

“Debunking the Rapture”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Mark 13:32-37 NRSV

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

If you could know how your life would end, would you want to know? Isn't that the classic question? Writers of apocalyptic literature, theologians who do eschatology want to tell us how it will all end, not just our individual lives, but the whole world. Some even want to tell us when.

There are still false prophets – did you read about the Russian economist who predicts that the US will end in 2011 or something like that and dissolve into 6 states and, guess what? Russia and China will be the new world powers that take over. Do you think he has an agenda? Do you think he is wanting to tell them what they want to hear?

So do writers of apocalyptic eschatology, in a sense. They want to reassure those who are down and out, who are oppressed, who are suffering from injustice, or who are outcasts in society or from it that there is a great day

a'comin'. There will be a time when all will be made right. Now this takes many forms in different religions. Jewish eschatology would never conceive of an end-of-the-world, destruction scenario. Creation belonged to God and God had blessed it all as good. They understood end-times things as being a righting of injustice, a correction of the suffering they had experienced at the hands of every empire that came along and enslaved, or abused, or dragged them off into exile.

One popular belief today in Christian circles is known as “The Rapture.” That's what those bumper stickers refer to when they say, “If the Rapture comes this car will be empty.” The Rapture is a concoction of the theology of John Nelson Darby who was an evangelist in the 1800's and the writing of the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. Once again, like modern fundamentalism, which was also

primarily an early 20th century reactionary movement, the Rapture took elements of the Book of Daniel, mated it with pieces of Revelation and predicted that, at the end of time, God would destroy masses of people who didn't believe correctly. In its essence the Rapture predicts that Jesus will return, but only to hover over the earth, all the true faithful dead or alive will rise up to meet him. Then God will visit seven years of suffering on everyone who is left, before Jesus comes again for the second time to initiate a thousand year reign of earthly bliss, at which time the end will come in some way of fashion. Now the details of this are dependent upon whether you are pre - , mid - , or post-millennial dispensationalist but in general the outlook isn't good for those who aren't the 'true' believers. So while the word "Rapture" never appears in the Bible selected elements of it are there.

So what does that mean for us? It means that literature like the *Left Behind* series are published to "explain the Bible," and the whole "Rapture" theology. With it these books can promote the whole political, economic agenda of this theology which holds to the power platform of the Religious Righteous who are anti - abortion, anti-gay, anti-environmental, militaristic view of the world. It actually attempts to affect Middle Eastern policy and opposition to the United Nations through that mind-set. Some who approach the world with this theology as their guidance are actually working to "bring it on."

It is easy to want God to intervene and make everything right. It is hard to work for justice and mercy so that a different world might come about. Certainly our efforts often seem too small and insignificant. But faith, it seems is not dependent upon success, but the willingness to persevere. We can wish that Jesus would "come back" and solve all our problems as these images suggest, but doesn't that ignore the real truth?

Dr. Edward Gleason writes that a friend of his "applied for a position that required him to instruct and inspire younger people. His interviewer and evaluator asked him, 'Tell me about your walk with Jesus.' My friend replied, 'You know, everywhere I go, no matter where or when, I find that Jesus has arrived there first. Wherever I go, Jesus is already there.' The evaluator made no reply; he had no idea what to say, and my friend was never offered the job. Was his response too theologically subtle? Jesus is not the Lord whom we discover or define or claim. Jesus comes to us. We do not summon Him by any action of our own."¹

Remember we can't judge whether this theology is true, as it has not come to pass. What we have to ask, as we do with all theologies, is whether it is "life-giving," whether it seems consistent with what we know and believe about God. For many it is consistent. But I would encourage us to ask questions. We might ask questions like whether this

¹ Rev. Dr. Edward S. Gleason, "In the Time of This Mortal Life," day1.org, November 27, 2005.

seems consistent with what Jesus revealed about God? In his first coming, it seems to me Jesus did not embody the kind of warrior that arrived on a blazing steed with a sword to annihilate his enemies. Instead he said something to the effect of “love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, pray for them.” When it came for him to make a “triumphal entry” instead of a warrior’s steed he came on a gentle donkey, a female donkey to boot. It seems to me that instead of promoting the power of the empires and governments of humanity he called them to task for not operating in a just and fair manner for the poor, the immigrant, and the outcast. Yes, I do hope that there will come a time when we will see the Lord face-to-face, but I don’t hope to see a Jesus who wants to wade on his horse through blood up to its bridle.

We would do well to remember the setting, the context, in which Revelation was written. John had been exiled to the island of Patmos for his beliefs in Jesus Christ. Christians throughout the Roman Empire were being persecuted. Revelation was written as “resistance literature” to provide hope for those who were suffering under the oppression. It is understandable that they would desire retribution and that it might be encouraging to the churches to predict such an outcome. But is it a “life-giving” theology today? Is it consistent with who we believe God to be?

This past week Allen sent me a video that I think better summed up what I think of when I imagine seeing God. It

was by Victor Wooten, a jazz musician, and it was entitled “I Saw God Today.” It goes like this:

*Now I’m going to tell you a story and
this one you can repeat
I saw God the other day
just walking down the street
He said,*

*I have something I want to tell you
Something I’ve been dying to say
You’ve been waiting for my return
The truth - I never went away
I said hold on just a minute
How do I know it’s really you
She gave me a simple answer
She said, you don’t unless you do
wait a minute,*

*I don’t quite understand all this tell me
what do you want with me?
you see I’m not a religious type of
person*

he said you don’t have to be

*I don’t know if I’m the right person to
talk to,
you know a few of my puzzle pieces are
missin’*

*She said, I speak to everyone but not
everyone chooses to listen*

Then tell me how to treat my enemies

I mean the people I despise

*He said the answer will be clear to you
when you see me in their eyes.*

I don’t care if you believe me or not

I know who I saw and it was God

I saw God the other day

she looked like me, he looked like you...

*Now that you’ve told me all this, can you
tell me what am I supposed to do?*

*She said, You may think its is up to me
but it is really up to you*

Now my eyes are open

and I can clearly see

*I realized that all the things I paid for
in life I could have gotten for free
Now I'm going to share
her parting words to me with you and
you might want to think this through,
she said If I only had one son,
then tell me, who are you?*

It seems to me that the Christ of the gospels was more concerned with opening pathways to life than condemning outsiders to death. It seems to me that the Christ of the gospels was more devoted to welcoming those who were considered undeserving. He seemed to value the undervalued. He seemed to heal victims rather than blame them. And the most unbelieving group he ever spoke to were his own disciples. Yet he did not seem to condemn them. Maybe it is important to see that many of them weren't too clear on what to believe, but they kept following him as best they could. Maybe that is the best we can do at times: keep following the best we can.

Maybe it is natural to want to know how it all turns out, to peak over the shoulders of history and see the outcome. After all, that is part of what makes us unique beings. We are aware of time and we are aware of our mortality. It is not unnatural to want a sign or a road map. Faith rarely works that way. God consistently keeps us on a "need to know basis." For us planners and worriers that is troublesome. For those of you who are more free spirited and willing to go with the flow it is probably less of a problem.

The gospels repeatedly report that Jesus did not offer a roadmap or a clear sign. In fact, to those who wanted a sign about the end times he said, "no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah." Our LTQ handout writes, "ironically, the 'sign of Jonah' is a reminder of God's unpredictable grace. Jonah experienced firsthand how God short-circuits any legalistic understanding of rules or events that ... show favoritism to one tribe or another." In short, it is "silly" to be so certain that God preferred them over the Ninevites."

Finally, it seems to me a wise statement to say, perhaps we should be more concerned with doing something about Jesus' first coming before we worry too much about his second coming. It seems to me a valid theology, a faithful and Biblical theology to propose that we are called to follow him now, to the best of our ability, even if we don't know all the answers about the end. And it seems to me that following him means remembering that when we can see God in the eyes of our enemies, then we are following Jesus faithfully and Biblically. When we can remember that Christ really did mean it when he chose to come as a humble servant rather than a conquering king the first time then we will be better able to follow Jesus faithfully and Biblically. And finally, maybe most of all, when we remember he came to offer an alternative to the fear and violence of our world we won't have to believe in a fearful and violent end of the world. Instead we can remember that we are all his sons and his daughters too. AMEN.