

FROM THE PULPIT

Our Last Days

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My early school years, until I was in the seventh grade, in fact, were spent in a two-room school. The school was in southern Arkansas, three miles from the nearest town, El Dorado — El Dorader, we called it — City of Liquid Gold. The school sat high off the ground on cement blocks (Mr. Brownfield's hogs appreciated the space under it) in the middle of what had once been Old Man Pratt's farm but was then a thriving oil field. When I started there, Pratt School was overcrowded (the school board had not anticipated the oil boom), and the first and second-graders sat on benches around the wall.

There under a series of young women, each in her first year out of "normal" training, I learned reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and science, and there I would have learned poker if the teacher hadn't taken the cards away from the boy who sat next to me on the second-grade bench. He had just dealt the cards and was going to tell me the rules, when he forgot himself and yelled, "Hey, you've got too many cards." The teacher interrupted the fifth-grade boy who was reading "Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham," and took the cards away.

If she hadn't taken the cards away though, I might never have known that the world was coming to an end on Wednesday. The boy who sat on the other side of me told me. He didn't play poker and he warned me not to learn, because sinners were all to die on Wednesday night. That's a startling thing to learn when you are in the second grade.

He was a stocky, stolid boy at least two years older than I was, with red hair and so many freckles they ran together, and usually a runny nose. Along with his parents, his brothers and sisters, and a few other families in the community, he belonged to a tiny religious sect that was looking for the Second Coming, looking for it any day. When I had to give up learning poker, I learned that the day was to be Wednesday. He wouldn't be in school on Wednesday, he told me. His church was going to sing hymns and pray all day Wednesday and into the night until Jesus came.

That afternoon my mother assured me there was nothing in the boy's prediction, no more than there was in the picture of hellfire and brimstone the nearby Baptist preacher described in such detail. Her comparison was unfortunate. During the day, or in the evening when I was with my family,

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I could usually convince myself that no such hell existed. But at night or even during the day if I were coming through the pine thicket behind our house alone, that hell was frighteningly, real, much more real than the vague discomfort my mother envisioned as hell. My father, when he was told about the coming event, merely said "Huh," an answer that served for almost anything my father heard.

All day Wednesday the extra room on the bench was an annoying reminder that by morning Pratt School, El Dorado, the whole world could be gone, and me with it, gone to wherever I was to go. And I was afraid the Baptist preacher might prove to be right about where that was. I endured Wednesday, and Wednesday night. I considered praying and singing all night, but the prayer I said regularly went "*Something, something*, and make us well and keep us good. Amen." You can't keep going with a prayer like that for very long. And as for singing hymns, I kept coming back in my mind to the one we sang in Baptist Sunday School, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and I wasn't too sure I believed that one at the moment.

It was at least Friday before the red haired boy was back in school. He wedged himself into his place on the bench with the shortest of greetings. I waited. He said nothing, didn't even mention Wednesday or Wednesday night. I knew that the politest thing would be to keep my mouth shut, but I couldn't help wondering how he felt. Was he disappointed or relieved? So finally when the teacher was busy writing an assignment on the board, I asked him what had happened. "Well," he said, "we prayed all night and the Lord put it off for a while."

It wasn't until I came to Utah to teach, that I discovered how many of the members of my own religion saw these as the immediate last days. I had heard sermons, of course, referring to these as the last days but only in a rather general way. I had not known those Mormons who, as my German friend says of his wife, "see the end coming already next Thursday." Or like my elderly friend Willard, who told me, with a voice filled with emotion, that he had heard Homer, one of his neighbors, say something religious. Willard had never expected to hear Homer say anything religious, but Homer had said, "The weather is changing so much, these *must* be the last days."

As I have become aware of this strong conviction, especially among the young people of the Church, I've become concerned. It seems to me that behind our conviction may lie the desire to escape responsibility. We always have a ready answer. "Sure, the world is in a bad way. What else can you expect? These are the last days." "Don't you want to do anything about the condition of the world?" someone asks. We come right back: "We can't do anything about it. Things won't get any better until the Lord comes." As long as we accept the idea that the Lord will come — in a matter of months, years, a decade or so — we can easily sluff off responsibility for any major problem in the world. Pollution? War? Racial problems? Over-population? We don't need to worry about these things; the Lord will take care of them when he comes, on Thursday, or Friday.

I have no doubt that the Lord could take care of them if he were to come. I am just afraid he might decide "to put it off for a while" and we will be left with the problems unsolved. He has indeed been "putting it off" for quite a while.

Sometyme this world was stedfast and stable
That mannes word was obligacioun;
And now it is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusioun,
Ben nothing lyk, for turned up-so-down
Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.

The images are different, of course, but Chaucer's sentiment is much like the bleak sentiment of Donne's Anniversarie poems, written a little over two hundred years later, in the first of which Donne says "that this world's spent."

And now the Springs and Sommers which we see,
Like sonnes of women after fifty bee.
And new Philosophy calls all in dought,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sunne is lost, and th' earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him, where to looke for it.

And Chaucer's sentiment is much like the frightening picture in the first stanza of William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming," written over five hundred years later:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack of all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

We can hardly doubt that the worst in our day "are full of passionate intensity," and while we may argue that the "best" do not "lack all conviction," it seems to me that I, and the people I associate with, too often lack the conviction necessary to act.

When I was a boy growing up in that Arkansas oil field, no one complained about the oil that soaked into the ground to turn once productive soil into something similar to sandstone. All the years I walked the half mile to Pratt School, I crossed the oil-hardened ridges of rows plowed into a field before oil was discovered there. No one complained either about the oil that killed the trees and vegetation in the slough and on the sides of the streams. We lived by the oil; how could we complain?

My mother, a very good woman, never paid her Negro kitchen help a fair wage. She paid just what everyone else paid so that there wouldn't be any trouble.

If a southerner tells you that the Negroes were happy, contented, until someone came along and stirred them up, don't believe him. We kids sitting on those benches around the walls in Pratt School talked of the coming war. Not the Second World War. None of us had the foresight to predict that. The war we talked of was the war between the blacks and whites. We knew the Negro was oppressed; we knew he knew it. Our predictions were wrong though; we expected a revolt to come within a year or two.

No Negroes came to Pratt School, and later when I rode a bus to El

Dorado, no Negroes rode the bus. I am ashamed to confess that I have no idea where the Negroes who lived near us went to school. Or if they went to school. There was one segregated school in El Dorado, I know, but it was on the other side of town, four or four and a half miles from where we lived. I doubt that many of them walked that far. None of *us* thought to complain, and none of *them* dared to.

When I came home for the summer, after spending two years in college, I discovered that the city librarian in order to obtain funds from the Carnegie Foundation had been forced to open the library to all members of the community, including for the first time the large Negro population. But she had, she assured me, managed things well. She had put a few old books in the basement and the Negroes could come in the back door and get those. That very year Richard Wright published his moving autobiography, *Black Boy*, in which he describes how he sneaked books from the Memphis Library, pretending they were for a white man who worked in the office where Wright himself held a menial position. Wright describes how his insatiable appetite for reading both elated and depressed him:

In buoying me up, reading also cast me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed. My tension returned, new, terrible, bitter, surging, almost too great to be contained. I no longer *felt* that the world about me was hostile, killing; I *knew* it. A million times I asked myself what I could do to save myself, and there were no answers. I seemed forever condemned, ringed by walls.

Richard Wright broke out of his ring of walls, but I doubt that many Negroes in El Dorado followed his pattern. There were too few books in the library basement. *Black Boy* would not have been there; it was a *new* book that year.

Let me return to my "last days" theme. I know that the argument is not valid which says that since the last days have been expected before and have not come, they will not come this time.

I do not care if the world's last days are coming or not. Yours and mine are here. According to the Psalmist,

The days of our years are threescore years and ten;
and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years,
yet is their strength labour and sorrow;
for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

So all that each of us ever has is "last days."

The Psalmist is being poetic, but he is also being quite accurate. If we are fortunate, we have just about what he says we will have. These are truly our last days.

When the Lord gave man dominion over the earth, He directed him to "multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it." And He did not say if man gets it in a mess, He'll come down and clean it up. I'm sure He expects us to work as hard as we can at "subduing" the earth, at controlling *all* its problems. I have a hard time seeing the Lord angry because we tried to solve a problem, even if we failed. I can much more readily see Him provoked because we stood by and waited for Him to do *our* work.