so forth. By the 64<sup>th</sup> square there is an unimaginable amount of grain on the board. Then he shows us some simple math so we can understand how to calculate what he called the "doubling rate". If your money in the bank is getting 7% interest, it will double in ten years. (Yeah, that's gonna happen) At 5% it will take fourteen. With all that as background he shares a story to help us understand how this all applies to us.

A single bacterium is placed in a two-liter soda bottle at 8:00 in the morning. This particular bacterium has a doubling rate of one minute, so it goes on its merry way, two, four, six, eight, sixteen, thirty two, sixty four.....you get it. At one minute before noon, the bottle is half full. How long before it's full? Right....one more minute. But these were smart bacteria. A few minutes before, they had sent out a scouting party to find some more bottles. They returned to their gleeful bacterial buddies with good news. They had found three. They now have four times the space they had before. So, at noon the first one is full. How much longer before their backup bottles are full? Two minutes. At 12:02 their world is out of space. **Where do we stand?** Professor Bartlett says it's one minute before noon. Not to cause you extra concern, but you should know that he first gave that lecture in 1969, 57 years ago.

Not everyone is so dire. John Muir founded the Sierra Club and was dedicated to preserving our natural wonders and established many of our National Parks. Elaine and I just watched a PBS show about our National Parks and Muir's pivotal role. He had a unique perspective about the state of things. He was very

optimistic. He died in 1914, so he wrote this a long time ago. He said “the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation; that mountains long conceived are now being born; channels traced for coming rivers; basins hollowed for lakes; that moraine soil is being ground and outspread for coming plants – coarse boulders and gravel for forests, finer soil for grasses and flowers - while the finest part of the grist, is seen hastening out to sea in the draining streams, being stored away in darkness and building, particle on particle, cementing and crystallizing, to make mountains and valleys and plains of other predestined landscapes, to be followed by still others in endless rhythm and beauty.” You see, Muir saw the natural world as a perpetual process, with seemingly destructive elements as part of the ebb and flow.

### **So, where do we stand?**

Church attendance has been declining since the late sixties. Local churches in nearly every denomination in this country, and many others around the world, are struggling to do their work. With empty pews and giving at all time lows, congregations are making tough decisions and worrying about their future.

I’d like you to consider that, just as with John Muir’s description of the natural world, faithfulness is in the midst of evolution. God’s will is playing out as it should. We are challenged by the circumstances in which we find ourselves to remain relevant and true to our commitments as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our mission statements may change to meet varying needs, and we may even tweak our by-laws to accommodate our changing realities, but our core values will never change. The bedrock of our faith is immovable, but we should expect ups and downs in societal religiosity.

There have been serious lulls before, and Phyllis Tickle tells us in her book *“The Great Emergence”* that we are, right now, in the midst of yet another dust up that happens every five hundred years. A thousand years ago it was “The Great Schism”. Five hundred years ago, it was “The Great Reformation”. This time it is being called “The Great Emergence”. Each one of these transformative episodes takes about a generation or so (40 or 50 years). That’s an eye blink, really. Each time, the question is asked, “who’s in charge?” Each time it gets answered

differently. A thousand years ago, the answer was “the Pope”. The Great Reformation that was triggered by Martin Luther came to the conclusion that it was “Scriptura Sola, Sola Scriptura”, only the Bible. What about this time? We are in the midst of this “emergence” so answers aren’t clear yet, but it may just be “the people themselves”.

What is clear, painfully clear to some of us, is that things are changing. Many yearn to go back to “the way things used to be”. Don Remick was a UCC Associate Conference Minister in the eastern end of our state for many years since 2009. He said, *“most churches look back to the 50’s and 60’s with fond memories. It is called the ‘Heyday of Mainline Protestantism.’ It was the era when everything closed on Sundays for worship, church was the place to make social, political and business contacts, church was the hub of community activity and free time programs, most families had a single income, with wives and moms free and able to be fully engaged in voluntary work through the church, and the Baby Boom meant church schools were bulging at the seams”.*

### **So, where do we stand?**

Here’s the answer. We do not stand alone. We have our God, His son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit with us. We learned from this morning’s scripture lesson (Numbers 10: 17-21) about the Israelites, who were constantly moving in the wilderness. No one knew better than those wandering Jews that life is full of changes (always has been). They were away from their homes and temples and were only able to cope because they felt God’s presence in the portable tabernacle that they carried with them. Stability, you see, does not mean lack of change, but moving with God in every circumstance. Avery Post was President of the United Church of Christ, for over a decade beginning in 1997. He spoke at an Annual Meeting and said that “local churches must think of themselves as “emigrants in time”. Even then, during the “heyday” of activity in our churches, he was encouraging (dare I say warning) us to pack our bags and be ready to move to answer God’s call, wherever and however it would come.

Feel the presence of God and know that the changes we see and feel are not about an ending. Like Muir’s natural world, we are witnessing the continuing

formation of the Kingdom of God. Pray and remain receptive to the Holy Spirit. Like the wandering Israelites, find strength in your faith and be open to the wonderful journey God has planned for us. We have been blessed and we have been led this far. Christians have always known the ebb and flow of challenges and comfort. Jesus said, when he revealed himself to his disciples after his resurrection, "Do not be afraid, I am always with you, even when I am gone from your sight".

Feel God's presence now and be comforted.

Amen