

ARE WE LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS?

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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I vividly remember one evening when I was about six years old. It was in the summer so I was sent to bed about sunset. The door was open, and I heard my mother and my uncle talking in the living room. The sky that evening was brilliant red, and the bright color started them talking about the end of the world. One of them made the comment that the Bible says the world will not end by flood as in the days of Noah, but by fire. I was frightened by their conversation, and remember to this day how I lay there shivering and hoping that this wasn't the night the world would end, as I had so many things I wanted to do the next day!

The reality of nuclear weapons makes even more plausible the notion that the world will end. Will the world end? Are we living in the last days? Such questions are popular these days. Both Newsweek and Time magazines must have learned that I was preaching a series of sermons on this topic, for both featured Armageddon in their religion section this past week! Newsweek began the story, "For the first time in American history, the end of the world has become a campaign issue. It arose during the second presidential debate, when Ronald Reagan was asked if he truly believes that the world is headed for a 'nuclear Armageddon.'" The President included in his answer, "A number of theologians for the last decade or more have believed...that the prophecies are coming together that portend...the coming of Armageddon."

The evangelical book stores are stacked with books developing this theme. The most popular author is Hal Lindsey who has sold more than 20 million copies of his books, the largest seller being The Late Great Planet Earth. Newspapers, TV talk shows, magazines are all captivated by the idea that the world is heading for a showdown, and that God will soon end it all. Lindsey first predicted a date in the 1980's, somewhere around 1984. His later books are qualifying this prediction. Such ideas are not new. When I was a teenager, I was intrigued with the books of Revelation and Daniel, and believed that we were living in the last days. Israel was going home, setting up their own nation, which, according to those who think they know, is a sign of the end. We called Josef Stalin the Anti-Christ and found oblique passages in the Bible to refer to the Soviet Union.

On the one hand, we have those fundamentalists who are certain we are in the last days; and on the other hand, we have those Christians who largely ignore the issue and hope it will go away. When was the last time you heard a sermon in this pulpit on this topic? Our United Methodist Sunday School curriculum by and large ignores the topic. We react against the "predicters" and tend to throw out the baby with the bath.

I enjoyed the title in the Outlook this week--"Sermon Series to End Confusion!" I really don't promise to end confusion, but I do want to examine the apocalyptic passages in the Bible, and give you my view of what the Bible actually says. I want us to rediscover the truth of these passages and not discount or discredit them. It is my hope that you will gain some knowledge of this topic and be able to discuss it intelligently with those who have very strong feelings and opinions. I hope that through these sermons we will see what God is calling us to do and be, in the light of the end times.

We can trace the apocalyptic passages back to 587 B.C. when Jerusalem was conquered, leveled and captured by Babylon. The glorious history of some 500 years was destroyed. They remembered how Moses led their ancestors out of Egyptian slavery into the promised land. Under the judges, they conquered Canaan and then became a nation

under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Solomon built a magnificent temple, and life was good. After Solomon's death, civil war divided the nation into the northern kingdom called Samaria and the southern kingdom called Judah. Samaria was conquered by Assyria in 721 B.C. and then some years later in 587 B.C., Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. The temple was destroyed. The leaders of the nation were carried into Babylon to do slave labor and there, as the choir sang this morning from Psalm 137:1,4, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

During this crisis, when the despair was overwhelming, the prophets began preaching hope, hope that God would intervene in the affairs of this world, deliver his people, and rule as King. The later chapters of Isaiah contain the beginnings of this apocalyptic theology:

For behold, the Lord will come in fire,
and his chariots like the stormwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
For by fire will the Lord execute judgment,
and by his sword, upon all flesh;
and those slain by the Lord shall be many.

(Isaiah 66:15-16)

Persia later freed the Jews, and they returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, but the apocalyptic longing for God's triumph was not forgotten, for Judea was controlled by foreign powers.

The next crisis which fostered new apocalyptic writings was the persecution of the Jews in 165 B.C. by Antiochus Epiphanes. The prophecies of Daniel were written at this time. Then, during the time of Jesus, interest in the apocalyptic was especially high because of the Roman domination, various rebellions led by the Zealots, and the eventual destruction again of the temple, by the Romans this time in 70 A.D. Many of the apocalyptic sayings of Jesus refer to this event. The final crisis which precipitated the writing of the book of Revelation was the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero.

It is important for you to have this historical sketch in mind, for those who do not know their history make serious mistakes. For example, most of the passages used by Lindsey and company to predict the end of the world by finding contemporary events to fit the passages, have already been fulfilled. When you understand the history, you will see that many of the passages were written about events of that time, not our time. The first rule of Bible study is to discover the historical context of the passage, asking the questions, "What was going on when this passage was written, and why was the passage written?"

For example, and I will discuss this in greater detail next week, let's take a quick look at the mysterious book of Revelation which was written during times of persecution to encourage Christians. The book discusses the Beast of the Sea, the anti-Christ, the whore of Babylon, who all wage war against God. God will eventually conquer them. Modern "predicters" delight in the attempt to identify the anti-Christ with the mysterious number 666. Some feel that Babylon, because of the reference to seven, is the Roman Catholic Church because Rome sits on seven hills. But, when you understand the history of the book of Revelation, you see that the reference is indeed to Rome, but to the Roman Empire, not to the Roman Catholic Church. There was no Roman Catholic Church at that time. The writer is disguising his attack on the Roman Empire. The anti-Christ is probably Nero. By using an ancient numbering system to decode the mysterious numbers, 666 is equivalent to Nero. The writer is using symbolic or code language to communicate subversive and unpatriotic ideas about the Roman government.

Notice also, that the apocalyptic writings and interest in apocalypticism occur at times of crisis. Certainly our modern world fits the criterion for an apocalyptic interest, and it is easy to see why there is so much interest these days. Mark Trotter in the Quarterly Review defines such a time of crisis as the "breakdown of the present world and the facing of an uncertain future. In such times, people find meaning in apocalyptic myth." He goes on to say that the popularity of the "predicters" today is because "they are answering questions great masses of people are asking...People sense something is happening beyond their control. Events seem to have apocalyptic significance."

The mainline denominations' interpretation of the kingdom of God is no longer relevant to this generation. The kingdom of God has been seen by some as the conversion of people to Christ, the pietistic approach. To others, the kingdom of God was the extension of the church into society. Perhaps the most common definition of the kingdom of God was, "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." That theology called "liberal" is dead and irrelevant. The times in which we live call for different language and images. The times in which we live call for a return to the biblical faith. The times in which we live call for an understanding and appreciation of the apocalyptic passages. The times in which we live call for an alternative to the fundamentalist predictors and "bogy men" with their scare tactics.

The main thrust of the apocalyptic passages and the thrust desperately needed in our society and churches today is hope, a daring hope. Lloyd Ogilvie in his book on Thessalonians says it well,

The reason for the virulent hopelessness of our time is that it has finally dawned on us that no leader, negotiated peace, armed might, or human cleverness can bring the utopia we've believed was the goal of history. The only way we can live with confidence...is to have an ultimate conviction about what will happen at the end of history.

The end of history. What will happen? Are we living in the last days? When will it end? Continued next week.

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