

“The Fundamentals: Second Coming”
A Sermon for University Congregational Church
Sunday, July 28, 2019
Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word

The Coming of the Son of Man

24 “But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

25 and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

28 “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he[e] is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

--Mark 13:24-31

Contemporary Word

“The Bible begins with God’s creation of the world and humanity’s alienation from God. The Bible ends with the reunion of God and humanity, with the overcoming of the exile from the Garden of Eden. Finally, God rules. Every tear shall be wiped away, and the river of life flows through humankind’s new home, God’s new and perfect creation. And there, we will all see God and joyfully worship together forevermore.” Rev. Dr. Gary Cox, *Think Again, A Response to Fundamentalism’s Claim on Christianity*

When I was a young man I was intrigued by all of the apocalyptic books and movies around. War Day, Nature's End, The Stand: books that foretold the end of the world and that small band of survivors who might rebuild human society in whatever was left. In a new world. I used to imagine myself working bravely alongside the other survivors as we reestablished community, rebuilt infrastructure and basically got things back to where they were before whatever cataclysmic event caused the end of the world in the first place. Sometimes it was a virus that wiped out 99% of humanity, such as in the Stand. Other times it was a nuclear war such as in The Last Ship or The Day After. When young, I always wanted to be one of these special survivors, humans who were chosen (who knows why)—but they were chosen to lead humanity out of the darkness and back into the light of life.

As I grew older, the naïve attraction of these stories faded and if you asked me today, I'd probably tell you that if the end of the world comes, I want to go in the first wave of destruction. I have no desire to be around for all of the ensuing madness and chaos. A youthful fixation on being one of the chosen "special" people has given way to a more guarded opinion that there would be nothing romantic or the least bit fun about rebuilding this Eden that we already have.

Apocalyptic literature has been around for millennia and it was quite popular in the ancient world culminating in a number of interesting stories that even made it into our Holy Bible. Today we're looking at some of these ancient stories of the end of the world and whether or not one must believe in their fantastic vision in order to be considered a Christian. Today we're asking one final time: Does belief in this

supposed fundamental of the faith really require us to pine for the end of days? And particularly an end of the world foretold in the Bible dealing with the Second Coming of Jesus—a Cosmic Christ that rides in and vanquishes all non-believers and leads a new humanity, a humanity only composed of Christians, into a new and prosperous future.

In his book *Think Again, A Response to Fundamentalism's Claim on Christianity*, Rev. Dr. Gary Cox writes this about the Second Coming of Jesus: "First, Jesus clearly states that no one knows when the end will come, 'neither the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father' [knows]. So we should not get too worried when we hear somebody claiming they have studied scripture, decoded its meaning and determined the date for the end of the world." Even Jesus didn't know.

There is one thread of modern apocalyptic fiction that I believe has done tremendous damage to all of us. In the *Left Behind* series, its authors have sought to capitalize on our inherent need for community and vanity that they have, rather cynically I believe, leveraged it into a powerhouse of commodities: books, films, self-help guides, a video game and more. All of it based on a terrible interpretation of scripture. This is the interpretation that is often referred to as "The Rapture"—when God's select will be taken up, raptured, and all of the unbelievers will be left to fend for themselves as a powerful figure known as the "anti-Christ" rules the world of a thousand years—and at the end of his rule the Christ returns again to then vanquish this anti-Christ and to rule a new heavenly kingdom on earth made up of believers only.

The immense popularity of these fictions is such that vast numbers of our fellow citizens just accept their depictions as true—they take this dark vision of Christianity as part and parcel of what it means to be Christian, when in fact, it is just one interpretation of one, single scripture that deals with this idea of a “rapture”. Here these words from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep...” That line, “will God bring with him” is translated in some previous versions as “raptured” or “caught up”. For many people this is a promise then (and an appeal to vanity) that if they believe in certain things, when the Christ returns, they will be part of the select few who will ascend into heaven and be saved.

Apocalyptic literature shows up during times of great social, political and economic upheaval. In the Hebrew Bible we see examples of it during the various exiles and when the tribes of Israel were in chaos. And in our New Testament we find it usually surrounded by terrible historical events—the Gospel of Mark was written immediately after the destruction of the temple. Imagine the great turmoil and terror that the Roman Empire created by their almost complete destruction of Jerusalem and the total ruin of the center of Jewish life—their sacred temple. Apocalyptic literature serves as a prophetic voice—a voice crying out to “beware! Things are happening now that will bring about great cataclysmic change”. What was

happening during the 1980's that inspired our own surplus of "end-of-the-world fiction? The cold war. Great uncertainty over who might push the red button first and annihilate all life on this planet. The same human need for an answer as I felt as a young man is evident in the Bible as people searched for some supernatural explanation for the chaotic events around them. Adding in the return of a beloved rabbi makes these apocalyptic stories even more palatable for a people yearning for some answers.

Let's look at a part of scripture that is often called "the Little Apocalypse" because it deals with this idea of Christ's return and because I prefer working with this version as opposed to that more troublesome book, Revelation, as this is the Gospel of Mark, the first chronological Gospel account in the Bible—written in roughly 70 CE, immediately after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Roman army. I've placed this scripture in your bulletins if you care to read along: 24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. --Mark 13:24-27. And then a bit later in the chapter is this other reminder: "Beware, keep alert for you do not know when the time will come."

The main themes of this passage are prophetic and that one must be discerning in their approach to all of the various apocalyptic fictional stories that abounded at the

time. The author is actually warning that many apocalyptic messengers are deceitful and that “good believers” will keep will keep watch, waiting for the “real” end.

What a terrific appeal to vanity! Our brand of belief has the secret knowledge and all others are wrong. We have the “right” belief and all others are apostate—different—unbelievers—not to be trusted. They are “other”—that dreaded category that we love to place so many people into. And you must join with our belief system to avoid that categorization—you must be saved—and only our salvation will work.

I’m reminded of a sermon that Gary Cox once gave from this pulpit on this very topic. He told us what we should do as Christians of good faith when a stranger asks us if “we are saved”. Gary said to just smile, say yes and not engage with them.

Because we are indeed saved from their interpretation of this scripture. We’re saved from that because that is not how we see this document—or even this event.

I hold that the Second Coming of Christ (as I’ve studied it) is quite different from the popular belief in “The Rapture” and I think there is a dangerous conflation of the two.

The idea of Christ’s second coming was of immediate concern for the early church.

Paul said to the early church to not even get married because Jesus would be

returning too soon to even worry about having a family—for Paul, his Jesus was

coming back the next day! There’s a reason that no one wrote about Jesus’ life until

well after the crucifixion. Remember, Jesus was probably executed somewhere

between the 27th and 34th year of the Common Era and we don’t get a Gospel until

after the destruction of the temple in 70. A good 35 to 40 years after the fact. That’s a

significant amount of time in any era—in our own time, could we come up with any

sort of reconciled agreement on say, the assassination of JFK? Look at all of the disagreement and controversy surrounding that! And this is in our modern era with better communication and things like television recordings and more permanent types of documentation. Imagine the early followers of Jesus trying to come to some sort of agreement on what happened...and then throw in all of the popular apocalyptic fiction that was proliferating in the Roman and Greek world during this time and you start to get an idea of how the two threads of this story began to be interwoven: The death and resurrection of a beloved teacher and his eventual second return to his followers in a great big cataclysmic way that proves to all of the unbelievers that they were wrong and they don't belong. And there's a certain schadenfreude that sometimes humans enjoy—that feeling of smugness that we get when we feel that we've made the right choice and those around us made what we think was a wrong choice and then they have to pay a price for the consequences of that choice.

And I think this is where we need to focus our attention—the judgement that surrounds so much of fundamentalism—we need to push back against these claims. It is absolutely fine for you to believe whatever you wish to believe. But when you start judging other people as going to hell or rendering some other type of despicable judgement because our beliefs don't align, then that is cause for worry. One of our most cherished rights in this country is the freedom to believe as each of us sees fit and once we cross that line, once we begin insisting that you must believe as I do or that I must believe as you—then we are on a very dangerous path—one that the founders of this nation took exquisite pains to ensure would not happen.

I'm actually fine with the fundamentalist tradition. I know many fundamentalists and I love them dearly. They are useful to me and my own belief system because it is by examining their deeply held religious beliefs that I am better able to gauge my own beliefs. If I hold everything to a simple test, then I find that my theology and my philosophy align quite nicely. Here's the test: Will this belief make me a better neighbor. Will it make me a more loving and kind human being? That's it! If the belief makes me a better neighbor, a more kind and loving person, then I am all for it. And if it doesn't then it is not a good belief for me. And this is my test—you are welcome to use it—to modify it—take it with you—but by no means is it a requirement of any kind: However; feel free to adopt it, if it works for you.

We've spent this past month exploring Fundamentalism's claim on Christianity and I think we've pretty well laid out the argument that being a Christian is far too important to reduce to a checklist of beliefs that must be professed in order to be considered a member of the club. It is instead about living a life modeled on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. We've laid out a number of ideas for what modern scholars and theologians think might make a better list of "fundamentals"—the "New Fundamentals". These include love of God and faith in that love of God, love of neighbor, finding joy in our lives, and refusing to judge others who approach their faith and their life differently.

Rev. Dr. Gary Cox summed all of this up nicely when he wrote: "The Bible begins with God's creation of the world and humanity's alienation from God. The Bible ends with the reunion of God and humanity, with the overcoming of the exile from the

Garden of Eden. Finally, God rules. Every tear shall be wiped away, and the river of life flows through humankind's new home, God's new and perfect creation. And there, we will all see God and joyfully worship together forevermore." Humanity reconciled to God. Each of us reconciled to the other. All of us belonging in this Eden. I think we, the Church, might actually be the Second Coming.

For me, it ultimately comes down to this belonging—relationship—feeling like you are part of a community—valued and loved. I think this may be part of what drives us to be part of this community—this church. We want to be part of something bigger than ourselves—something that we can all point to and say "I'm part of this thing—this community—this group of friends" and we can all rest easy that being a member of University Congregational Church is at once a simple and a very complicated thing. Simple in that you don't have to make any professions of faith—complicated in that you don't have to make any professions of faith—we spend more time struggling with the questions that we ever do on deciding any permanent answer.

I'm grateful to you all for this opportunity to spend a few weeks with the words of Gary Cox-- he was and is my spiritual mentor and his voice continues to shine bright through his memory. May we relish this opportunity to work with his thoughts on fundamentalism and may we honor his memory as a strong, vibrant and growing church—a community that places a higher value on human beings than on any sort of right belief. Amen.

RESOURCES: Cox, Rev. Dr. Gary. *Think Again: A Response to Fundamentalism's Claim on Christianity*. University Congregational Church Press: Wichita, KS, 2006