

I'd Rather Be Left Behind

Sermon edited and adapted by the Rev. DWHinkle
Advent 1 A December 1, 2019

Scripture: Matthew 24:36-44

“36 ‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. “

What do you do with this bit from our Gospel today?: *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.*” It sounds like the rapture theology of Tim LaHaye’s, New York Times Best Seller Left Behind series. Rapture theology tells us that when Jesus comes again, all true Christians will be sucked out of this world leaving auto mobiles driverless, planes without pilots, schools with missing teachers and students, and marriage partners suddenly widowed. It sounds cruel to me and not at all like the Jesus I follow. You can tell that I think rapture is a bunch of crap.

Here is a story told by a seminary professor:

Ten-year-old Josh” came home from school to an empty house. His mother, normally at home to greet him, was nowhere to be found. She might have been at the store or at a neighbor s, but Josh was terrified. His immediate response was a terrible fear that all his family had been Raptured” without him. Josh was sure he had been left behind.

Now a grown-up in my seminary class on the book of Revelation, Josh told this story of his boyhood experience. Others consistently echoed his story of a childhood fear of the Rapture. These children were exhorted to be good so that they would be sure to be snatched up to heaven with Jesus when he returned. Raised on a daily diet of fear, their view of God resembled the song about Santa Claus coming to town: You d better watch out, you d

better not cry.” Only it was Jesus, not Santa, who was coming to town” at an unexpected hour: He knows when you’ve been sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.”

Have some of you been exposed to this kind of thinking? I have.

Today I’d like to offer an alternative to Rapture theology. We’ll begin with the story of Noah. “*For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.*” There’s something about Noah’s world that’s similar to the world Jesus returns to.

For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.” These are a people who don’t know what they’re doing even as they habitually do it—they sound a lot like us. Why do we keep destroying our environment?

People are doing all the things they normally do. When, out of the blue, the floods came and swept them all away. They didn’t see it coming. They didn’t understand the inevitable consequences of what they were doing. If this being swept away business is a metaphor for the rapture, I’d rather be left behind! Noah and his family are the ones who made it and gave humanity a second chance. Those who were swept away... disappeared. They weren’t raptured; they were drowned. A closer look at this text leads us in the opposite direction from the way we’ve always gone.

The story of Noah is about the problem that’s plagued humanity since the beginning of civilization. It’s the problem of the build up of violence, chaos, and confusion leading to war. Our wars are like floods that overwhelm us and destroy much of the progress we make. After the flood of violence, we settle down a bit until it builds up again. And so we go through cycles of violence endlessly. WWI, the war to end all wars, twenty three years later, WWII, twenty some years after that, Vietnam, and so it sadly goes on and on. Wars never solve anything.

You may remember that the story of the flood begins with, *The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.*” At the time of the flood, culture was again disintegrating and everywhere violence and evil were breaking out and spreading. I think the flood symbolizes the cycles of violence in which we humans have always lived and will live until the coming of the Son of Man.

Two men are in the field, one is taken the other left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.” Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright, my favorite Biblical scholar, says this could point to secret police coming in the night where one person is taken and another left. It happens all the

time in our violent world. If Wright is correct, and I think he is, this means that being “left behind” is actually the desired fate for Christians, whereas being “taken” would mean being carried off by the forces of human judgment, like a death squad.

So, when we see violence breaking out, things falling apart, nothing making sense, and yet people going on as if it all were normal, like the endless mass shooting in America,.. keep awake; make yourselves ready; wake from sleep. As Paul says, *Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers, the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

In the cross Jesus himself became the one left behind. All others had gotten swept up in the unanimous violence against him. He was the only one not caught up in the flood of violence toward another and instead became its victim... for our sakes.

He was taunted while on the cross that the Messiah should expect some sort of miraculous Rapture, some sort of supernatural rescue mission on God's part: They said, *He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, I am God's Son*”” Even the criminals crucified with him derided him. He was cosmically alone as the scapegoat of all. There was no Rapture to save him from the cross. Instead, Jesus quoted the psalmist in crying out the forsakenness of the sacrificial victim, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” A flood of collective violence had swept up everyone in its path. Jesus alone resisted it.

The violence washed over him and he drowned in it. But, by the power of God, the tomb was also his ark. He remained in its shelter for three days and then left it behind... empty. He has arisen as the Forgiving Victim of all those who were swept up in the flood. There was no Rapture that saved him from the cross, but the Resurrection pulled him from the clutches of death. What we need now isn't so much a Rapture theology as a good baptismal theology. We've already been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus so that we can face the ever rising tide of *human* violence with faith.

The New Testament doesn't describe a coming **rapture** but a **rupture** that has already come in time and history. The endless cycles of human violence have been exposed as the lie they truly are and interrupted with an incarnate, nonviolent word from God in Jesus Christ, a word spoken from the cross where Jesus prays over and over again, *Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.*” It's a **rupture** that begins creation again with a power of life from God that reveals itself as more powerful than our powers of violence and death. We who are already baptized into that promise of life don't need to hope in some future rapture. **Our hope is in the coming fulfillment of what was already begun in the cross and resurrection.**

We're called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus' faithfulness. Baptized, we're those who die and rise with him so that we might also be left behind when the rising tide of human violence rolls our way. We are those who resist joining in the violence. **Living in faith, we do not get carried away.**

Sources:

NRSV Bible

November 28th, 2010

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Truby and Rev. Laura C. Truby with special thanks to Rev. Dr. Paul Neuchterlein