

Don't schedule appointments after May 21, billboards warn

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Give these billboards credit. They don't hedge their bet.

Judgment Day is coming May 21, 2011—not sometime this decade, not sometime this year, but precisely May 21.

The hundreds of billboards warning unrepentant commuters of their impending doom are courtesy of a California radio station led by 89-year-old Howard Camping, who initially predicted the world would end in 1994.

Bob James of Morristown, N.J., organized a grassroots campaign to fund billboards in his area warning about a pending Judgment Day on May 21. (RNS PHOTO/Noah K. Murray/The Star Ledger)

"Seven billion people are facing their death! What else could I do?" said Bob James, a Morristown, N.J., engineer who organized a grassroots effort to erect the billboards in his state. James views the billboards as a message of hope. "When you have this information, with my love for my fellow man, I wanted to tell people."

Warnings of "end times" are cropping up all over. Throw in buzz about the Mayan calendar's purported lights-out date of 2012, and it makes for jittery times.

"People love to speculate about the end of the world. It's human nature to want to know when Jesus is returning," said Barbara Rossing, author of [The](#)

[*Rapture Exposed*](#) and an ordained pastor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. "But Christ specifically admonishes us, 'Don't try to figure it out.'"

She finds Camping's views to be at odds even with those described in the best-selling *Left Behind* books about the Rapture, when some Christians believe they will be swept up into heaven as those left behind endure years of war and hardship.

"He has some very strange teachings on his website," she said. "This is very odd thinking."

May 21 believers say the Bible contains clues that brook no argument. God tells Noah the world will end in seven days; the Bible also equates a day to 1,000 years. They set the date of the flood at 4990 B.C. So, adding 7,000 years and considering the missing year "0" produces the year 2011. Translating a biblical reference to a month and day, from the Hebrew calendar to the Gregorian, results in May 21.

"It's no other date. It's only that date," said Michael Garcia, special projects coordinator at Camping's [Family Radio](#) enterprise.

The gathering up of saved souls will begin, followed by five months of chaos and tribulation that will serve as a spiritual going-out-of-business sale, Camping teaches. It will culminate with the end of the world on Oct. 21.

That is daunting to Anthony Hernandez, a 44-year-old technology worker from Chester Township, N.J., who runs a monthly Bible study class in his home. Although he devotes himself to proclaiming the message of the May 21 date, he knows that doesn't guarantee his salvation.

"If I find myself here May 22, then I'll be unsaved, because all the believers will be taken," he said. Asked if that scared him, the father of seven answered: "It is scary. I don't know if my children are saved."

He's made no contingency plans for life after May 21, neither booking a summer vacation with relatives, nor stocking up on provisions.

"I've done nothing, because if I'm lost, I'm lost. It's over," he said.

Although most Christians have dismissed the May 21 prediction as silly, Camping's followers see validation in that reaction. After all, Garcia said, Noah met nothing but skepticism when building his ark.

"It probably wasn't even raining at that time," said Garcia, a 39-year-old father of six.

"What was the attitude of everybody else? They scoffed—and they died," said James, who also sees inspiration in Noah's tale. "So, scoffers don't bother me."

Nor is the refusal of mainstream churches to accept their prediction any cause for doubt, because Camping's followers believe most churches now are corrupt.

Family Radio has placed about 1,000 billboards nationally. Garcia declined to disclose the cost, nor how much contributors gave in total, but individual donations ranged from \$100 to \$5,000.

End-of-the-world predictions are nothing new, said Rossing, who specializes in eschatology—the branch of theology examining the end of the world.

William Miller had thousands of followers—called Adventists—convinced the date would be Oct. 22, 1844. Many climbed on their roofs in anticipation of their imminent ascension. When that didn't happen, the day became known as the Great Disappointment.

Belief in the discovery of secret information is alluring, Rossing said.

“It’s like the decoder ring you found in your cereal box,” she said. “You can be the first on your block to decode the Bible.”

-Kathleen O’Brien writes for The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J.