

## **Matthew 24:30-44**

"Is Jesus Coming Back?"

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When I first sat down to write my sermon this week, I entitled it, "Is He Coming Back?" Then I realized that you would think the sermon was about Chuck, so I changed it to be more specific. Though, I will admit the answer to both questions is the same: we know not the day nor the hour.

There have been a lot of questions about the second coming of Christ lately, most of them asked in response to Harold Camping. As you probably remember, Camping just a few months ago readied his followers for May 21. He had studied the pages of scripture and determined that Jesus would come back and the world would end on that date. As May 21 came and went, he announced that he had made a mistake in his calculations, and the actual date would be October 21. On October 22, we'll know what to make of his revision, but for many in the mainstream Christian world, it's not worth thinking about all that much.

You may have noticed that we Presbyterians don't give much thought to the Second Coming, or the Apocalypse, or the Rapture, or the End Times. Part of the reason for this is that so much of what we read in the Bible concerning the final state of the world is very hard to make sense of. It's tempting to try to put it all together as if it were one big scriptural puzzle, or rack our brains over it as if it were the last great unsolved calculus equation... but that's not what scripture is for, is it? When we serve communion here in church and you hear me or Chuck say the words, "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes," what goes through your head? I'd wager that you're not in that moment trying to figure out the date on the calendar when that's going to happen. You probably hear that phrase as a comfort to you, knowing that you can be assured of Christ's presence always, even to the end. But then again, there's all that interesting and scary stuff in scripture... and it's so fascinating to think about where creation is headed... and sooner or later we are going to ask about it or be asked about it. So... what do we say?

If you read through the whole of the New Testament, it's clear that Christian believers in the very early days of the church expected Jesus to return at any minute! In Matthew 16:28, Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Jesus said this to his disciples, and they in turn shared it with others who formed the early church. They probably believed that they would see their Lord again face-to-face in their lifetimes.

About twenty years after Jesus died, Paul wrote a few letters to the Christians living in Corinth. In his letters, he mentioned an "impending crisis" and told them that "the appointed time has grown short." In case that didn't get their full attention, he then wrote, "For the present form of the world is passing away." He encouraged people not to get married. "It is well for you to remain as you are," he wrote. He spoke of the imminence of Christ's return, and cautioned them not to do anything that might endanger their relationship with God during those final days...

Only, now we know that those weren't the final days. When we read Paul's letters, we read them some two-thousand years after they were written. We understand those words differently than the first Christians did. There's no doubt

that Paul himself believed that Christ's return was very close, and now that his letters have become part of the Bible, it seems to us so many centuries later that even scripture itself resists any kind of prediction concerning the return of Christ, or the end of the world. Yet, we take our place in a long line of Christians, who have always believed that Christ will one day return. We stand with Christians across the ages who have asked questions about these things, but have not gotten any sound answers. As we read things like Paul's letters, and witness with our own eyes the predictions of other Christians in our world, the question is not whether or not we should talk about the "second coming" of Christ, but what we should say about it.

We want to be faithful to scripture and consider everything that the Bible says about Christ's return, but we also want to be careful that we don't take verses out of context or read more into it than is really there. The modern day concept of "the rapture" is a misguided one, precisely because it takes certain biblical texts and mashes them all together and interprets them literally. It produces a vision of the future in which all the true Christians will disappear. Jesus will come again and rescue them, literally taking them directly up into the clouds. There they will wait out the "tribulation," a time of warfare between the forces of God and the forces of the Antichrist. This will climax in the battle of Armageddon. After that battle, the millennium of peace and joy will come. If you've read any of the *Left Behind* books series, this will seem very familiar to you. It makes for good fiction. It does not, however, make for good interpretation.

The term "Rapture" does not appear in scripture, of course, and the details of any rapture event are constructed by taking Bible verses out of context. It's used to underscore the notion that you're "in" if you're a true Christian, and "out" if you're not. It's used to send a message to others that all the real Christians will be up there with God while all the other heathen who God doesn't much care about will have to fight through unimaginable horror. You know the bumper sticker that says, "In the event of the Rapture, this car will be unmanned." If you happen to be driving behind one, you probably feel more than a little disheartened and worried that you might be driving behind them when that happens! And that's not a good thing!

The popular notion of "the rapture" today is that if you get right with God, then before things really get brutal here on earth you'll get a cosmic "get out of jail free" card and be whisked away to your heavenly paradise while the poor fools who didn't listen are left behind to deal with the horror that God will unleash upon the earth. It says that if you are saved, you won't have to face all of these terrible things. You will be lifted up and out of all of the mess. Before it goes from bad to worse, God will come for you and rescue you! It's unfortunate that so many people buy into this vision of the end times. It's unfortunate because it suggests that what happens to you in this life and in this world does not really matter. You may be unemployed. You may be sick. You may be suffering or in pain. But you know what? You don't need to worry about any of that because it's not this world that matters - it's the next. All those people that you see around you, starving and suffering from violence, and crying out for help? Don't give them another thought. They'll either get rewarded or punished in the end based on their beliefs and actions, and you don't need to be concerned in the least. You'll be kicking back in the clouds, living the good new life! *I don't think anything could be further away from what Jesus' ministry on this earth was all about.*

Jesus makes it clear that those who follow him don't get special treatment. We don't get spared the world's sufferings. To the contrary, we are the ones who go into the mess of the world. We find ways to love, and serve, and give, and hope, even in the midst of pain and suffering. That's the Christian life Jesus calls us to. It isn't that

we will one day be lifted up above the world, but that Jesus Christ himself has come down to the world, to where we are. Scripture tells us that one day we will see Jesus again, face-to-face. The details of that event are sketchy, and if you try to put it all together and make a formula out of it, it won't make a whole lot of sense. But one thing is clear: we do not know the day nor the hour. We live in the in-between times, this life between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and that future time when he will come again. In this time, we are called to be the presence of Christ right here and now, without being distracted by the failures of the past or the predictions of the future. We are called to be about the Lord's business right now, and right here where we live.

Rather than try to figure out the second coming as if it's some puzzle about the future, we could try looking at what it means for us today. There's a meaning in those words that grounds our lives in a truth that mere predictions cannot. It's God's way of telling us, "I know that life hurts sometimes. I know that you're weary and frightened, but don't lose hope. The pain and suffering and even death of this life are not the final things. Jesus Christ is Lord of all that is. It may seem at times like death or pain has the last word. Don't believe it! Jesus Christ has the last word. He will come again and sound a final note of victory that will drown out all the horrors of this world. Will he come to pluck us up out of the muck at the last minute and spare us the pain of the world? Well, not really. The point is not that we will be exempt from the mess of the world, but that we're already seeing it day after day. And even as we witness it with our own eyes, we know that Christ looks with us, urging us onward to live, and serve, and love in his name. We are the ones who shed tears with those who have lost loved ones. We are the ones who sit by the bedside of someone dying of cancer. We are the ones who will not sit idly by and do nothing while a child starves half a world away.

No. We are Christians. We go and work and serve because we know that this world is not ours. It was God's in the beginning. It is God's now. And it will be God's until the end. We might not know exactly what that end is going to look like, but we do know...

Over the sound of grief-stricken sobs...

Over the soft drip... drip... drip... of chemotherapy drugs...

Over the clap of gunfire and the chiming of broken glass...

Over the cries for help and the wailing of mothers who cannot save their children...

Above all these horrors... and more that will come...

There comes the sound of a mighty trumpet blast.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is coming.

Thanks be to God. Amen.