

## Season after Pentecost

### Summer Sermon Series: "The Second Coming"

August 30 & 31, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm: 25: 1-10; Revelation 21: 1-6; Matthew 24: 36-44

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

It's the classic family vacation scene. You haven't gotten out of the neighborhood someone asks, "How much longer?" An hour down the road the next refrain is spoken, "Are we there yet?" "Are we close?" After the umpteenth inquiry someone finally says, with gritted teeth, "We'll get there when we get there, SWEETIE. Now quit asking."

People have been asking the Lord and church leaders those same questions about the Second Coming of Jesus. We profess, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again." And so followers of Christ have often wondered, "How much longer?" It's a question posed even by many non-Christians who believe in an Apocalypse — an end of the world as we know it. Countless movies and books propose how it will happen and who might survive. There are ministers, writers and churches that have made it their business (figuratively and literally) to determine the stages and timing of Jesus Second Coming and who will make it to eternity and who will not. Some even claim it's all laid out in the Bible. So many would have us think of the end time as a doomsday prophecy. Yet in our branch of Christianity, "Christ will come again" is a joyful, confident proclamation of hope that we celebrate. We may not be eager to end our time here on earth, but Jesus return is not to be feared. The Second Coming of Jesus means the fulfillment of all God's promises — life with no more sadness, disease, war, pain, separation, poverty or death but only love, unity and peace. "Are we close?" "Are we there yet?"

Our belief in life progressing toward a definite end evolved in part from the world view of our Hebrew ancestors. Rather than a cyclical view of life, the Hebrews saw life as linear, moving from one point to another. Earthly life had a definite beginning — creation — and would have a definite ending — the Day of the Lord — the consummation of the ages. Between was a cosmic war between the forces of good, of God and the forces of evil, that which opposes God. While there would be wars, oppression and destruction, the faithful were not to worry — God would win in the end.<sup>1</sup>

Writings about the end times — called Apocalyptic literature arose and flourished in popularity when persecution and oppression were the norm of the day for the Hebrews. You find vivid examples in the books of Daniel and Ezekial. While suffering in the present, they continued to believe that one day, one glorious day—God would come in the form of the Messiah, overthrow their persecutors, destroy all evil, and establish the Kingdom with Israel, God's chosen people, at the head. Symbols were used to communicate truths that

eluded human language—but the basic tenet held fast: God would vindicate the righteous. The time of peace and prosperity to which prophets like Isaiah spoke would indeed become a reality.

After Jesus spoke of his Second Coming the early church came to believe that the Day of the Lord was this promised event. The first coming of the Messiah had not produced what they believed would happen, but the Second Coming would. Jesus had promised that he would return on the clouds in power and glory and Christians the world over have anxiously sought to interpret the apocalyptic literature in the gospels and Revelation so that they could know when he would return. Never mind that Jesus said this was none of our business, our inquisitiveness and need for certainty and control seems to get the better of us.

The first century Christians fervently believed that the Christ would come again in their lifetime. It became one of the early church's problems to try to understand what they should believe and do when Jesus had not yet shown up. We can read St. Paul addressing these fears and worries in some of his letters. The apocalyptic writing we know as Revelation was also written to encourage and strengthen believers to remain faithful and confident in Jesus' promise to return, even in times of persecution and turmoil. It seems that ever since, believers have tried to decipher the apocalyptic symbols and metaphors of Jesus and Revelation, setting out stages and time lines, seeing the events unfolding in their own time. It has continued across the centuries and continents.

One particular and more recent example is the end time theory of John Nelson Darby. A disgruntled Anglican minister from Ireland, Darby developed a rather elaborate theory of the end time that is now known as "dispensational premillennialism". He divided human history into seven ages, or "dispensations" based on proof texts of Scripture. Darby thought the stage coming next was the "Great Tribulation," which those faithful to Jesus would not have to endure because God would remove the elect from the earth by way of the rapture — a literal interpretation of the gospel we read today --- "one would be taken; one would be left." In Darby's theory, Israel would then be restored as God's primary instrument of history, the wicked would be destroyed in the final battle of Armageddon, and Christ would begin a thousand-year reign on earth. I share Darby's ideas with you so that you know the idea of the rapture as popularized in the Left Behind series of books comes from Darby and his followers. Its basis in Scripture is very spotty and suspect. "But since it answers a lot of questions that Scripture won't answer, [Darby's theory as well as the end time predictions of others are] very popular.... especially among people who do not like surprises."<sup>2</sup>

What are we to make of Jesus' Second Coming? How are we to live when we're not there yet and we don't know if we're close? "We live in a tension between the now and the not-yet, between this earthly existence and our heavenly home. We live in this tension lovingly, with grace and freedom, because as the children of God we know that life is moving toward an ultimate fulfillment. The prophets of doom are right on one accord: this world will end. There is a point at which the purposes of God come together and this existence will be no more. When that is, not a one of us has a clue—and never will. Jesus underscored the secretive and sudden nature of the Second Coming. What we do know is that we are to live in this life in anticipation of how life will be in the kingdom."<sup>3</sup>

"In the Greek there are two words for the future. One is "futurus," which denotes a future constructed out of the past and present. This future we can predict because we have a past record upon which we can base our predictions. The other is "Parousia," which denotes the future as coming to us from beyond us. It is this word which the New Testament uses when it speaks of the Second Coming. These believers realized that Christ would be bringing to us a future that is beyond and above us, that we could never anticipate nor plan. John strains at the limits of language in the 21st chapter of Revelation as he describes the beauty and glory of the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God. These are not literal descriptions but are attempts to portray a wonder, a beauty, and a holiness far beyond our ability to comprehend. We live now in anticipation of that Kingdom as a sign to the world of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus will not just be Lord in heaven, Jesus is Lord here and now."<sup>4</sup>

"We also live as people of faith believing that the purposes of God are being worked out even when we cannot fathom them. History is linear, not circular. It is moving toward the goal, not just repeating itself in some unending, meaningless fashion. Though it has been over 2000 years since Jesus promised to return, Matthew reminds us not to fall into the traps of anxiety or apathy. Repeatedly Jesus and the gospel writers remind us to be alert, stay awake. We aren't to spend our time trying to figure out when Jesus will return. We are not to just sit around waiting on Jesus to come. Be ready. Be alert, Jesus tells us. How does it look to live that way?

Barbara Brown Taylor suggest it means that when you wake up every morning, you decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow. Do not put off living the kind of life you are meant to live.... Go ahead make the decision, write the letter, get the help you need," make your apologies..."Live a caught-up life, not a put-off life, so that wherever you are.....you are ready for God, for whatever happens next, not afraid but

wide awake.” Jesus will come again. We don’t know when. So we live in faith and hope. We live with our eyes peeled to discover where it is that God is at work so we can get busy offering our hands to do God’s work, ever “watching for the Lord who never tires of coming to the world, not just at the end of time but all the time.”<sup>5</sup>

Linda M Alessandri 8/30/14

## ENDNOTES

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1. adapted from Robert Ferguson’s sermon, “Preparing for the Apocalypse” as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, “On the Clouds of Heaven” [The Seeds of Heaven](#) Louisville, Y: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 p. 110

3. Robert Ferguson, “Preparing for the Apocalypse” as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)

4. Robert Ferguson, “Preparing for the Apocalypse” as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)

5. Barbara Brown Taylor, “On the Clouds of Heaven” [The Seeds of Heaven](#) Louisville, Y: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 p. 113