

WHAT ABOUT APOCALYPSE, RAPTURE, SECOND COMING AND ARMAGEDDON?

(Second in Series)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California

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I Thessalonians 4:13-18

Tom Sine, in his book The Mustard Seed Conspiracy, tells of an incident in Burlington which he claims to be true. Two emigrants from Scandinavia brought with them from the old country a love of gathering wild mushrooms. One weekend they went mushroom gathering in the foothills and came home carrying baskets overflowing with delectable mushrooms. Realizing they couldn't possibly consume all their bounty, they decided to throw a dinner party and invite a houseful of friends to help them devour the harvest. They fixed mushroom crepes, mushroom souffles, mushroom omelets; and everyone ate until they couldn't possibly eat another mushroom. They scraped the leftovers into the cat's dish. Later, there came a scream from the kitchen, "The cat!" They went running to the kitchen, and there on the floor lay the cat--thrashing, kicking, crying, her sides heaving. Some exclaimed, "Oh, no!" The doctor was called and said, "It is nothing to mess around with!" They rushed to the Emergency Room, and there the guests stretched out to have their stomachs pumped. What a way to end a lovely dinner party! They drove back to the house to get their coats, and at 1:30 a.m. the bedraggled, weary, weak guests prepared to leave the party. Someone remembered the cat. They went to the kitchen, looked in, and there on the floor lay the cat--with eight new kittens!

They misread the signs! Events are subject to various interpretations! Last week I gave an historical interpretation of the mysterious Beast in Revelation 13. The Beast subdues the world and is identified by the mark "666," known as the Mark of the Beast. Understanding the history of the time and using an ancient numbering system, the number 666 can be interpreted as the Emperor Nero who was notorious in his persecution of Christians. Many, however, delight in finding the Beast in the world today. After worship last Sunday, a couple told me of dinner guests who proceeded to tell them of the 666 conspiracy threatening our world today. As with the cat, the signs can be read in differing ways, and if you look, no doubt you will find many "sixes" today. I myself prefer the interpretation that 666 was a code for the hated Emperor Nero.

The purpose of this sermon series is to discover meaning in the apocalyptic biblical passages for our day. We are seeking answers to the questions: Will the world end? Are we living in the last days? How do we differ from those who predict the end of the world in our time?

Let's first look at some of the terms used, so you will be familiar with them.

Apocalypse: This is a Greek word--apokalypsis--which originally meant "revelation." Usually the result of visions, the author received a revelation. The term gradually came to signify those writings of a particular nature: Daniel, Ezekiel 38 and 39, Mark 13, Revelation, etc. As I explained last week, while the Jews were in exile in Babylonia, apocalyptic theology began to interest them as a means of hope. The Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, believed that two opposing cosmic powers--God and Satan--are in conflict. The present age is irretrievably evil under Satan's power, but God will soon act to overthrow Satan, and a new age where God rules will come.

Rapture: Our Epistle lesson today, I Thessalonians 4:13-18, describes the experience of Christians rising in the air to meet Christ. The term "rapture" refers to this event. Rapture literally means "to be carried away."

Second Coming: The Thessalonians passage also describes the Second Coming of Christ, when the Christians who are alive will be raptured. The term "second coming" does not appear in the Bible.

Armageddon: This is the site of the battleground where God will defeat Satan, Revelation 16:16.

Like the cat in labor, however, these terms and their concepts are subject to varying interpretations, with as many interpretations as there are Bible students. However, according to my study, I believe the interpretations can be grouped into five major groups; each, of course, subject to differences within.

First, there are those Christians who interpret the apocalyptic passages literally and futuristically, believing that the passages refer to historical events yet in the future. There are differences of interpretation, but basically most would agree on the scenario that Jesus will soon come again and take the Christians off the earth in a twinkling of an eye through the Rapture. Terrible tribulations will then fall on the earth. Then Christ will return with an army of raptured saints to defeat the Antichrist at the Battle of Armageddon. Somewhere in this scheme there is a millenium of peace, a 1,000-year period. The modern "predicters" see Russia threatening war on Israel. Israel will join forces with the east, all substantiated by obscure Bible verses. Herb Caen in the Chronicle reported a recent survey that some eight million Americans not only believe nuclear war with the Soviet Union is inevitable, they think that born-again Christians will escape the nuclear war by being raptured. This phenomenon explains the Religious Right Wing's lack of interest, even opposition to, nuclear arms control.

Second interpretation: There are those Christians who interpret the apocalyptic passages quite literally, but with an historical consciousness, believing that many of the passages have already been fulfilled. Last week I used some of the Revelation passages as examples; today let's look at Mark 13, selected verses.

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." ...Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" And Jesus began to say to them, ... "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the sufferings... For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been seen from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be."

These and similar passages were fulfilled when the Romans marched on Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. The unfulfilled part of Jesus' teaching, beginning with verse 24, especially verse 26--"And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory"--is yet in the future, according to this historical interpretation.

A third interpretation: there are those Christians who interpret the apocalyptic passages as figurative language, poetic language, and believe that the events described have already occurred. According to this interpretation, Satan was defeated by Jesus on the cross and through the resurrection. The second coming of Christ occurred on Pentecost when Christ returned in the form of the Holy Spirit to be with his followers. The rapture (meeting in the air with Christ) occurs at the time of death. According to this interpretation, there are many supportive passages in the Bible. In fact, it is claimed that if you read the writings of the New Testament in the order in which they

were written, rather than in the order in which they appear in our Bible, you can see a development from the early writings where Christ was expected to return in person, as we read in I Thessalonians this morning, to the later writings where it is assumed that Christ is not coming again in that manner. In fact, Christ has already come the second time, the new age has begun. Eternal life is a present as well as a future reality.

A fourth interpretation: There are those Christians who interpret the apocalyptic passages allegorically. They believe that these writings are symbolic representations of each individual's spiritual journey. The Antichrist is inside each of us fighting Christ. The second coming occurs when Christ is invited into the inner person. The battle of Armageddon occurs when Christ conquers Satan within a Christian's attitudes, motivations, and life style.

A fifth interpretation: There are those Christians who interpret the apocalyptic passages by combining and selecting elements from the previous four interpretations. They believe that the apocalyptic passages are using expressive language, not informational language; the difference between poetry and a newspaper. The passages are filled with images and should be taken seriously as images. We should, therefore, allow ourselves to feel the impact of the image, and not immediately run to the books to find historical events to explain--either past or future historical events. We should, therefore, take literally the fact that Daniel reported his dreams, and John in Revelation reported his visions, and then interpret the passages as dreams and visions which use picture language.

The impact and the feeling-tone of these images is God's presence in time of trouble. Therefore, have confidence that God will prevail. Hope in the future, for the future is in God's hands. The Holy Spirit is present now in comfort, love, joy and peace because the power of Satan has been broken by Jesus Christ. Satan has fallen from the throne and we look forward to the final consummation of God's victory. In other words, we live in the time when victory is proclaimed but not yet fully realized. The returns are not yet completely in, as with our finance campaign; but in faith, based on evidence at hand, we proclaim victory.

We still have not discussed what will happen at the end of history. Nor, have we answered the questions: Will the world end? Are we living in the last days? So, continued until next week.

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