

Sermon: "Left Behind?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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IS THIS THE TIME?

Just before his ascension, the disciples had a question for Jesus, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The disciples had been asking that question for a long time. In light of the resurrection and the general sense of anticipation that must have been a part of life with the risen Christ, it was only natural that they ask this question again with even more urgency.

They now believed more than ever that Jesus would bring in the great and terrible day of the Lord. Jesus would fulfill the apocalyptic predictions of the Old Testament prophets. He would miraculously and with great force change the world, as they knew it. And at the center of that change would be God's chosen people, Israel. Their kingdom would be restored.

Fast-forward over 2,000 years and guess what question many modern-day disciples of Jesus are asking? "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel? Are these the days of the Second Coming?"

LEFT BEHIND

Do you know who are the best-selling American authors of all time? If you said Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, you are correct. You say you never heard of them? They're the authors of the wildly popular "Left Behind" series published by Tyndale Press.

This series is a fictionalized account of the "last" days predicted by Scripture. The plot begins with the rapture of millions of Christians from this world, progresses through seven years of a great international tribulation and concludes with the return of Christ to set up his 1,000-year earthly reign in Jerusalem.

Events during the tribulation include the rise of the Antichrist, war against Israel, the persecution of Jews, and the conversion of Jews to Christianity. The last volume in this series was published in 2004 and to date the series has sold over 70 million volumes!

TSUNAMIS IN DIVERSE PLACES

Regardless of whether you think this is a good thing or a bad thing, it is easy to understand why there is so much interest in books about the end of time. We live in turbulent times, and that often makes some people wonder if we are indeed living in the last days.

Not long ago some futurists predicted the meltdown of our computers, and our society when we hit the year 2,000. Fortunately, it turned out to be a false alarm, but a few years later something happened that was even more alarming. Terrorists attacked our country on September 11, 2001.

The stock market floundered. Since that time our country has fought several wars, and we are still involved in military action.

This past summer hurricanes hit Florida in record number. Floods hit the West Coast. And most recently a Tsunami killed many thousands in Asia.

In times of upheaval and uncertainty, people begin to think in apocalyptic terms. Could we be living in the last days? Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?

NO "S" IN REVELATION

I noticed that television is trying to capitalize on this recent interest in apocalyptic fever. They have a new program on Wednesday nights called "Revelations". In the great tradition of television, they have even managed to make the end of the world seems boring.

The show features a nun who says she has memorized the whole book of "Revelations" in order to be ready for the events of the end time. Too bad she didn't notice that the title of the book doesn't have an "s" on the end!

And therein lies the problem with much of the apocalyptic hysteria. They want to talk about "revelations," secret insider knowledge about the last days. The biblical book is entitled the "revelation of Jesus Christ". (Revelation 1:1) Jesus is the past, present and future of God's kingdom. How does the praise and worship song put it, "Kings and kingdoms will all pass away" but not the name of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that there will be wars and rumors of war. There will be frightening natural disasters all over the world. But, none of these things have any say in the final outcome. Jesus is Lord! Jesus will reign forever. That's all we know, and that's all we need to know.

Sometimes people ask me, "What's wrong with the Left Behind series? What do we Presbyterians believe that is different?" I'm not sure that there is anything "wrong" with these novels. If people enjoy them, they're certainly better than some of the other works of fiction on the market. But, if you read them, there are several things that you need to keep in mind.

JUST A NOVEL

First of all, the novels of this series are just that, novels. They are a work of fiction, and we need to guard against mixing fiction with what the Bible actually says. That can be a bigger problem than you might think.

For example, quite a few people have told me that they have been disturbed by what they read in the fictional book, "The DaVinci Code". My answer is always the same, "Don't worry about it. It's a work of fiction. It's made up." But, many of us have a harder time than you might imagine separating fact from fiction. We always need to do the hard work of checking our facts.

DISPENSATIONALISM

Second, these novels are based upon a particular way of interpreting the Bible called dispensationalism. Most Pentecostal and independent Bible churches in our area hold to some form of this view.

We Presbyterians do have quite a bit in common with these believers. With them we put a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture, and we also believe in the second coming of Christ. Do you remember how the Apostle's Creed puts it?

It tells us that Jesus "ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead." (The Apostle's Creed, Ecumenical Version)

Where Presbyterians (and most mainline Christians) differ with these other groups is that we don't want to say anything more about that second coming than to say that it will happen. There will be a day of judgment. When it will come, and how it will come, we don't know. We can't know.

Did you notice how Jesus answered the question his disciples asked in today's passage? The disciples asked, "When will the kingdom come?" And Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." Acts 1:7 (NRSV)

And so, when we make specific predictions about the last days by over-interpreting symbolic texts from the Bible, I think that we are attempting to know more than we can know.

THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH?

When I was a teen, a man by the name of Hal Lindsey wrote a book about the end times entitled, "The Late Great Planet Earth." There was even a documentary style movie based upon that book.

The days of my youth were also a time of great social turmoil. The Vietnam War was raging. The country was polarized by widely differing political and religious beliefs. The cold war with the Soviet Union posed a great threat ... and so forth. In that time of great peril and upheaval, Lindsey's book appeared, and the book was wildly popular.

According to Lindsey, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 was a sign that the end of the world would come in the generation to follow. He outlined how Russia would attack Israel, based upon his interpretation of Ezekiel 38 and 39. He also argued, based upon the books of Daniel and Revelation, that the European Common Market would be a tool in the hands of the Antichrist.

He thought that before this period of tribulation, there would be a great rapture of the church. That's why you used to see those bumper stickers that read, "In case of rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned."

Throughout church history, there have been others who have attempted to interpret international events through the lens of biblical prophecy.

In fact, in almost every age people have asked the same question the disciples first asked Jesus, "Is now the time?" There will come a time when the excitement about the "Left Behind" series will quiet down, but if history is any indication, there will be some book or some movement to take it's place.

We can't prepare for the coming kingdom by trying to 'figure out' a timetable for the last days.

NOT COMPLACENT

But, that doesn't mean we should be idle or complacent either. I don't want you to think that I'm being overly critical of those who ask this question about the end of days. There's something right about living each day as if it is our last.

Jesus often told his disciples to work for the night is coming. (John 9:4) Many of his parables suggested that we should get ready because no one knows the hour or the day when the Son of Man comes. (See, for example, Matthew 25:1-13)

Andy Dearman, a professor at Austin Seminary wrote an article in the school magazine about the "Left Behind" books, and dispensational theology. He concluded his article with these words,

"Since there is much in the New Testament about the difficulties that shall continue until the end, I am grateful for earnest Christians who take these matters seriously, even if some of their detailed schemes fall short of persuasion.

I actually wonder more about Christians and others who consider all such 'end of the world talk' and language about future judgment to be outmoded. From my limited vantage point they seem less prepared for the Lord of surprises and his second advent than those who are concerned with precise eschatological timetables.

We don't want to lose our anticipation of the bridegroom's appearance or succumb to the lure of insidious principalities and powers, lest we be left behind."

HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR THE COMING KINGDOM?

So, the important question is this, "How do we prepare for the coming kingdom?" How can we keep that sense of anticipation alive? How can we learn to live on tiptoe? How can we maintain that sense of mystery and hope that is so necessary for a healthy spiritual life?

WAIT FOR THE SPIRIT

Jesus told his disciples in the passage that precedes our lesson for today that their first job was to wait; they were to wait for the wind of the Spirit. The risen Christ told the disciples that they were to

stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promised coming of the Spirit. Jesus said,

"John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4-5)

According to Jesus, the baptism of the Spirit would change everything. The Spirit would enable them to preach the gospel effectively, not only in Jerusalem but also in Judea, Samaria and throughout the world. Barriers would be broken, and a new kingdom would be established.

I think Jesus still calls us to wait, and waiting might be the hardest thing we are called to do. Most of us feel like we have to do something right away, but in the Bible times of waiting and anticipation are often used to deepen the faith of God's people. I think the same is true today. Like those first disciples, we need to wait so that the Spirit might enliven and enlarge the focus of our vision.

A CHANGE OF FOCUS

As always, the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying to them. Even as he proclaimed to them their final instructions, Jesus ascended into heaven, and we have this description of the disciples:

They were "gazing up toward heaven." How long the disciples gazed into the heavens we don't know. All we do know is that they were becoming so "heavenly minded that they were of no earthly good." The next verse tells us that they needed a wake up call.

It comes in the form of a couple men in white robes (whom we assume are angels).

These messengers from God tell the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Acts 1:11 (NRSV)

In other words, the angels told them, "You can rest assured that God's kingdom will come. Jesus is coming again in God's time. But, now you need to shift your focus from heaven to earth. Your job now is in Jerusalem. Go and wait there."

The disciples had a job to do in Jerusalem, and we also have a job to do in Jerusalem.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

When we say the Apostle's Creed, we say that Jesus, "ascended into heaven" and that he will come again to "judge the living and the dead."

But, that's not all we say in the Creed.

We also talk about our belief in the Holy Spirit and the benefits that come to us as a result of God's Spirit, things like a community of like-minded believers, and forgiveness of our sins.

The Spirit of God in Christ is with us here and now. We don't have to go to a mountaintop and stare up into the sky to find Jesus.

We find him among those other saints who seek to follow him. We find him in that upper room where Mary, Peter, James, John and all the others gather.

Jesus ascended into heaven, but we are not "left behind." His Spirit is to be found in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and throughout the whole wide world.

His Spirit is to be found where we are here and now.

For each of us, there is a winding path that takes us to an "upper room," that place where God's messengers and the wind of the Spirit meet.

In my experience, that place is almost always closer than you think.

AN UNWED MOTHER

Today is mother's day so the sermon wouldn't be complete without a story about a mother. Today's story is about an unwed mother.

Ann Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, told why she makes her son, Sam go to church. She started going to St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in San Francisco early in her pregnancy. One Sunday at the end of the service she stood up and told the congregation that she was pregnant. The people cheered.

Now that was not the response Ann expected. Ann wasn't married, and the people knew it. But, she said, even the people raised in the Bible thumping homes in the deep South clapped and clapped. Even the old women whose grown-up boys had been in jails or prisons rejoiced with her.

They reached out their arms and adopted her. They brought clothes and blankets for the new baby. They lugged in casseroles that she could freeze and use later. The church members kept telling her that this new baby was going to be part of their church family. And then they began to slip her money.

A bent over woman on Social Security would sidle up to her and stuff her pockets with tens and twenties. Ancient Mary Williams always sat in the back and brought Anne baggies filled with dimes week after week.

Anne brought Sam to that church when he was five days old. Church folks stood in line and called him "my baby" and "our baby." People in that church kept her going. They cared. They reached out and prayed with her. They kept her going through the hard days. She says that Mary Williams still gives her dimes even though she is doing much better financially. So Anne now gives the dimes to homeless people she meets.

But, she writes, "Why do I make Sam go to church when none of his friends go to church? I make him go because somebody brings me dimes."

THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Did you notice how the Spirit of God worked in that mother's day story? Did you notice how the saints pulled together to do God's will, how sins were forgiven and how life was affirmed? Did you notice how a young woman who thought she was alone found out that she wasn't?

The opportunity to experience the Spirit of God will come to us in the same way. Oh, the names and the locations and the situations will change. But, you will know when it happens.

Barriers will be broken. Sins will be forgiven. A broken life will be mended, and there will be a new child welcomed into the kingdom.

Are we left behind? Not according to Jesus. Each and every day is an opportunity to see the power of the kingdom in action.

May God help us see the glory of His kingdom even today.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN