

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 22, 2011

Worship Notes:

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So, I see we all survived the rapture.

In case you didn't know, the rapture, its original Greek meaning "of being caught up," is a belief by some that prior to the Second Coming of Christ, a certain select group of faithful will literally be lifted up into the air or heaven while Jesus returns to earth in judgment.

This latest go around is a repeat of a now 89 year old owner of a multimillion radio empire that has been preaching apocalyptic views for decades and reaped millions as a result.

Many were ready to listen to this voice on the radio. They were motivated by belief in God and trust in the radio prophet. And they were wrong...

"I had some skepticism but I was trying to push the skepticism away because I believe in God," said Keith Bauer — who hopped in his minivan in Maryland and drove his family 3,000 miles to California for the Rapture. He started his day in the bright morning sun outside the gated Oakland headquarters of Family Radio International.

"I was hoping for it because I think heaven would be a lot better than this earth," said Bauer, a tractor-trailer driver who began the voyage west last week, figuring that if he "worked last week, I wouldn't have gotten paid anyway, if the Rapture did happen."

According to the prediction, the destruction was likely to have begun its worldwide march as it became 6 p.m. in the various time zones...

Despite Jesus' words about not knowing the time nor the place of his return and to beware of those who say they do, there always seem to be those willing to listen. Over and over such predictions have been made or promoted from Nostradamus to the Mayan Calendar and the Rapture in between. And time and again, over and over they have been wrong.

Historically, prophets are never recognized in their own times. Throughout the ancient texts there were thousands of predictions that never happened. Over time, when a prediction did happen, the prophet who made the prediction was

confirmed. That's the process. So one day, one day the world will end...and if we keep saying it enough, one day...one day someone will be right.

What is it though that even gives any of this credibility?

What even encourages someone to think someone predicting the end might be right...or wanting them to be right...or not sure if they will be, so go along at least with the possibility? Has our willingness to be open-minded reduced our ability to dismiss the quacks – even when the scripture they are purporting to witness to with their predictions – warns against listening to such people?

Motivation for some is pretty clear.

As Saturday drew nearer, followers reported that donations grew, allowing Family Radio to spend millions on more than 5,000 billboards and 20 RVs plastered with the doomsday message. In 2009, the nonprofit radio station reported in IRS filings that it received \$18.3 million in donations, and had assets of more than \$104 million, including \$34 million in stocks or other publicly traded securities. [There is not indication that those holdings are no longer held.]

While I don't fault those whose marketing skills generated profits, I do not condone those who use others' spiritual or emotional condition for financial gain. I do not condone those who pejoratively use one's acts of faith as fodder. Cynics are important and have their place.

Today, though, I have the most compassion for those who were taken in because someone convinced, persuaded, or duped them to drink the Kool-Aid, thankfully not as literally as those who took their lives in Jonestown in 1978 following another prophet.

These are people who believed. And they were willing to take drastic action for their beliefs. I have to tell you...I admire people who have the chutzpah to do such things. I admire people who are willing to be wrong.

Paul says the following in I Corinthians 4:10: We are fools for Christ! Sometimes that's what it may feel like. Imagine making life-changing decisions, putting everything in play for a belief, which by definition cannot be proven. There really is nothing to be made fun of there. And, yes, sometimes people will see us as fools. They are kinder than that, generally, not coming right out and saying it, but we all know the look.

There is everything right about being such "fools" by the standards of some segments of society. There is everything right about seeking and seeing the presence of God in our lives in our world. And there is everything to be awed and

excited about in a faith that promises eternal life, even if most likely in a form other than we understand.

That's the story of the Old Testament. It's all about what people did in their lives for what they believed in. The real stories are not stories about what people feared, but about what they believed in.

I relish the words of Acts this morning:

That day about three thousand took him [Jesus] at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's needs were met.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

There isn't a word of fear here. There isn't a word of "world's end." No. There is an elevation of discipleship to praising God for being saved – i.e., Loved by God, for seeing signs all around them in what it is God is doing in the world and their lives, and then seeking how they can help. How they can join in...be a part of it. They were excited, called, and they answered. Perhaps, like me, you ask yourself that question now and then. How have I answered or how am I answering the call of God? What excites me? What causes me to want to celebrate? There, I think, is God and God's call.

I said celebrate, right? You bet. Just listen to the words in the reading. Commitment. Baptism {Joining}, celebrate, love, exuberance, joyful – after all they have been through! Thousands took Jesus at his word. Amazing. When was the last time you can think of someone you know having their word taken as true by thousands. And celebrated, and were joyous, and took actions.

And Jesus' promise is clear in the reading this morning. He tells them that he and his teachings are the way.

. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them [false prophets?]. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me

will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

So, I can't tell you what to do, in terms of service or belonging. I can tell you that that you need to find it. There is a path here to help. Worship, membership, participation, and getting involved. It's a start. And, sooner or later the questions will follow...and when you answer, answer them like there was no chance of failing in your response:

- How joyful are you?
- How joyful in your relationship to God?
- What calls you?
- How do you answer?
- How much celebration is there in your hearts?
- Is there enough to risk the fool and ask others to join you so they can maybe find what you have?
- What brings you to prayer?
- Where do you find prayer rising by itself, where and in whose company?
- Just a few....

To my thinking, it's an absence of these questions as real in our lives and important – not just a fad or a religious thing – it is the absence of delving deeply in community in prayer in the desert – it is the absence of these things that leave a void – a void into which creeps hopelessness.

So much so, for some, that the only thing that has any meaning are the loud extreme narrow voices of – rapture, elitism, sectarianism, exclusion...

It is always the quiet voice, at least for me...that challenges me the most and means the most.

Being present to that voice with an eye and ear toward God and a movement toward others is a bit scary, at first. We wonder what is at risk? What are we going to lose? What happens if we are nice to someone we don't like and who may not like us? What happens if we are really nice?

So much easier to judge, discard, separate, exclude, minimize, and move into the void of extremism and righteousness.

To me such righteousness is a consumer mentality...buy this get this. Guaranteed. When in fact there is no certainty in all this, no guarantee beyond the faith that says, "Trust in God."

Please, let's really look at who we are in this world. Let's not be afraid of the mistakes, and take the inherent risk of Christianity – to love God with all our heart and exuberance and excitement and joy – and then make a commitment to share it with others – supporting one another.

We are a Sunday people and more. And, I promise you, there is more to who you are and who we are than our minds tell us. Join us in this or ask us to join you.

Let the awe creep back in and then share it. Fools and all.