

A priest and a rabbi from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The rabbi's sign read, "The End is Near!"

The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, "Turn before it's too late!" They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car.

"Get a job," The first driver yelled at them when he saw the sign.

The second driver, immediately behind the first, yelled, "Leave us alone you religious freaks!"

Shortly, from around the curve, the two clergy heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The rabbi looked over at the priest and said, "Do you think we should try a different sign?" The priest responded thoughtfully, "Perhaps our signs ought to say simply 'Bridge Out.'"

It seemed like a good idea to start the potentially gloomy topic of the last days with a bit of humor. And the story of the priest and rabbi by the road side also helps make my first point. We aren't very good at dealing with signs or putting it another way: our predictions are almost always wrong. Here are some predictions of the future. All from people who could be trusted:

"The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a 'C', the idea must be feasible." -
- A Yale University management professor in response to Fred Smith's paper proposing reliable overnight delivery service. (Smith went on to found FEDEX)

"Who wants to hear actors talk?" -- H. M. Warner, Warner Brothers, 1927.

"It will be years -- not in my time -- before a woman will become Prime Minister." -- Margaret Thatcher, 1974.

"With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn't likely to carve out a big slice of the U.S. market." -- Business Week in 1968.

"There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will." -- Albert Einstein, 1932.

And on the religious side the track record is at least as bad. For centuries there have been innumerable theories as to when and how the world might end. In 960 a German theologian calculated 992 as the most likely year. As the time approached, panic was widespread. In 1665 a man named Solomon Eccles was jailed in London for striding through Smithfield Market stark naked and prophesying doom and destruction. In 1874 Charles Russell, founder of the sect that became Jehovah's Witnesses, declared that people had 40 years, or until 1914, to enter his faith or be destroyed. Later he modified the date to "very soon after 1914."

We all remember the folk who thought the world would surely end in the year 2000. Actually for the last few centuries here has been an end of the world movement about every 20 years; we are due for another one soon and they too will be wrong. They are always wrong because they think the end is triggered by natural disasters, political change, or even personal tragedy. They think the end will be overwhelming and undmistakeable.

THE END, however, doesn't really have a trigger event but is more of an ongoing thing.

The desserts of Arabia used to be lush jungles; the middle of our own country used to be a salt water sea. Change means one pattern ends and a new one begins. Something is always ending in nature.

In human history great empires arise and then fall because they are a human construction: Egyptian and Inca, Greek and Roman, French and English, ancient china and modern Japan. Even the pyramids will eventually erode away to nothing. Our own country is a human construction and it too will pass into history someday. If our country collapsed next year – and I'm not making predictions because we already talked about how worthless those tend to be – we would feel like our world was ending. Our savings would vanish, medicare and social security and obamacare would vanish. It would be devastating to many but it wouldn't be THE END.

What is always ending is the human world we construct around us but there is a bigger picture. Creation is the work of God; it changes and grows and always heads toward the goal God had established for it. It has its own timeline and that end isn't one we should fear.

But what about all those folk who seemed obsessed with the endtimes? Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming because, deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one. Maybe they just want God to do all the work and stop bothering them with all this concern for neighbors and such. Our job is not to speculate about times and seasons, but to make sure that we are living as God wants us to live - sisters and brothers to one another - here and now. Sadly some folks are "so heavenly minded they are no earthly good."

When Cecil B. DeMille, the noted director of biblical epics, began working on the movie Ben Hur, DeMille talked to Charlton Heston--the star of the movie--about the all-important chariot race at the end. He decided Heston should actually learn to drive the chariot himself, rather than just using a stunt double. Heston agreed to take chariot-driving lessons to make the movie as authentic as possible.

Learning to drive a chariot with horses four abreast, however, was no small matter. After extensive work and days of practice, Heston returned to the movie set and reported to DeMille.

"I think I can drive the chariot all right, Cecil," said Heston, "but I'm not at all sure I can actually win the race."

Smiling slightly, DeMille said, "Heston, you just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win."

Those are the words of God to everyone through a time of tumultuous change: "You just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win." Look for God's hand. If you cannot see it in the event itself, look for it in the aftermath when you are putting your life back together. I promise you, God's hand will be there guiding you to build the world that will only end on his terms.

We began with humor, so we should probably end that way. Several years ago, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks did a comedy skit called the "2000 Year Old Man". In the skit, Reiner interviews Brooks, who is the old gentleman. At one point, Reiner asks the old man, "*Did you always believe in the Lord?*"

Brooks replied: "*No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshiped him.*"

Reiner: *You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?*

Brooks: *Because he was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!*

Reiner: *Did you have prayers?*

Brooks: *Yes, would you like to hear one? O Phil, please don't be mean, and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands.*

Reiner: *So when did you start worshiping the Lord?*

Brooks: *Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, "There's somthin' bigger than Phil!"*

All the frightening events around us – they are just Phil. There is something bigger and that is really what the readings today want us to know.