

Apocalypse? Before the World Ends
A sermon by Rev Steven Epperson
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As luck would have it, I have met the very person who deciphered the single artifact that may have referred to this Friday, December 21, 2012, as the end of one of the long calendar cycles in ancient Mayan civilization. It's an artifact and date that have taken on a fabulous apocalyptic life all their own which has nothing to do with what the writing actually has to say. Stephen Houston and his family were, like us, some-time visitors of the small Quaker meeting just around the corner from where my family lived in Salt Lake City. The Eppersons had recently made the decision to quit attending Mormon church services; Houston, a non Mormon, and professor of anthropology and archaeology at Brigham Young University, was seeking out a viable house of worship for his family. Neither he nor we stuck it out with the Quakers; we were just too impatient and jumpy, I think, for the deliberate consensual goodness of the meeting.

But enough of that and back to the Mayans; it turns out that Houston, along with David Stuart of the University of Texas were the lead scholars in deciphering an 8th century Mayan sculpture fragment covered with hieroglyphs in Tortuguero, Mexico. You can see a drawing of the calendar glyphs printed on the order of service. In the right hand side of the tablet, there are glyphs that refer to the ending of the 13th b'aktun. For the ancient Mayans priest-astronomers, a b'aktun was a 400 year period, and the 13th b'aktun, according to this fragment, would end around this week; or as some would say this very Friday, on winter's solstice, to be exact, some ancient Mayans prophecies that the world as we know it would come to an end..

But here's the thing, according to Houston and Stuart, there was nothing especially meaningful about the end of this period, and this calendar. Stuart put it like this: think of the odometer in your car. When you hit 100,000 kms what happens? It automatically turns over back to 0. And what happens then? You keep driving. The road doesn't swallow you up. The stars don't fall from the skies. One season will follow another. The earth continues to rotate on its axis and its circumnavigation around the sun. There's absolutely nothing on that tablet that predicts or describes the end of the world, or the advent of a new order of things on earth. Again, according to Stuart, there will be a 14th b'aktun, and 15th and countless more. In fact, there are Mayan calendars that conjecture that we live in a 72 octillion year-old cosmos. And, finally, the text of the Tortuguero Monument is all about celebrating the 8th century dedication of the

buildings of which it was a part, and it includes references to the descent of Mayan gods to witness and bless the event. That's about all there is to it. (see David Stuart interview on "The Mayan Calendar," broadcast on "To the Best of Our Knowledge," Public Radio International, 2/7/2012; <http://archive.cyark.org/2012-maya-conceptions-of-time-blog> "2012: Maya Conceptions Of Time," John Mink, November 12, 2009; Houston, Stephen and Stuart, David (1996). *Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya*, *Antiquity Magazine* #70:289-312)

I'm sorry if that's a bit of a Mayan letdown; but naysayers like me, and morning-after, post apocalyptic disappointments just come with the territory. It has ever been thus: hard times, anxious times, mounting hopes for spectacular change, the high brought low, the low exalted, the end of days, the breaking in, the dawning of a new age of wonders—and then the "day after" dawns, and the beat goes on. And on.

The problem with prophecies about the end of the world, "whether based on passages from the Bible or ancient calendars, on solid climate science and economics or the visions of Mongolian shamans" is that they are invariably wrong. (David Baird, "Apocalypse Soon," *The Walrus*, January/February 2012) But that doesn't keep us from doing it any way. A quick look at one article on "lists of dates predicted for apocalyptic events," such as "the Rapture, the Last Judgment, or any event that would result in the end of humanity, civilization, the planet or the entire universe" toted up one hundred and fifty-three notable end-of-it-all predictions going back to 634 BCE when many Romans believed that their civilization would end in the 120th year of its founding. And that list isn't the half of it, believe me.

And please, don't think Unitarians have been immune from end-times prognostications. In 1553, Michael Servetus claimed the Devil's reign in the world began with the Council of Nicea in 325 CE and would last for 1260 years, making 1585 the world's due date for apocalypse. Isaac Newton, spent as much time teasing out prophetic, end-time meanings from the Books of Daniel and Revelation as he did on celestial mechanics; and from his gloomy interpretations of the Bible, Newton predicted that Christ's Millennium would begin in the year 2000. (Doesn't look like it happened to me. Unless you consider George W. Bush a signature of the end times.) Meanwhile, our own Canadian brother, Thomas Homer-Dixon, in his book *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* argued "that the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on our fossil fuel-dependent, globalized world will be disastrous," it will entail "social chaos and mass famine" unless we quickly and massively work "to build greater resilience into our systems, which will inevitably mean living on a smaller scale" (Baird, "Apocalypse Soon")

Why do we do this to ourselves? Why read entrails, scour esoteric texts, get worked up by New Age, wacky versions of Mayan cosmology, snap up copies of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and volumes of the *Left Behind* series by the tens of millions, and lock eyes with dread on the latest *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* that announces that their doomsday clock has advanced to five minutes to midnight. Why do we do this to ourselves? Think about it with me.

‘Say what you like,’ wrote noted Christian author CS Lewis, “the apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, [Jesus] had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, ‘This generation shall not pass till all these things be done.’ And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else. [Matthew 24:34], Lewis writes, is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.”

In 1648, the Jewish mystic Sabbatai Zvi announced that, according to computations from the mystic writings in the *Zohar*, the messianic age had begun, and that he was Israel’s true redeemer. Though his views were rejected by rabbinic majorities, the word of a Messiah in Israel spread like wild fire throughout Jewish communities in the Middle East and Europe. In some parts of Europe, Jews began to unroof their houses and prepare for a new “exodus”. People sold their businesses, their homes and began preparations to travel to Palestine. Imagine the disappointment that ensued when the news shot out from Turkey that Sabbatai Zvi had been forced by the Sultan to convert to Islam and abandon his claims.

Now, forward in time and a different continent. Beginning in the late 1820s through early 40s, the American Baptist preacher William Miller announced that the world as we knew it was coming to an end, and with it the advent of a new Millennial age was about to break forth. “My principles in brief, Miller proclaimed, are, that Jesus Christ will come again to this earth, cleanse, purify, and take possession of the same, with all the saints, sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844.” Miller adjusted the date one more time to October 22, 1844. By that date, thousands of his followers sold their possessions, gathered in fields and hilltops, eyes turned to the heavens to await the rapture and nothing happened.

From Jesus and his disciples to Sabbatai Zvi, to the Great Disappointment of Miller’s followers, myriad are the number of stations on the journey of failed apocalyptic, end time prophecies, fervor and experience. And this isn’t just a Jewish and Christian phenomenon; messianism, apocalyptic prophecies and behaviour animate the very core of Shīte Islamic belief

and practice. The quasi Buddhist group Aum Shinrikyo, predicted an imminent apocalypse and unleashed terrorist attacks in Japan in the 1990s. Native American prophets from Tenkwatawa to Wovoka in the 1800s led extraordinary messianic, end-time resistance and reform movements. And traditional Hopi elders, from the first time they saw photos of the atomic bomb's mushroom cloud in 1948, believed it fulfilled prophecies and sought for decades to deliver a message at the UN calling on world leaders to solve world problems without war and to live in harmony with nature before it was too late.

Before what's too late? The end of the world, the end of the story—our story.

We love a good story, don't we?; it's "stitched intrinsically into the fabric of [our minds]." (David Eagleman, "The Moral of the Story," a review of Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal...*, NYTimes Book Review, August 3, 2012) According to literary critic David Gottschall, we spend an enormous time in fictional worlds: day and nighttime dreaming, novels, life narratives, Fox News, fables, and other imaginary worlds of our own creation. "Neverland," Gottschall claims, "is our special habitat." Storytelling plays a fundamental role in our life: it bubbles with conflict and struggle; it overflows with discord and violence. Have you read any serious children's and youth literature lately? It's not a playtime bliss world; think for one moment about the classics of this genre from *Treasure Island* to *Harry Potter*, from *The Mouse and His Child* to *Are You My Mother?* And what about our dream life? Ask researchers; they'll tell us that most of the inscape of dreamland is all about fight or flight.

A story's job is to simulate potential threatening situations and to encourage certain kinds of moral laden behavioural responses and conduct in the people who read or hear the tale. Take the story I read with the children earlier in service. One fine day, Mr Gumpy sets out in a boat. He gladly takes on passengers one at a time, but cautions them about how to behave on the river. But children and animals can't help being who they are, catastrophe ensues, and they all end up in the water. What happens next is the key. They haul themselves on to shore, dry off, and troop to Mr Gumpy's house for tea. They've had an outing together, survived its perils and become something of a community with a story to tell. The book ends under a full moon, with Mr Gumpy inviting them to return for a ride on another day. The adventure of life continues.

Though from the outside it may seem rather warped, apocalyptic, end-time prophecies and stories convey a message of hope, of comfort in times of tribulation and woe. Here's the picture: The present state of affairs is unendurable, the outlook grimly pessimistic. Catastrophe

looms on the horizon. But there is hope for those who heed the message, a righteous remnant, an oppressed people will endure and eventually triumph, for enemies will be overcome, and a new age will unfold in a chastened, transfigured world.

You are an oppressed people occupied by a ruthless, imperial power: a young itinerant preacher and wonder worker arises and tells you that the days of the rule of Rome are numbered, and in your life-time, a blessed messianic era is about to unfold.

Your lands have been taken from you by invaders from Europe, you've been decimated by disease and warfare; forced onto reserves, thrust into residential schools; you've lost freedom, and your cultures are on the verge of total collapse. Then prophets step forth from obscurity across the land, preaching resistance, renewal, and a promise that all has not been lost and that your people will once again arise.

Or what about this: you've grown up in a world where progressive abundance, health, and dominance over *seemingly everything*—from politics to nature itself—has been taken for granted. You've believed in it as something of a birthright that would pass seamlessly from one generation to the next—onward and upward forever. But like in the story of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, the very powers and tools used to create that cornucopia of plenty and dominance are the very seeds of ruin: lurching financial markets beyond our control, a despoiled planet inexorably heating up, and children anxiously entering a world of turmoil, housing and work with uncertain futures, no room in the inn and no place at the workbench.

And so, in our times, we get zombie movies, so-called Mayan prophecy, doomsday cults posting billboards announcing the date of the end of the world, photos of polar bears marooned on the breaking ice, Margaret Atwood writing books on debt and post-apocalyptic worlds, and Thomas Homer Dixon, true to the end-time literary genre, predicting disaster, "social chaos and mass famine" unless we—that message heeding, righteous saving remnant—quickly and massively work "to living on a smaller scale," for the hour is nigh.

Is it any wonder that so many of us are going through bouts, short and long, of extreme emotional and mental distress? I think our sensitive young people magnify and present back to us our own anxieties and fears about the future. And great is the tragedy when, instead of patiently providing them with narratives of power, purpose, relevance, and ultimately of some kind of chastened hope, instead we tranquilize ourselves and them in a river of psychiatric drugs, technology and entertainment.

A couple of stories to bring this sermon to an end. In a book teeming with strangeness: talking snakes, burning bushes, and corpses brought back to life, the Book of Job in the Bible is something else altogether. Satan wagers that he can break Job, the apple of God's eye, by afflicting him so grievously that he will curse the Maker of his life. We know what follows—~~one~~ unimaginable disaster after another destroys everything in Job's life that gave it worth and meaning. Having nothing else to fall back on but thread bare theology, his idiot, so-called friends can only say that Job must have somehow sinned grievously—~~how~~ else could you account for such disasters rising up and raining down upon his wreck of a life and wretched diseased racked body? Suffering like this has to have some cause; and to discover the cause entails effect—~~and to have cause and effect is to have meaning.~~ In view of Job's private apocalypse, his tormenting friends desperately need to have their own theology, their just-so-story view of the world confirmed. And do you know what happens next? God enters the story saying that Job's friends are speaking claptrap and he dismisses them in anger—~~they~~ have no idea what they're talking about or dealing with here.

And then he turns to Job and speaks some of the most stirring poetry in all of Hebrew scripture where, in effect, he tells his suffering servant that God, too, struggles with all his might and main to bring and make some meaning, some order out of all the chaos in the world. "One is so near the other," God and Leviathan, humankind and all its suffering, "that no air can come between them. They are joined one to another, they clasp each other so, that they cannot be sundered." (Job 41: 16-17)

We human beings have always lived in apocalyptic times; times of turmoil, suffering and trouble. Each of us faces the approach of death, an apocalypse unique to each of us. The question is how we live with it. For some years now, I have seen how members of this congregation have approached the end of their days. I have been moved beyond words by the depth of your courage, acceptance and humour; yes, even that. Arthur Hughes, knowing his end was nigh, tended to his affairs and his Final File like a skilled, responsible gardener: laying out the beds for planting, watering and weeding, pruning here and there with careful, thoughtful attention. All his earthly affairs were in order. He has left me and us with a detailed map of how he wanted to leave this world, and how to celebrate his life when he laid it down for the last time.

And finally, there is a scene in ‘Big Night’: a wonderful little movie about a failing Italian restaurant run by two brothers who gamble on one special night to try to save the business. Everything that could possibly go wrong does; and by the evening’s end, it’s a catastrophe.

Next shot, the last in the movie, and we’re inside the restaurant kitchen the following morning. Without a word, one brother enters, breaks and whips up some eggs, cooks an omelet and sets out plates, forks, and a loaf of bread. The second brother enters, and without a word sits down. They both eat. All of this without a word, in a single shot, nearly six minutes long; one take. And then finally, first one, then the other brother, reaches out and puts a hand on the other’s arm; and the movie ends.

I am certain that we will gather here next Sunday, two days after winter’s solstice, after December 21st to enjoy this year’s Christmas pageant together. And then comes Christmas Eve, and another Christmas. And days later, the beginning of another calendar year.

It is said that someone asked Martin Luther, the great 16th century Protestant reformer, what would he do if the world would tomorrow? And Luther responded, ‘I would plant a tree today.’

May generations to come look back at us and say that in our apocalyptic times we put our affairs in order as best we could, that we cooked an omelet on the morning after the big night, and that we stepped out into the garden of our lives and planted a tree.