

Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30

**No Child 'Left Behind'**  
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Easter 4

Five or six years ago, the presbytery which I served as Executive sent an Overture to General Assembly, which passed. An overture is a communication from (usually) a presbytery asking the national church to either amend the constitution of the church, or implement a program or practice. This overture originated in the Alamogordo, NM congregation. It asked the GA to communicate to pastors and sessions throughout the church that the (then) popular Left Behind series of books, and the movie based on it, is built on an interpretation of Scripture which is not in accord with our theology, and the overture asks GA to provide assistance and materials to our congregations to teach what the church really believes. That General Assembly acted positively on the motion, and did produce the materials, and declared for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in a hundred years that “dispensational theology is out of accord with Christian doctrine.”

Why does this matter? First Birmingham, and probably most Presbyterian churches, are made up of people who come from a wide array of doctrinal backgrounds. Indeed most of the folk I talk with today about the church are bored to tears with doctrinal disputes about theology, and care far more about how the church is following Jesus in its life together and its actions in the world. And I don't disagree with that at all.

And yet we live in a world where there is a deep division within the Christian church about just who God is. And that's kind of an important question. We live in a world where the same folks who read Jerry Jenkins' "Left Behind" books are getting the children's fantasy Harry Potter books banned from libraries, and are even burning them in some communities. Harry Potter stories do not claim to be a theological treatise. They simply claim to be entertaining children's literature. And so they are. The Left Behind@books, on the other hand, claim to be Christian truth, and yet they are not. So it *does* become church business. Obviously anyone can write what they want, and read what they want. But the question could be raised – has been raised – what are God's intentions toward humankind. That's not an irrelevant question.

It's important for this reason. The theology of the Rapture is everywhere in American religion, and has badly skewed how Christians live in the world. It has caused anxiety and trauma to some of God's children. It has become the dominant theology in American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, but it is a distortion of the Bible and it misrepresents God. Worth talking about this morning, I think.

Let's be clear - anytime you hear someone talk about The Rapture, you know they are off on the wrong track. But belief in the Rapture is so pervasive among evangelicals today that many don't realize it is a relatively recent doctrine - brand, spanking new, really - with little, if any basis in Scripture. It started in 1830, and was refined by John Nelson Darby,

an ex-Anglo-Irish priest who founded the Plymouth Brethren. His views were made possibly, disseminated widely, in the Scofield Reference Bible in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Darby tried to synthesize the Bible's many prophetic passages, within a scheme he called dispensationalism. He believed that world history, past and future, was divided in distinct eras (or dispensations), and that God had an entirely different way of dealing with humanity in each of them. Darby was a pre-millennialist, that is, he believed the world would have to endure 7 years of great suffering before Jesus could return and reign in person. It was Darby that invented the Rapture - that Jesus would scoop up all the true believers and take them to heaven to avoid the Anti-Christ's reign.

Myself, I confess to liking the bumper sticker that says, *In Case of Rapture, Can I Have Your Stuff?*®

In recent years, the proponent of these ideas has been Hal Lindsey (Late Great Planet Earth), and now the Left Behind series, LaHaye and Jenkins. It imagines an apocalyptic timetable that is highly deterministic. In this scheme, the life, death and ministry of Christ become quite secondary to arbitrary speculation about the final events of history. Dispensationalism lacks a theology of the cross. A friend of mine describes it as Apocalyptic terrorism!, and notes that in this scheme, the church is only saved when all hell breaks loose. It assumes all these things are yet to be, and entities in Revelation are modern day nation-states. Biblical scholars, on the other hand, assume Revelation is, by and large, coded language describing the suffering of the church under the Roman Empire, and the eventual triumph of the faithful.

There is an ethical problem with this little scheme as well. At the heart of both the theology and the series, is an inherent fatalism. Rapture theology believes the doomsday timetable is unfolding inexorably, and it cannot be changed - either by human faithfulness or will, or even by God's grace, since it is God's design. Two problems here: One is, why care for the poor, or the downtrodden, or anything about this world - its institutions, schools, saving an endangered species, and so forth, when all is impermanent, when very soon now it will all be destroyed?

And why care at all, if God meant from the beginning to destroy it? Back in 1981, then-Secretary of Labor, James Wall, famously told congress there was little point in protecting the environment, since the Second Coming could be any day.

And second problem - if the end is near, why not hasten it? Picture a dispensationalist with a finger on the nuclear trigger, who's been listening to Jenkins and LaHaye, even Falwell, say that nuclear apocalypticism is inevitable, that prophecy is clear that Russia (or Iran) will do X and Israel will do Y, etc., etc. Pull the trigger and let's get it over with! There is in this no sense of stewardship, no sense of responsibility for the future, knowing that they will be exempted from the terrors to come, they can watch the world collapse and calmly await the Rapture. It is a negative theology, in which the only way the Saved survive is by planetary escape (rapture), since all is doomed. The deterioration of the country, of the environment, of society, is of little concern to the dispensationalist.

That's real different from Christianity. And it's real different from Scripture. Biblical eschatology tends to be a positive thing, and Christians have end time - hopefully - a time when the world will be redeemed and renewed, when salvation history will be brought to fruition, when what has been promised will be fulfilled. The Bible tells us that our hope is not in some arcane rapture-scheme, but in the resurrection of the Crucified Jesus.

In John 10 (our Gospel lesson today) they ask Jesus: Tell us plainly, are you the Christ?@ Jesus responds, in essence, how could it be more plain? The works I do in my Father's name bear witness of me. My sheep hear my voice and follow me. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and *no one* is able to snatch them out of my hand.

Does Jesus say, anywhere in the Bible, forget world, and let's hole up till the end comes???

No. He dealt with real things in the real world that changed human life. He taught about actions and consequences, he taught about money and possessions, he healed people, created community in his very footsteps. Faith in him is not some isolated, internal experience of warm *gooshiness*.

*No one* is able to snatch them out of my hand@ . . . no inexorable rapture-date, nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Against the mean message of the dispensationalists is John 3:16 – For God so love the world that whosoever believed in Him would not perish but would have eternal life.

Left Behind says God's grace is conditional. Depends on you. The Gospel says God's grace is unconditional, and is the choice of God. The real question is, what is the nature of God? What are God's intentions towards humankind? The pre-mil dispensationalist assumes God's intention toward the world is to destroy it, has always been to destroy it, and God will rescue out of that destruction a relatively few faithful folk. The historic Christian view is that God's intention toward humankind is one of love and grace, that God's intention towards the world is to redeem it. For God so loved the world. And how God does that is through Jesus Christ and his resurrection, and we already know the end of the story!

That's the basic theological difference - what is the nature of God? Does God hate the world and most of its folk and mean to make them pay? Or is God a God of love who is redeeming the world through Christ? For God so loved it. Historic Christianity says the latter - redemption. The ethical implications of that are to live in imitation of Christ, healing and caring for the poor, and creating community, making the world more like the Kingdom of God, and for no other reason than thanksgiving for God's love and grace.

The key passage in Revelation might be the one in our lectionary reading this morning, Chapter 7 - in which John sees in his mind's eye a multitude which no one could number standing before the Lamb - (Aside: The Jehovah's Witnesses get their only 144,000 go to heaven notion from the passage right before this. It hangs them up, if you point them to

verse 9, and the countless multitude. Try it some time.)

The multitudes are standing before the Lamb, (sacrificed Lamb, for our redemption) singing salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb. Salvation is God's...not yours, not an inexorable scheme, but from God's grace alone. They shall neither hunger nor thirst, the Lamb shall lead them, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Francis Thompson, in a poem you may remember, describes God as the *Hound of Heaven*, who pursues us relentlessly.

*I fled him down the night and down the days,  
I fled him, down the arches of the years . . . I hid from him...  
Adowned titanic glooms of chasmed fears ,  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.*

For pages the poet describes a life of fleeing from God, from God who pursues only out of great, great love.

*(For though I knew His love Who followed, Yet I was sore adread  
Lest, having Him I must have naught beside.)*

Across the world and the years, watching his youth disappear, the poet flees God, till at last...

*Rise, clasp my hand and come! @  
Halts me by that footfall:  
Is my gloom after all  
Shade of his hand, outstretched caressingly  
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He whom thou seekest!*

It is kind of amazing to me how, through all these centuries, we Christians keep trying to make bad news out of Good News. Which is true, do you suppose - that God is playing a cosmic game of Blind Man's Buff with us? Pin the tail on the Rapture? Or that God is the Hound of Heaven, the source of infinite Love, Keeper of the Covenant, faithful through every time we have not been, seeking us and refusing to let go, refusing to let love fail. To the point of sending the only-begotten Son to find us, so when we are too far gone to reach out, through Christ's resurrection his hand clasps ours.?

Forget this rapture@ business. God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be redeemed through Him. Good News.

*They shall neither hunger nor thirst, the Lamb shall lead them, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*