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From the Baltimore Sun

On 6-6-06, no apocalypse

If you're reading this, the world hasn't ended yet

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The jumpy among us can stop holding their breath. The date might be 06/06/06, but no one is predicting anything particularly evil happening today. Unless, that is, you consider the slew of commerce to which we are to be subjected.

Heading the slate today is *The Omen*, making a rare Tuesday premiere to take advantage of the supposedly demonic date. Thrash metal veterans Slayer launch the *Unholy Alliance Tour* tonight in San Diego; supporting artists include Mastodon, Lamb of God and Thine Eyes Bleed. And conservative pundit Ann Coulter will be haranguing readers with her newest screed, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*.

Of greater concern, officials around the world are on alert for outbursts of mayhem inspired by the date. In Carroll County, Liberty High School Principal Florence Oliver has promised to increase police presence and forbid students from wearing trench coats today to allay concerns from what she has called "unsubstantiated rumors" warning of "Columbine-like violence."

All of which demonstrates the power of 666, the much-remarked-upon but little-understood number that is identified in the New Testament Book of Revelation as the "Mark of the Beast" - and has spread, courtesy of horror movies and heavy metal lyrics, to a position of general notoriety in the popular culture.

"People who know almost nothing about the Bible know something about this," says the Rev. Mark Hitchcock, pastor of the non-denominational Faith Bible Church in Edmond, Okla., and author of several books on biblical prophecy and the End Times.

"It's something easy to remember," he says. "It's kind of eerie and mysterious. ... My only concern is that

we don't trivialize it."

The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John of Patmos, the final book of the New Testament, describes a vision that some Christians believe foretells the end of the world. Amid a backdrop of growing bedlam, Chapter 13 describes the emergence of two beasts, one from the sea and one from the land, each a servant of the dragon, interpreted as Satan himself.

The second of the beasts enslaves humanity. As the King James Version has it:

"And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six."

Some Christians interpret the passage literally, as describing a mark that humans will need to engage in commerce during the time to come.

"During the tribulation period, people are going to have the choice to choose Christ or choose antichrist," Hitchcock says. "There's going to be this visible sign on them of making that choice. It will be really a mark of allegiance to him."

Others read Revelation as a veiled account of political developments in the Roman Empire of the first century. Many hold that the beast who emerges from land is the Emperor Nero, an enthusiastic tormentor of early Christians; "666" can be derived from "Nero Caesar" using the Hebrew numerological system of gematria.

"John of Patmos is writing in code, for security, to other persecuted Christians around the Mediterranean," says Phillips Stevens, a professor of anthropology at the University of Buffalo. "He's writing in language that they will understand."

And there the differing interpretations likely would have rested - had it not been for Hollywood. The original Omen film, released in 1976, centered on the birth and early childhood of Damien Thorn. As death after mysterious death follows the young Damien, it dawns on his adoptive parents that their precocious son is, in fact, the antichrist.

If only they had paid closer attention to the unusual birthmark on his scalp: the number 666.

"After that movie came out, everybody was talking about it," says Robert J. Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "Kids were putting it on their notebooks at school and writing it on the chalkboard before the teacher walked in." In some ways, he says, the number was perfectly suited to take root in the popular imagination.

"The thing about 666 is it's this thing that you can yank out of the Bible as a sign of the devil and ultimate evil and all the rest of it, and then you can find it in so many places without argument. Every time your odometer gets to 666, a date that comes along, the coincidence of getting the last numbers of your license plate or 666 in your Social Security number."

So powerful is the association that the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials agreed in 2003 to redesignate U.S. 666 - the "Devil's Highway," a two-lane road that runs from Gallup, N.M., to Monticello, Utah - as U.S. 491. On leaving Washington in 1989, Ronald and Nancy Reagan were granted permission to change the address of their new Los Angeles home from 666 St.

Cloud Drive to 668.

Now those concerns have attached to today's date. In Britain, The Times of London reports, expectant mothers have expressed fear about giving birth today. In Norway, according to the German news wire Deutsche Presse-Agenture, Lutheran Church officials are reviewing security measures against arson or other possible attacks.

Todd Strandberg is Web master at the Rapture Index, an online table that tracks world events for signs of the coming Apocalypse. He calls the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the earthquake in Pakistan and hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico last year and the continuing suicide bombings in Israel and Iraq "birth pains of the End Times." Still, he says, today's date has no special significance:

"The number itself is a demonic number, but to connect it directly to the date, I don't think there's anyone saying that any part of prophecy would be connected to that. Well, we'll soon find out."

While we wait, today promises a load of new products to wade through. David Lee Roth's Strummin' with the Devil will compete for the demon-themed dollar with new discs by the death metal acts Deicide, Behemoth, Gorgoroth and As Blood Runs Black. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins will release The Rapture, the 15th novel in their best-selling Left Behind series.

The online casino BetUS.com was taking wagers on the arrival of the Apocalypse today - and claiming takers, at 10-1 odds. In Los Angeles, meanwhile, the Church of Satan was planning a Satanic High Mass for tonight.

"For we Satanists, numbers are just numbers, and June 6 is just a day like any other," Magus Peter H. Gilmore, a high priest in the church founded 40 years ago by Anton LaVey, said in a statement.

"We are amused by Christians superstitiously being afraid of this number, as well as the date," Gilmore said. "Since we enjoy mocking irrationality in all its forms, we embraced this day to have a celebration of our freedom from such nonsensical fears."

With all the interest in the date, Hitchcock, the Oklahoma pastor, was planning a talk on the subject for tomorrow.

"When you read the Bible - when you read that passage, the context that it's in - it's not funny," he said. "If you take it literally, as I do, it's very sobering."

"We need to use the opportunity as a time to witness, to educate people about what's going to happen," he said. "The most important thing about all of this ... , whenever Jesus comes, is for people to make sure they're ready."

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