



“God’s Ultimate Victory Garden”

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Rev. 22:1–7 (NRSV)**

I’m glad to see that everyone made it to church today, especially given that East Bay radio talk show host Harold Camping predicted that yesterday was the beginning of the end of life as we know it. The *San Lorenzo Patch* (and several other news outlets) reported on Camping’s predictions in yesterday’s paper where he reportedly said:

Jesus will return to Earth and save his believers. The unrepentant sinners among us will be the victims of a massive earthquake that will start in New Zealand and spread across the world until it reaches the United States about 6 p.m. Unlucky survivors will perish six months later on October 21, when God destroys the Earth with fire.

“It’s a horrible judgment that’s coming,” said Santos Rolon, a spokesperson for the evangelical group. “The Scriptures describe the events, and they are horrible events.”

Camping claims the May 21 date is exactly 7,000 years since the animals stepped onto Noah’s Ark. He arrived at this date through intricate calculations based on the Bible.

His supporters are certain the calculations are correct.¹

Yesterday’s forecast isn’t the only doom and gloom prediction that Camping has made. Those who’ve followed his ministry for a long time know that he made a similar prediction back in the early 1990s when he prophesied that the world would end in 1994.²

II

Clearly, predicting the apocalypse (the end of the world as we know it) isn’t new for Camping—and as we may realize, it isn’t new for other religious zealots—so we may question these prognosticators’ intentions and credibility, and we may even poke fun at them.

¹ <http://sanlorenzo.patch.com/articles/bay-area-evangelist-claims-end-of-world-coming-saturday-4H>

² <http://sanlorenzo.patch.com/articles/bay-area-evangelist-claims-end-of-world-coming-saturday-4H>

In recent weeks, for example, it was brought to my attention that there is a web-based company called Eternal Earth Bound Pets³ that is profiting from recent apocalyptic predictions, by selling pet care services to persons who anticipate being taken up in the rapture. According to the Eternal Earth Bound Pets' website, their company is "the next best thing to pet salvation in a postrapture world," because—in their view—pets don't have souls, so they don't go to heaven, and the people who work for the company are card-carrying atheists who are sure that they aren't going to heaven either, so they'll be here to take care of their clients' pets.

Even the Center for Disease Control has gotten into the apocalyptic act by posting a link on their website, under the disaster preparedness heading, explaining how to prepare for zombies if you encounter them in your neighborhood after the apocalypse. While I doubt that the CDC officially confirms the existence of zombies, they clearly see apocalyptic predictions as an opportunity to draw the public to their web-based resources about disaster preparedness, and I applaud their ingenuity for this out-of-the-box thinking.

But what's next? Here we are. It's Sunday morning, May 22, 2011. It's the day after the day that the apocalypse didn't come, and we are here, this side of the grass, this side of heaven. What's next?

III

My answer to what's next is simply this: we need to reframe John's vision of the apocalypse. Rather than holding on to prognostications of doom and gloom, we need to lay hold of John's vision of the world beyond the human conflict and natural disasters envisioned in the Apocalypse (the holy war which precedes the new order), and we need to cultivate a world in which the soil around us is fertilized and the seeds of abundance are planted, so that John's vision in Rev. 22 may flourish here on earth.

In Rev. 22, John envisions the Holy City of Jerusalem restored and renewed beyond its former luster and enriched by the River of Life that runs through it. In this world-as-it-should-be, the inhabitants of Jerusalem are fed by lush orchards where the Trees of Life grow on either side of the river, and these trees bear twelve kinds of fruit, and their leaves foster healing for the nations.

Imagine that, John says. Imagine a city where the dwellings are sound, where the water is pure, where the people are fed, where the sick are healed, and where God has taken care of the utility bills. Imagine that, John says. Imagine the New Jerusalem set within an earthly context of God's ultimate victory garden.

Most who remember WWII or studying the world wars also know about victory gardens. For those who don't, I'll explain that victory gardens were residential fruit and vegetable gardens and kitchen gardens planted on public lands during WWI and WWII in North America and the United Kingdom, where people raised their own food and often raised

³ [Hhttp://www.eternal-earthbound-pets.com](http://www.eternal-earthbound-pets.com)H

enough to share with others. The purpose of victory gardens, particularly during the war years, was to reduce the pressure on the public food supply, and to build national morale by providing citizens with concrete ways to contribute to the war effort while feeding their families during a time of international deprivation.⁴

Though the War to End All Wars has long passed, deprivation still exists in our nation and world. Bread for the World and other global charities who are working to eradicate world hunger teach us that there has been and continues to be plenty of food to feed the world. So the problem is not one of food availability, the problem is that too few people lack the vision of a better day and a better way, and too few lack the motivation to overcome our current distribution problems that keep most of the world hungry. But life could be different. Life this side of heaven could be different. Our lives could resemble the vision that John expressed in Rev. 22.

Every time I read Rev. 22, I am reminded that UCC theologian, Gabriel Fackre, teaches that the story of the Christian faith begins and ends in a garden. Our holy history began in the Garden of Eden, and it culminates in the Garden of Jerusalem.

Rather than sitting around waiting for the rapture to come, a more productive use of our time would be to plant and cultivate the kind of victory garden that John envisioned, in Rev. 22, in our own backyards. For those of us at Eden Church, Cherryland is our backyard.

IV

One of the ways that we are planting seeds and tilling soil in God's victory garden here in Cherryland is through the youth investment and violence prevention work that we have been engaged in, particularly this past year. The impetus for this work grew out of doom-and-gloom concerns articulated by our neighbors back in 2008, and the handwringing that continues over the growing number of gangsters and the growing amount of gang activity in our neighborhood.

Law enforcement officials tell us, for example, that nearly 600 youth and young adults (out of approximately 4200 residents living in Cherryland) have been identified through their interactions with the Sheriff's department as being associated with gangs. Doom and gloom.

We read every day in the papers that California's economy is in the tank, and that we should expect less, not more, publicly funded services in our communities. In the context of gang activity, this means that we should expect more violence, not less, because gang membership and violence breed on deprivation and despair. Doom and gloom.

Last month our County Supervisor excoriated Eden's community organizing group for our apparent failure to resolve the gang problems in our community. His comments were made in the context of an EALI meeting in which I reported on our youth violence

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_gardenH

prevention work. Doom and gloom.

It's easy to profligate a philosophy of doom and gloom. Many have done it. Many are doing it. And many more have gotten on the bandwagon of doom and gloom prognosticators.

But doom and gloom are not what we teach at Eden Church, and doom and gloom is not what we practice as people of faith. We know that there is a better day and a better way coming, and we aim to be a part of planting and cultivating that reality. We aim to plant and cultivate God's victory garden by bringing together community leaders who work together to find solutions for the common good that address the disconnection and deprivation that creates a climate in which gangs grow and violence escalates.

The truth be told, gangs exist where deprivation and despair are prevalent. Young people who get involved in gangs lack many of the basic necessities of life. They lack some or all of the following: food, shelter, clothing, safety, healthcare, and an emotionally nurturing home life. Typically, gang-involved youth are not succeeding in school because they are not reading at grade level by the time they reach the third grade. As a consequence of these privations, at-risk youth lack meaningful paths to high school graduation, job training, and employment—and gang participation seems like the only option for affiliation and economic reward.

The good news for at-risk and gang-involved youth—and ultimately for our whole community—is that the story of deprivation and despair doesn't have to end there. (Remember what Professor Fackre teaches: "The Christian story begins and ends in a garden.") The way to diminish (and ultimately eliminate) gang involvement is to fulfill the basic needs of our youth, serve as mentors and counselors as needed, and ensure that they are literate; so that every young person has a meaningful path to graduation and higher education, job training and professional development, and employment and advancement.

If all this rhetoric sounds like pie in the sky to you, hear this: in less than six weeks, our community organizing group, Eden-Cherryland COR, has brought two County supervisors and two City Council members, numerous County and City employees, all of the public school principals associated with Cherryland and South Garden, leaders from several community-based organizations, and numerous parents from the neighborhood to the Community Round Table to design and build a youth investment program for our community that will address the root causes of youth violence in our neighborhood.

Last month we were told by county officials that dollars were shrinking, that the clock was ticking, and that there would be little to no money for the work that we are about. But we didn't give up, because we knew that God had a better day and a better way in store for the young people of our community, and you know what happened? Others started believing that our prophecy—which was John's prophecy—is true.

Several community leaders stepped up and have committed staff time and volunteer

hours to support this effort. Two county supervisors have committed \$70,000 to the project. The Deputy Director of Community Health has committed technical support for a school-based project that we have proposed for Hayward High School. Tiburcio Vasquez Healthcare has stepped up, too, and offered to help implement the proposed program at Hayward High. This past Thursday, the Deputy Director called and said, “Arlene, I’m leaving on a trip tomorrow, and taking my laptop with me, and I’m going to write a grant proposal for your program at Hayward High, and if we win the grant there will be \$125K for the second year of operation.”

V

The problems are not yet solved. There’s lots of work to do. There’s a program to build, there are relationships that need healing across racial and economic lines, and there is money to be raised for program and capital improvements throughout the entire Hayward Unified School District. But a vision has been cast, some seeds have been planted, and God has provided us with sun and rain sufficient to cause those seeds to sprout.

Each of us in this room can be part of cultivating God’s victory garden in Cherryland. Some of us can help by coming to the next meeting of the Community Round Table, Wednesday night at 6:30 p.m., in Oliver Hall. Others can help by saying our prayers that meeting participants stay focused on the needs of our young people, so that fears of scarcity do not turn the meeting into the Jerry Springer Show. And some others can help by designing the pilot program at Hayward High.

If direct involvement in this project isn’t your particular interest or gift, there are countless other ways to help tend God’s garden—through the sharing of time, talent, and treasure—that you can be part of cultivating God’s victory garden here at Eden Church, and ensuring that our entire community can experience the abundant love and grace that God has offered all of us. One way to express your commitment to being part of this grand gardening project is through the completion of your Time and Talent form and your pledge card today.

On behalf of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, and on behalf of Eden United Church of Christ, thank you all for the many and varied ways that you have planted and that you continue to cultivate God’s victory garden, right here in Cherryland. Amen.