

"LOOKING AHEAD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 13, 1994

## "LOOKING AHEAD"

### INTRODUCTION

Let's begin by supposing that the world was coming to an end. One wonders how the news media would play the story of the "end of time" and what the headlines might be. Let me share some of the possibilities that come to mind...

Los Angeles Times: NO TRAFFIC ON FREEWAYS TONIGHT  
USA Today: WE DIE (Late Sports, Section C, Page 1)  
The Wall Street Journal: MARKET CLOSES EARLY.  
Sports Illustrated: THE FAT LADY SINGS.  
The Daily News: ARE YOU PREPARED, BROTHER...SISTER?  
News Day: LIE FACING GRIDLOCK

### DEVELOPMENT

I'm sure you can add a few good ones of your own. Today's scripture from Mark's Gospel is part of the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. In rather vivid terms the last days of planet earth are described. Some get a chill thinking of the possibility of the end of the world, or the Rapture, as some believers call it, or The Second Coming. And as you know, whenever such predictions are made there are always some folks who run out and put their homes on the market, or cash in life insurance policies and look toward heaven for a sign.

Students of history...of church history...know, of course, that none of this is new. Many theories as to when and how the world would end have been offered. In the year 960 A. D., a German theologian predicted 992 as the most likely year. Panic was widespread as the year approached. Then in 1665 a man named Solomon Eccles was jailed in London's Bridewell Prison for striding through Smithfield Market stark naked, carrying a pan of blazing sulfur on his head and shouting doom and destruction. Although the end of the world did not follow, the Great Fire of London did - in the year 1666.

In 1874 Charles Taze Russell, founder of the sect that later became Jehovah's Witnesses, concluded that the Second Coming had already taken place and that we had 40 years - or until 1914 - to enter his faith or be destroyed. Later, I believe, he modified the date to "very soon after 1914".

The last twenty-five years have seen a number of "date-setters" including one "would be prophet" who set the date for this past September. All have been wrong. A minister by the name of Michael Stiffell in what is now East Germany who according to his study of the Book of Revelation proclaimed that the world would end on October 18, 1533 and when it didn't happen, his townspeople gave him a bit of a thrashing. Not a bad idea. For even Jesus said that not even He knew the date, nor the hour...but that does not discourage some of His present day followers from speculating about the "final days" sometimes with tragic results.

I like something that J. David Bianchin wrote in a magazine. He used the analogy of a basketball game. He said that in the 1987 NCAA Regional Finals, Louisiana State University was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. As is often the case with a team in the lead, LSU began playing a different ball game. The LSU players, according to the television announcer, began to watch the clock....rather intensely....rather than playing the

game. As a result of this shift in focus, Indiana closed the gap, tied the score and then went on to win the game by one point. Eventually, as some Hoosiers present may remember, they became NCAA champions. The author's point was to simply say that God does not want us wasting pointness energy watching the clock. Rather, God wants us to be geared to obedient service.

We don't want to be guilty of "clock-watching" here this morning, but we do want to take seriously the words of Christ about the last, the final days. And there are three things Christ says to us about the end of time, about His return that we would do well to occasionally think about and reflect upon.

WE CANNOT KNOW THE FUTURE

First of all, He says that we cannot know the future. Bible students present will recall that His own disciples fully expected Him to return within their lifetime. Paul did, too. But they were wrong. And I think no Scriptural truth is more sure than this one: only God knows the future!

Think about some of the things that have happened in our own history.... especially those of you who are fifty or older. Would you have predicted in your younger days that within your lifetime a man would walk on the moon and that you'd get to watch it on television? Everyone else now....could you have predicted just a few years ago how the computer would change our lives - or the FAX - or the cellular telephone or Cable Television. Or, in political terms. Could you have predicted that the Hippies of the Sixties supporting George McGovern would become the Yuppies of the eighties supporting Ronald Reagan? Would you have predicted AIDS or the Fall of the Berlin Wall?

Hey, who knows what tomorrow will bring? A cure for cancer. Or perhaps a nuclear catastrophe as weapons of destruction come into the hands of terrorists? Who knows? Only God.

GOD DOES KNOW

This brings us then to the second truth I would like to lift up. I believe that God knows. None of us knows, but God, I believe...does. And we can find comfort in this.

Sometime ago down in Richmond, a broad-minded judge let some petty offenders roll a huge pair of dice to determine the number of days they would get in jail. After the death of that judge, his secret came out. The dice were loaded. At first, though one might conclude that when God gave humanity the great gift of freedom, God gave man an astounding roll of the dice. How would humanity use its freedom - to build or to destroy. The answer is not yet clear, but friend...let me give you a hint. The dice are loaded.

I'm told that there is a form of science known as chaology - the study of chaos. The basic assumption of this discipline is that some things in life are just basically unpredictable. Take the weather, for example. Our eco-system is so interrelated that a butterfly flapping its wings in Beijing may ultimately affect the weather we have. In other words, there are simply too many variables to ever give a completely accurate long range weather prediction. Yes, according to computer models there are patterns even to those supposedly chaotic events. The patterns are so huge and so complex that they only seem chaotic to us.

The Biblical testimony is that there is a basic pattern to all of life. You and I cannot discern it anymore than a fish can analyze the water in which it swims.

If we could "step out" of space and time with God, we could see the pattern, and we could see that "all things do work together for good to those who love God" - but right now, we "see through a glass darkly" (as Paul put it). All we know and would believe is that God knows and therefore, all things are all right! It is a leap of faith, to be sure!

There's a rather haunting story of a man who was the lone survivor of a shipwreck. Washed up on a small island, all alone, he cried out to God to save him and every day, he scanned the horizon for help, but none came. Eventually he built a small hut and put his few possessions into it. Then one day, he came home to his hut and discovered it to be in flames with the smoke rolling up to the sky. Angry, grief stricken and thinking it was all over, he fell asleep. Early the next day, though, a ship drew near the island and rescued him.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked the first man who came up to him. "We saw your smoke signal" was the man's reply.

You and I don't know the future, but I go on believing that God does. And with that, I go on believing that He will not forsake any one of us. We are in His eternal care. But what about in the meantime, you may be tempted to ask. What does God expect out of us while we are awaiting the culmination of God's plan for each of us. Let me suggest what I believe is our task.

MAKE THE MOST OF THE PRESENT

I believe that our task is to make the most of the present. Yes, in the words of Robin Williams' character in the movie, The Dead Poets Society - "Carpe diem" - seize the day.

Remember how Williams in that movie plays the role of an English teacher who one day takes his class into the hall to examine the School Trophy case. And there he shows them pictures of past heroes of the school. He whispers to them,

"All of these young men were as you are today starting life with great promise. All of you will someday be as they are. They're all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up close to the glass." (And as the class leans toward the glass, Williams, in a raspy voice says, "Carpe diem...Carpe diem")

Are you making the most of the days that God has given you? Someone has noted that the average American disposes of about 40.1 hours of leisure time per week of which 15.2 hours are spent in front of television. If the same time were invested in walking, during one year you could walk across America, one coast to the other. If the same time were invested in education, you could earn an MBA in two years. Carpe diem, my friend...just "seize the day".

Someone else has noted that if you get up just one hour earlier each morning you will add the equivalent of over two additional months of productive work days each year. Chances are there's at least one person in the congregation today who is saying to himself (or herself)... "stop preacher...you're making me tired". But listen, friend....I need to take that risk for a few moments here this morning for there are some present who may be concerned about

✓ their place & their future in the marketplace. The world is rapidly changing. Companies are downsizing. Middle management is disappearing as is unskilled labor. Social Security may be in trouble. I don't know what the future holds and neither does anyone else, but one thing is clear: the better prepared you and I are, the better our chances of survival. Young people, stay in school. Young and middle adults, realize that in an information society, we must keep learning and growing over a lifetime. Learn to make maximum use of the time God gives us. "Carpe diem". Seize the day.

#### TWO INVESTMENTS

There are, of course, two investments of time that pay high dividends. The first is that time that we invest in our family and in our friends. It can be a cold, cruel world out there and we need one another.

The second is the time we spend with God. God is our primary resource for coping with an unknown future.

Dr. Robert Schuller told a rather remarkable story recently on his Sunday morning television hour that caught my imagination. I'll try to reconstruct it for you. It was about Christy Wilson, a missionary educator in Afghanistan. A few years back there was a near "wipe-out" of Afghanistan's leading industry - sheep breeding. Apparently a fatal disease had gotten into the flocks and had resisted all efforts to eradicate it. With the entire sheep industry in danger of extinction, it would mean a loss of wool for clothing, leather for commercial products and food to eat. And in a land that was already suffering from extreme mass poverty, the potential losses were staggering.

Christy Wilson understands the power of prayer better than most people. He prayed, "What can I do?" And back came the answer, "Write to your friends back in the United States and ask them to send you some Long Island ducks".

So this is what Christy Wilson did. Two dozen duck eggs were shipped AIR FREIGHT from Kennedy to Afghanistan. But they didn't go directly to that land. The shipment got sidetracked and spent many not days in a warehouse in Calcutta. When the package finally arrived in Kabul, Afghanistan, some of the eggs were cracked and smelled rotten. Christy prayed again,

"Lord...let at least two eggs hatch out and let one of them be male and the other female...."

Twenty-two eggs proved to be rotten and infertile. Only two hatched, and yes - one was male and the other female. In a matter of months they were reproducing and the offspring multiplied. Then the miracle happened. The ducks began to devour the snails that crawled along the watering holes where the sheep went to drink. And amazingly, the fatal sheep disease disappeared. For the snails were the carriers of the disease. Today both ducks and the sheep are in abundance for which Christy Wilson was recently honored by the King himself.

#### CLOSING

As we look ahead and prepare for an unknowable future don't overlook the importance of the presence of God in our lives. Remember that there is a basic pattern to life, a pattern that only God can fully see. We would do well to "trust" in Him, and seize the day.

#### PRAYER

Dismiss us now, O God, with Your blessing and as we prepare to depart...let our faith be strong...as we look ahead...knowing that You are always in control and that a loving, guiding hand is at the helm. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

"LOOKING AHEAD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 13, 1994

## "LOOKING AHEAD"

### INTRODUCTION

Let's begin by supposing that the world was coming to an end. One wonders how the news media would play the story of the "end of time" and what the headlines might be. Let me share some of the possibilities that come to mind...

Los Angeles Times: NO TRAFFIC ON FREEWAYS TONIGHT  
USA Today: WE DIE (Late Sports, Section C, Page 1)  
The Wall Street Journal: MARKET CLOSES EARLY.  
Sports Illustrated: THE FAT LADY SINGS.  
The Daily News: ARE YOU PREPARED, BROTHER...SISTER?  
News Day: LIE FACING GRIDLOCK

### DEVELOPMENT

I'm sure you can add a few good ones of your own. Today's scripture from Mark's Gospel is part of the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. In rather vivid terms the last days of planet earth are described. Some get a chill thinking of the possibility of the end of the world, or the Rapture, as some believers call it, or The Second Coming. And as you know, whenever such predictions are made there are always some folks who run out and put their homes on the market, or cash in life insurance policies and look toward heaven for a sign.

Students of history...of church history...know, of course, that none of this is new. Many theories as to when and how the world would end have been offered. In the year 960 A. D., a German theologian predicted 992 as the most likely year. Panic was widespread as the year approached. Then in 1665 a man named Solomon Eccles was jailed in London's Bridewell Prison for striding through Smithfield Market stark naked, carrying a pan of blazing sulfur on his head and shouting doom and destruction. Although the end of the world did not follow, the Great Fire of London did - in the year 1666.

In 1874 Charles Taze Russell, founder of the sect that later became Jehovah's Witnesses, concluded that the Second Coming had already taken place and that we had 40 years - or until 1914 - to enter his faith or be destroyed. Later, I believe, he modified the date to "very soon after 1914".

The last twenty-five years have seen a number of "date-setters" including one "would be prophet" who set the date for this past September. All have been wrong. ~~A minister by the name of Michael Stifell in what is now East Germany who according to his study of the Book of Revelation proclaimed that the world would end on October 18, 1993 and when it didn't happen, his townspeople gave him a bit of a thrashing. Not a bad idea.~~ For even Jesus said that not even He knew the date, nor the hour...but that does not discourage some of His present day followers from speculating about the "final days" sometimes with tragic results.

I like something that J. David Bianchin wrote in a magazine. He used the analogy of a basketball game. He said that in the 1987 NCAA Regional Finals, Louisiana State University was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. As is often the case with a team in the lead, LSU began playing a different ball game. The LSU players, according to the television announcer, began to watch the clock...rather intensely...rather than playing the

game. As a result of this shift in focus, Indiana closed the gap, tied the score and then went on to win the game by one point. Eventually, as some Hoosiers present may remember, they became NCAA champions. The author's point was to simply say that God does not want us wasting pointness energy watching the clock. Rather, God wants us to be geared to obedient service.

We don't want to be guilty of "clock-watching" here this morning, but we do want to take seriously the words of Christ about the last, the final days. And there are three things Christ says to us about the end of time, about His return that we would do well to occasionally think about and reflect upon.

#### WE CANNOT KNOW THE FUTURE

First of all, He says that we cannot know the future. Bible students present will recall that His own disciples fully expected Him to return within their lifetime. Paul did, too. But they were wrong. And I think no Scriptural truth is more sure than this one: only God knows the future!

Think about some of the things that have happened in our own history.... especially those of you who are fifty or older. Would you have predicted in your younger days that within your lifetime a man would walk on the moon and that you'd get to watch it on television? Everyone else now....could you have predicted just a few years ago how the computer would change our lives - or the FAX - or the cellular telephone or Cable Television. ~~Or, in political terms. Could you have predicted that the Hippies of the Sixties supporting George McGovern would become the Yuppies of the eighties supporting Ronald Reagan?~~ Would you have predicted AIDS or the Fall of the Berlin Wall?

Hey, who knows what tomorrow will bring? A cure for cancer. Or perhaps a nuclear catastrophe as weapons of destruction come into the hands of terrorists? Who knows? ~~Only God.~~

#### GOD DOES KNOW

This brings us then to the second truth I would like to lift up. I believe that God knows. None of us knows, but God, I believe...does. And we can find comfort in this.

Sometime ago down in Richmond, a broad-minded judge let some petty offenders roll a huge pair of dice to determine the number of days they would get in jail. After the death of that judge, his secret came out. The dice were loaded. At first, though one might conclude that when God gave humanity the great gift of freedom, God gave man an astounding roll of the dice. How would humanity use its freedom - to build or to destroy. The answer is not yet clear, but friend...let me give you a hint. The dice are loaded.

I'm told that there is a form of science known as chaology - the study of chaos. The basic assumption of this discipline is that some things in life are just basically unpredictable. Take the weather, for example. Our eco-system is so interrelated that a butterfly flapping its wings in Beijing may ultimately affect the weather we have. In other words, there are simply too many variables to ever give a completely accurate long range weather prediction. Yes, according to computer models there are patterns even to those supposedly chaotic events. The patterns are so huge and so complex that they only seem chaotic to us.

The Biblical testimony is that there is a basic pattern to all of life. You and I cannot discern it anymore than a fish can analyze the water in which it swims.



If we could "step out" of space and time with God, we could see the pattern, and we could see that "all things do work together for good to those who love God" - but right now, we "see through a glass darkly" (as Paul put it). All we know and would believe is that God knows and therefore, all things are all right! It is a leap of faith, to be sure!

There's a rather haunting story of a man who was the lone survivor of a shipwreck. Washed up on a small island, all alone, he cried out to God to save him and every day, he scanned the horizon for help, but none came. Eventually he built a small hut and put his few possessions into it. Then one day, he came home to his hut and discovered it to be in flames with the smoke rolling up to the sky. Angry, grief stricken and thinking it was all over, he fell asleep. Early the next day, though, a ship drew near the island and rescued him.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked the first man who came up to him. "We saw your smoke signal" was the man's reply.

You and I don't know the future, but I go on believing that God does. And with that, I go on believing that He will not forsake any one of us. We are in His eternal care. But what about in the meantime, you may be tempted to ask. What does God expect out of us while we are awaiting the culmination of God's plan for each of us. Let me suggest what I believe is our task.

MAKE THE MOST OF THE PRESENT

I believe that our task is to make the most of the present. Yes, in the words of Robin Williams' character in the movie, The Dead Poets Society - "Carpe diem" - seize the day.

Remember how Williams in that movie plays the role of an English teacher who one day takes his class into the hall to examine the School Trophy case. And there he shows them pictures of past heroes of the school. He whispers to them,

"All of these young men were as you are today starting life with great promise. All of you will someday be as they are. They're all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up close to the glass." (And as the class leans toward the glass, Williams, in a raspy voice says, "Carpe diem...Carpe diem")

Are you making the most of the days that God has given you? Someone has noted that the average American disposes of about 40.1 hours of leisure time per week of which 15.2 hours are spent in front of television. If the same time were invested in walking, during one year you could walk across America, one coast to the other. If the same time were invested in education, you could earn an MBA in two years. Carpe diem, my friend...just "seize the day".

Someone else has noted that if you get up just one hour earlier each morning you will add the equivalent of over two additional months of productive work days each year. Chances are there's at least one person in the congregation today who is saying to himself (or herself)... "stop preacher...you're making me tired". But listen, friend....I need to take that risk for a few moments here this morning for there are some present who may be concerned about

their place & their future in the marketplace. The world is rapidly changing. Companies are downsizing. Middle management is disappearing as is unskilled labor. Social Security may be in trouble. I don't know what the future holds and neither does anyone else, but one thing is clear: the better prepared you and I are, the better our chances of survival. Young people, stay in school. Young and middle adults, realize that in an information society, we must keep learning and growing over a lifetime. Learn to make maximum use of the time God gives us. "Carpe diem". Seize the day.

#### TWO INVESTMENTS

There are, of course, two investments of time that pay high dividends. The first is that time that we invest in our family and in our friends. It can be a cold, cruel world out there and we need one another.

The second is the time we spend with God. God is our primary resource for coping with an unknown future.

Dr. Robert Schuller told a rather remarkable story recently on his Sunday morning television hour that caught my imagination. I'll try to reconstruct it for you. It was about Christy Wilson, a missionary educator in Afghanistan. A few years back there was a near "wipe-out" of Afghanistan's leading industry - sheep breeding. Apparently a fatal disease had gotten into the flocks and had resisted all efforts to eradicate it. With the entire sheep industry in danger of extinction, it would mean a loss of wool for clothing, leather for commercial products and food to eat. And in a land that was already suffering from extreme mass poverty, the potential losses were staggering.

Christy Wilson understands the power of prayer better than most people. He prayed, "What can I do?" And back came the answer, "Write to your friends back in the United States and ask them to send you some Long Island ducks".

So this is what Christy Wilson did. Two dozen duck eggs were shipped AIR FREIGHT from Kennedy to Afghanistan. But they didn't go directly to that land. The shipment got sidetracked and spent many hot days in a warehouse in Calcutta. When the package finally arrived in Kabul, Afghanistan, some of the eggs were cracked and smelled rotten. Christy prayed again,

"Lord...let at least two eggs hatch out and let one of them be male and the other female...."

Twenty-two eggs proved to be rotten and infertile. Only two hatched, and yes - one was male and the other female. In a matter of months they were reproducing and the offspring multiplied. Then the miracle happened. The ducks began to devour the snails that crawled along the watering holes where the sheep went to drink. And amazingly, the fatal sheep disease disappeared. For the snails were the carriers of the disease. Today both ducks and the sheep are in abundance for which Christy Wilson was recently honored by the King himself.

#### CLOSING

As we look ahead and prepare for an unknowable future don't overlook the importance of the presence of God in our lives. Remember that there is a basic pattern to life, a pattern that only God can fully see. We would do well to "trust" in Him, and seize the day.

#### PRAYER

Dismiss us now, O God, with Your blessing and as we prepare to depart...let our faith be strong...as we look ahead...knowing that You are always in control and that a loving, guiding hand is at the helm. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

*REMAIN faithful  
Obed.*

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 13, 1994

A ROSE ON THE ALTAR

- A. Once again...there's a rose on the altar...to celebrate new life in our midst.....it's there to celebrate the birth of ILYA RYAN DA COSTA, infant son of Margaret and Howard daCosta, born on October 31st at St. Vincent's Hospital here in our own city. Ilya will be back in NYC on Sunday, December 11th, for a baptism...along with Margaret and Howard.

VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of warm welcome to the visitors who have joined us in worship this morning. Delighted you're here and we look forward to greeting you personally following the service - either at the door or downstairs at the coffee hour. Be free.....sign a visitor card, or leave your name and address in one of the Guest Books.
- B. Come and worship with us....come and work with us in....we minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit, that we... Been doing the Lord's work here since 1837....roots are deep. Members: be sure to wear your name tags...make some new friends.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Review the parish concerns "lifted up" in your bulletin. Busy time right now. Christmas Fair is approaching...this coming Saturday....be sure to take along some of the flyers and post them around...in your building or where you shop. The more we get the "word" around...better off the sales will be! Check with Jane Chaney for any last minutes concerns and see Dee Downing Schaffield for a "promise tree" donation.
- B. This evening the Membership Committee will be holding our Fall "Conversations in Membership" for those who in recent weeks have found a church home here and who would like to learn more about the church and the steps that lead to membership in it. Tonight. Russell Room downstairs. 6:30 to 8:15...talks, slide show, refreshments....Said Wesley,

"If your heart is as my heart is, then  
come...give me your hand...."

Hearts and hands are needed to keep this church alive and active as we minister to a parade of people in this urban area. New members will be received on December 11th.

- C. Note that the Day School Committee meets on Monday night. "Hounds of Heaven" on Tuesday. Finance Committee on Thursday evening.

FINANCIAL CANVASS

- A. Most churches across America conduct their Financial Canvass in the month of November...trying to get the task done before the holiday season "hits us".
- B. We "kicked off" our 1995 Financial Canvass two weeks ago today....and it peaks on DEDICATION SUNDAY which we celebrate today. Many of you have already responded and some will be responding today. It would be wonderful if we could "do it all" in a two week period...or in one month. It's going well and present this morning to bring you up to date and encourage you to do your part if you haven't already, is:
- C. Following the singing of the Doxology, we shall share in the LITANY OF DEDICATION....let's bring our praises to the ful...to the highest...and dedicate our anticipated gifts for the coming year with conviction and with the feeling that they make a difference...and THEY DO!
- D. Thank you...JIM PERKINS. KARL NEWLINE. MAVIS VANN. DAN BOONE....and all of you for helping is do what has to be done.

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit then, let us worship God with our tithes, our gifts, our offerings, our pledges...