

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 11, 2007, dedicated to all Veterans and their families, to my father, Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. and my late father-in-law Robert Francis Sitler who served our nation in WWII and the Korean War, respectively and especially to veterans of First Congregational Church who have served our nation in times of peace and war and always to the glory of God!

“The Eleventh Hour”

II Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

In 1918, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month an armistice was signed between the Allied Forces and Germany calling for the end of hostilities on the western front. Although fighting continued in other regions for months to come, 11/11/1918 at 11 a.m. was set aside from that time onward as Armistice Day. It was to be a time of silence. A time of reflection. A time in which each year, each person would “give peace a chance.”

After all, the world was just ended what has been called - “the war to end all wars.” To establish a dream of peace embodied “hope” in the midst of never before known destruction. Eighty-nine years later, we know this dream of peace never really prevailed. Only 20 years after “the final war of the world,” the world was at war again. In the Great War that commenced from the late 1930s and ended in August 1945, over 50 million men, women and children perished across three oceans and three continents - Europe, Africa, and Asia. Close to half a million of the dead were American soldiers.

I invite you all to stop at our wall of honor in the southwest corner of the sanctuary to see the names of those who served our nation from this congregation in World War II. Only a handful of them are with us now. We are told that a thousand more soldiers of WWII are dying each day. Their memories are fading as we honor the dead and living; the wounded and the dying veterans of this our second war in the Persian Gulf over the past 15 years.

“The Eleventh Hour” has taken on new meanings over the generations. The eleventh hour has become an expression referring to the last moments before a deadline or the imminence of a decisive final moment. In *The Eleventh Hour*, action must be taken or hope is extinguished. Books, music, radio and television shows and even a recent video game have claimed the eleventh hour for their titles. Now a newly released film, narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio documents the environmental crisis, which we have created as the eleventh hour for the planet and all of life as we know it. Based on scientific evidence, this new documentary shows what humanity has done to the earth and what we must do to reverse “The Crisis” of our times. It is being released now in theaters around the country.

Months ago, when I thought of this day and our 11/11/11 moment, I was reflecting on the eleventh hour of our stewardship drive - which hardly seems to meet the gravity of all the moments which claim the title of the eleventh hour. I must admit, from the perspective of two months out, this looked like our last moment to act on our 2007 pledges. But, as we reach for our goal of \$725,000 and stand only at \$491,000+ with 200 pledging households units (half of our units) yet to respond to letters, calls and gentle nudges - I certainly hope and pray we have not reached our eleventh hour, because we are far from the summit of our assent to goal! It may be the ninth or tenth hour, but I appeal to you to remember our church membership covenant and to step up your stewardship by supporting the ministry and mission of your church. Let's pray that our eleventh hour is still pending - and let's continue to reach our goal!

In scripture today, both Jesus and Paul reflect on the eleventh hour in their times. As we follow Luke's Gospel to the end, we find Jesus in Jerusalem. It is the eleventh hour of his ministry and mission. He is in his last days on earth. He has already turned over the tables and cleansed the temple. Now he is now engaged in a series of confrontations with Jewish leaders. They have already questioned his authority (20:1-8) and the matter of paying tribute to Caesar (20:20-26). Their third and final question is about the resurrection of the dead. But, we need to remember that they are angling to corner Jesus. Their questions about resurrection come not from bereaved persons seeking hope for their beloved who had died. They are not coming from new believers and followers seeking clarity about a doctrine of resurrection. Rather, Jesus is being interrogated by persons who already have a fixed position that there was no resurrection of the dead. These are the Sadducees and Pharisees.

The Sadducees were a priestly class many of whom were aristocratic and wealthy. They were theological fundamentalists. They regarded the first five books of Moses to be the only normative texts for their religion. If you couldn't find it in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy, then whatever you said had no authority in the eyes of God (at least the God of the Sadducees).

The Pharisees believed in the oral as well as the written tradition, which came down from Moses. Within the oral tradition, there was room for conversation and belief in resurrection of the dead. The two schools of thought often engaged in heated debate. Jesus steps right into the maelstrom of discontent. He knew what he was up against. But, he doesn't respond to their attitudes but rather to their questions.

First, he points out the inappropriateness of the question given the difference between this life and the life to come. While marriage is a hot topic in our age, for those who attain resurrection from the

dead, it is not an issue. Why? Because in the life to come, they are children of God and as such they are angels. Angels have no need of marriage.

Second, Jesus uses the Sadducees own tactics. He quotes the Books of Moses. While they quote Deuteronomy 25:5-10 about a widow remarrying her brother in law, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6 to affirm that God is Lord of both the living and the dead. In Jesus' view, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all have continuous life with God. There are no tiers of intermediate states of deceased. All are one with God!

In the eleventh hour, Jesus takes on the critics and silences the mumblers. He doesn't back down. Within days, he will show - through his own resurrection - the realness of his truths.

Flash forward 30 years. It is the time of great expectation. The church is growing. The love of Jesus is spreading across the world. The promise of Jesus' return "on the clouds" is one which the first Christians anticipate as excitedly as stargazers and astronomers anticipate the moment of total eclipse of the sun. Paul stands with them in their eleventh hour of anticipation. "The Day of the Lord" is coming. He offers a twofold prayer - first, a prayer of thanksgiving. He is filled with gratitude for all God has done for him in Christ Jesus. Then, he offers a benediction. Gratitude and comfort embrace the fullness of this prayer.

How many of you live with such expectation and gratitude? How many of you greet each day anticipating the imminent return of Jesus? How many awaken to each new sunrise believing: "THIS IS THE DAY THAT THE LORD HAS MADE! LET US BE GLAD AND REJOICE IN IT!" I can tell you that when we do this, our lives are placed in perspective and blessed immensely. Faced with critics and those who would love to see him crucified, Jesus pointed all his listeners to heaven. He told them that resurrection over death was the answer

to squabbles in this life. Faced with a persecuted and increasingly anguished band of baptized brothers and sisters, the Apostle Paul lifted praise and thanksgiving to God. He exalted his creator, testified to his Christ, and pointed to hope in the blessings of this life and the next. All this he did in the Eleventh Hour of his ministry.

We all face the “eleventh” in our lives at various times.

In WWII, my friend Jack Bush was in an Army Unit cut-off by the Nazis in the Battle of the Bulge. They were told to hold a town – which ended up being in the crossfire of Nazi and Allied bombardment. Jack and his unit took refuge in a church basement. Through the night, missiles landed on the town from both sides. Through the night, Jack and his men prayed the Lord’s Prayer. When daylight broke and the smoke was settling Jack’s unit emerged from the depths of the church. The town was in absolute ruin. The only wall standing in the church was the directly over the men. Jack said to me years later, “Each day I prayed the Lord’s Prayer” and gave thanks that he had delivered me in the eleventh hour!

Last year, Bernie and Nancy Bouman’s daughter and grandchildren suffered through the suicide loss of her husband. In the face of this tragedy, the boy’s aunt, Diane Bouman Kaulen, wrote this book *In the Wake of Suicide: A Child’s Journey* to help her nephews through their loss. In the Eleventh Hour, Diane saw the need to minister to her family and share with the world a much-needed help in facing suicide in families. Thanks Be to God for her Eleventh Hour Ministry!

In late September, Lissa Wade forwarded me the story of Dr. Randy Pausch, a Carnegie Mellon University professor of Computer Science. On September 20th, Dr. Pausch offered his “last lecture.” Across America, various professors have been sharing their wisdom with students as “if it were their last lecture.” For others this was an academic exercise. For Dr. Pausch, a 46-year-old father of three

living with pancreatic cancer and a prognosis of two months to live, this was his eleventh hour.

Dr. Pausch began his lecture by showing his CT scans, revealing 10 tumors on his liver. But after that, he talked about living. If anyone expected him to be morose, he said, “I’m sorry to disappoint you.” Then he dropped to the floor and did one-handed push-ups.

Clicking through photographs of himself as a boy, he talked about his childhood dreams: to win giant stuffed animals at carnivals, to walk in zero gravity, to design a Disney ride and write a World Book Encyclopedia entry. By adulthood, he had achieved all these goals. With that, he gave away his stuffed animals to students in the audience.

He paid tribute to his techie background and admitted to a deathbed conversion. “I just bought a Macintosh!” He flashed copies of his rejection letters on the screen and talked about setbacks saying, “Brick walls are there for a reason. They just prove how badly we want things.” He told students to be patient with others. “Wait long enough and people will surprise and impress you!” He showed his bedroom wall as a child filled with mathematical equations and told parents to let their kids draw on the walls – “as a favor to me.”

He talked about requiring his students to create video games without sex and violence. He said, “You’d be surprised how many 19-year-old boys run out of ideas when you take away these two factors.... But they all rose to the challenge.”

He thanked his parents for letting him express himself. He knew his mother was proud of him when he got his PhD even though she said, “This is my son! He’s a doctor, but not the kind who helps people.”

He talked of creating “Alice” a Carnegie Mellon Software product that allows people to easily create 3-D animation. He said, “Like Moses, I get to see the Promised Land, but I don’t get to step foot in it. That’s Okay. Through Alice, I will live on....”

Dr. Pausch ended his lecture with a call to all his students and colleagues to go on without him and do great things. Then he tuned to his wife, who was celebrating her birthday. They brought in a cake, while the whole room sang, “Happy Birthday!” through their tears.

With his last words, he announced that this speech was being taped for his children, five, two and one – who could watch this when they were older. He He ended with “this was for my kids.”

In the Eleventh Hour, Jack Bush, Diane Bouman Kaulen, Dr. Randy Pausch, Jesus and Paul all found ways to make a difference. When faced with your “Eleventh Hour, what have you done? When your Eleventh Hour comes, what will you do?