

Have you seen the movie posters or trailers? Aerial views of cities devastated by natural disasters, tidal waves crashing over the Himalayas, huge letters spelling out “We Were Warned”

- The movie is the poster child, you might say, for a burgeoning industry based on cataclysmic predictions of events expected on Dec. 21, 2012
- What first caught my eye was a *Denver Post* article early this month: “That’s the day, according to people obsessed with an ancient Mayan calendar, (when) either the world will come to an end or the universe will witness a grand transformation toward peace and harmony.”
- Searching the internet led me to a wonderful variety of perspectives on the subject

More than a year ago, Belgian laboratory worker Patrick Geryl quit his job and began preparing for the end times

- He’d saved up enough Euros to last until through 2012, figuring he wouldn’t need money after that
- His list of survival goods—from water filters to dust masks to vegetable seeds—filled eleven pages
- “You have to understand there will be nothing, nothing left.” Geryl told ABC News. “We’ll have to start an entire civilization from scratch.”

Scholar Stephen Houston, a specialist on Mayan hieroglyphics at Brown University, scoffs at this idea, “These prophecies of doom really don’t have any basis in what we know about the Maya.”

- Boulder resident John Jenkins, author of *The 2012 Story*, predicts a time of “rejuvenation and transformation, as long as people work to achieve it.”
- Another prominent website stated, “There’s a lot of talk about 2012 being the end of the world. But how will it really end?”
- That turned out to be posted by the Conservation Law Foundation, warning about the dangers of climate change

My favorite was the home page of the Institute for Human Continuity, whose mission is “to ensure the survival of the human race beyond 2012”

- Claiming to be dedicated to “scientific research and public preparedness,” the Institute’s website includes a registration procedure for their survival lottery
- “Nobody knows precisely what our world will look like on Dec. 21, 2012,” they say. “We do know, with near complete certainty, that a series of catastrophes will decimate much of the planet. The IHC lottery will give each individual an equal opportunity in 2012.”
- It’s not exactly clear what happens if you win the lottery, but I guess it sounds like a good thing...

That’s all part of the promotion campaign for the movie, of course, which generated \$238 million in revenues during its first week in theaters worldwide

- But it tells us something about the public’s fascination with apocalyptic themes, that over 14 million people have enrolled in the survival lottery
- And however foolish this all may seem, there’s some kind of comfort in realizing that its foundation is biblical
- The visions of the end times in the book of Daniel and the Revelation to John, from which we read today, have fascinated their readers and hearers for two thousand years
- Similarly, the Gospel of Mark warns of “wars and rumors of wars...earthquakes (and) famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (*Mark 13:7*)
- Mark goes on to promise that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Christians in every era since then have looked for signs that the end of the world is close at hand

- Even a cursory knowledge of history reminds us that unrest, violence, plagues, and starvation have always been regular features of human civilization
- In our lifetimes we’ve also seen unprecedented cultural change, leading to an erosion of traditional foundations across the world
- Combined with the scary impacts of the past year’s economic crisis, it’s no wonder that people are drawn to apocalyptic prophecies
- They portray a stark opposition of good and evil, with passions running high and no middle ground

- People tend to grasp for solutions, whether that might mean survivalist strategies or Divine intervention or New Age catharsis

It's interesting to observe how widely the theological term "apocalypse" is misunderstood

- It does not actually refer to judgment or destruction, but comes from the Greek root "apokalypsis" meaning disclosure or unveiling
- Daniel, one of the last Old Testament authors, describes a "night vision" in which "I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven."
- After being presented to the Ancient One on his throne (said to be surrounded by a hundred million attendants), the one like a human "was given dominion and glory and kingship...that shall never be destroyed." (*Daniel 7:13*)
- Originally identified as the Archangel Michael, this figure came to be seen by Jews as the promised Messiah, and by Christians as Jesus

Daniel's apocalyptic tradition is continued in the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation to John, "which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place..." (*Rev. 1:1*)

- The Revelation is characterized by dramatic symbolic visions, vivid and colorful in their description, with fantastical animals, numerological codes, and secret books concealed until the end of time
- Not surprisingly, these symbols have generated what one scholar described as "widely divergent systems of interpretation"
- Most literally, there seem to be a number of references to the Roman Empire and the emperor Domitian, who persecuted Christians for refusing to worship him as "Lord and God"
- In a final battle, an avenger called "The Word of God" rides down from heaven on a white horse to capture "the beast and the kings of the earth" (*Rev. 19:13, 19*)
- Then, echoing the last chapters of Isaiah, the narrator sees "a new heaven and a new earth...(and) the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." (*Rev. 21:1*)
- John's Revelation describes the coming of the Kingdom, but what exactly does that mean in our day? Most importantly, how does it sustain our hopes and guide our actions?

In many ways it would be comforting to believe that this divine consummation will come in our lifetimes

- It would be painful to let go of our homes and relationships, but being swept up into the clouds would certainly be dramatic
- The widespread fascination with this possibility is reflected in the popularity of the Left Behind series of novels, with over 65 million copies sold
- Any connection to Scripture is tenuous at best—they're imaginative reconstructions of what might happen in the last days

The most important New Testament writers agree that it's not possible for humans to predict the end of this world

- The Gospel of Mark says that “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.” (*Mark 13:32*)
- Luke expresses agreement in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles
- Just before the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, the disciples asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.’” (*Acts 1:6*)
- Similarly, Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, “Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” (*1 Thess 5:1*)

The Thessalonians expected Jesus to return in power and majesty during their lifetimes, and they were concerned about family members who had already died

- I've already noted that Mark anticipated that event in the lifetime of his readers, and the first verse of Revelation speaks of “what must soon take place”
- Almost two thousand years later, we're still waiting
- Dozens or hundreds of times over the ages, Christians have seen signs pointing to the end of life of earth, but it hasn't happened yet
- I can't see any reason why 2012 is going to be any different, but who knows?

Sometimes when you're looking for something, your mind is so set on what you think it will be like, that you don't notice its surprisingly different appearance

- We certainly haven't seen anything like that final battle in Revelation, but perhaps that's not the way it's going to begin
- Maybe Christ has come among us already, and we haven't realized it
- Maybe the Apocalypse (or unveiling of divine mysteries) has been taking place all along

Think of the people of Jerusalem two thousand years ago, who were waiting for the Messiah

- They expected a majestic King, riding into the city on a big stallion surrounded by soldiers, the way Pontius Pilate did every year before the festival
- Who would have thought he'd come to them seated on a donkey?
- They expected the Messiah to triumph over the Roman authorities, showing his power as an earthly ruler
- Who would have thought he'd be crucified next to two criminals and put away in a borrowed tomb?

In the end it really doesn't matter what we expect or when we think it will happen

- The Apocalypse will come, revealing the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst
- Maybe you've already seen him in the waiting room of a hospital, or in the cubicle next to yours, or sitting in the school lunchroom
- Maybe he'll be at your dinner table this Thanksgiving, or lining up at a soup kitchen, or kneeling at the altar rail here in the church

All we know is what the Revelation tells us: that Jesus Christ is "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." (*Rev 1:5*)

- We know that He "loves us, and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom..."
- Our hope lies in recognizing Jesus among us, and responding to his love and grace
- Hopefully it's not as complicated as people often make it seem—it's not like we have to make it happen
- "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him..."