

BETWEEN THE TIMES
(Last in sermon series)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
November 18, 1984

I Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:1-13

A mother served stewed prunes for dessert every now and then, and her little boy hated prunes with a passion. One evening he got down to the last two prunes in the dish, and he had had it. Mother tried all her usual tactics with none of them effective, and finally cried in frustration, "All right, go to bed this instant. You have been a very bad boy, and God will be very angry!" Later a terrible thunderstorm broke loose--lightning flashing, thunder roaring, the wind whipping the rain against the window. The mother felt guilty and was sure that he was upstairs frightened, so she went up to comfort him. He was standing at the window with his face pressed up against the glass, saying, "My, my. Such a fuss to make over two prunes."

There are those who believe that God is getting angry with us and will send terrible tribulations on the earth, after the true believers have been conveniently raptured (taken off the earth) by Christ at the second coming.

Last week I suggested five interpretations of the apocalyptic passages. Behind the various interpretations, there is a fundamental difference between those Christians who believe that the world is unredeemable and those who believe it is redeemable; between those who see the world as basically evil, and those who see it as basically good--perverted at times, but basically good. The question is, "Who is in charge? God or Satan?"

On the one hand are those who have essentially given up on the world. They believe that it is under Satan's control. There is no prospect of improvement and the only hope is the ending of this world by divine intervention. But, miraculously, they believe that they will be raptured--they will escape the worst of it--by Jesus' second coming. There is a great deal of security in this belief. You can see why those churches who preach this brand of apocalypticism are often packed with people. You can also understand why this brand of church is not interested in social reform, as there is no hope of changing it for the better. They are also not interested in controlling nuclear weapons, for a nuclear holocaust might very well be God's plan for Armageddon.

It is fascinating to me how many of them are sure that they are on the right side. The Antichrist is identified with outsiders; the United States and their own kind are the "good guys." I'm also fascinated with the "I get to go and I'm glad to go" philosophy, relishing the idea that they will escape and the rest of us will undergo terrible tribulations. I wonder if Jesus might elect to stay with those who are left behind to provide comfort, healing, love. Should a Christian be so anxious to escape?

In contrast, there is the belief that Satan is not in charge of this world, but God is in charge! Through the coming of the Messiah--through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ--God conquered Satan. Evil's power over the earth was broken. Evil is not completely subdued, but victory is in sight. Therefore, Jesus could send out his disciples to preach, teach, heal; and when they returned with accounts of victory, Jesus rejoiced and exclaimed, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18) Therefore, said Jesus, this is a time for celebration, not fasting. The bridegroom is here; let's rejoice. The central message of apocalyptic theology is birth-wish, not death-wish; not the wish for destruction, but the affirmation of hope.

This past week I had the privilege of "continuing my education" by attending the annual lecture series at Garrett Seminary, my alma mater in Evanston, Illinois. Dr. Ted Runyon, from Candler Seminary in Atlanta, mentioned in one of his lectures that John

Wesley in the 18th century had similar differences with the Calvinists. The Calvinists of Wesley's day could not wait for God to destroy the world and save the elect. Wesley's interpretation of the Bible led him to proclaim that God is in the business of transforming this world, not destroying it. This points up a fundamental difference in perspective and outlook. Do you as a Christian live your life with the destruction of the world as your goal, or with the transformation of this world as the goal--the wish for destruction or the affirmation of hope?

We've been asking the question: Will the world end? Now, in the third sermon, I tell you it is the wrong question. The Bible does not speak of the end of the world. The Bible measures time by ages, not geographically or spatially. Life is a series of ages. We do not speak of the end of the world. Life as we know it on this planet is an age, a dispensation, or a period. Another age will dawn and take the place of the present age. The Bible speaks of the coming new age as the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, God will reign. All enemies will be subdued and conquered. Evil will be eradicated, and Jesus Christ will be Lord of all.

The one who inaugurates the new age--the kingdom of God--is Jesus Christ. The New Age came with Christ. Therefore, the New Age is already here. Eternal life is here. John wrote, "He who has the Son has life, and he who does not have the Son does not have life." Eternal life, the kingdom of God, the life of the New Age, begins when one is in Christ. Therefore, the end of the present age--the end of the "world"--occurs for you when God converts you. Conversion is the entrance into the New Age. We die to this world and are born again into the kingdom of God.

When you are in the New Age, the power of the old age no longer has hold over you. You look at the world differently. You are no longer bound by it or to it. The values of the present world, the present age, are not the most important things to you anymore. You look upon your neighbor differently. You have peace, joy and love in your heart, rather than hate, competition or jealousy.

When you are in the New Age, the present age is transcended. We are not promised deliverance from the chaos and struggles of this changing social order in which we live. But, what is promised is the transcending of the struggles. We are given power to live so that this world does not govern or rule us. We are in the world, but not of the world, said Paul. We still have problems, concerns, illness, pain, heartaches, deaths, but they no longer rule us, for they have been conquered in and through Jesus Christ. The Christian lives in a New Age even though still in this one. Empowered by daring faith, hope and love, described in our epistle lesson today, we live the future life right now.

When you are in the New Age, there is tension with the old. Things are not all rosy. The church is in tension with the world. The church's task is to preach, teach and be God's instrument in the transformation of this present age. Mark Trotter in the Quarterly Review suggests an interesting image.

Waiting for the Lord is to live the way underground
resistance forces prepared for liberation, by struggling
against the enslaving powers, refusing to accept the world
the way it is now as the way it must always be, and looking
toward that day when they will be able to escort their
exiled leader to his rightful throne.

Going to meet Christ in the air (the rapture) is a way of saying that we work valiantly toward the day of final victory when we can escort the exiled leader to his throne.

This means that victory is proclaimed even though it is not fully yet realized. We are living between the times, between the time of Christ's victory and the ultimate fulfillment of it. We see signs of the kingdom present now. The kingdom breaks through. Christ, the bridegroom, comes. Therefore, be ready. Keep oil in the lamps as the young maidens were warned in our gospel lesson which was read and is being sung in the Cantata this morning. The bridegroom is coming again and again--unexpectedly. Be ready to celebrate whenever he comes. Waiting for the Lord is a time of anticipation and joy. The Christian is not despairing of these times in which we live, looking for an escape, but is joyful, knowing that God indeed is in charge, and constantly breaks into this age with the new.

God is in charge and is about the business of transforming this present age into the kingdom of God, the New Age. Living in the New Age begins with conversion and means that the present age no longer has power over us, for we transcend the present struggles by living the future now, all the while struggling as resistance forces, anticipating that day when we will escort our leader to his rightful place.

I've barely scratched the surface of the rich depths of apocalyptic theology. Shall we ask the questions again? Will the world end? That is the wrong question. Yes, the present age will end; in fact, it began to end in the coming of Christ the first time. The final victory is in sight. Are we living in the last days? Yes, we are always living in the last days, for the bridegroom comes, has come, and is coming. Come, Lord Jesus.

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