

Advent 1, 2 December 2018 (Year C)

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

St Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman, OK

Edgar C. Whisenant (September 25, 1932 – May 16, 2001), was a former NASA engineer and Bible student who predicted the Rapture would occur in 1988, sometime between Sept. 11 and Sept. 13. His book, “88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be in 1988” was given away free of charge to ministers across the country (300,000 copies distributed by mail), and an additional 4.5 million copies were sold in bookstores and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

I was eighteen years old in 1988. All that year, during the spring and into the summer, people in my hometown of Baytown, Texas, were scared. I knew of families that had stopped paying their house notes, who had given their pets away to “unbelievers” in anticipation of their own immanent departure into realms above. They were expecting (I think) some cosmic pyrotechnics, the ear-shattering blast of a trumpet and the disappearance of all the true believers in a single moment. Cars and trucks would suddenly be without drivers, even on the highways at 60-70 miles per hour. Clothes and shoes would be found in piles here and there, wherever their former occupants had been snatched away, and everyone else, all those who had not believed the right things in time would be “Left Behind.” I had friends at school who were completely unchurched, knowing that I was involved in my local congregation, who asked me “Is something supposed to happen, I heard on the news...” or from a neighbor or friend or family member.

The day came, and went, and nothing happened. Apparently Mr. Whisenant published several other books recalculating the date of “The Rapture,” none of which sold very well, and none of which turned out to be correct after all.

The longing for the return of Christ “to judge the living and the dead” has been part of the Christian hope from the beginning; but I tell you dear ones, with all sincerity and solemnity: The term “The Rapture” does not occur anywhere in Holy Scripture; and those who profit from the creation of fear and terror of such a fabricated event are charlatans, and they are terror-ists. They make a living by creating terror and anxiety in others.

The history of Christian sectarian movements is filled with instances of people—who may have had the best intentions—who have tried to figure out “when will this happen?” and fixed on a date, only to be disappointed time and again. If we’d begun reading a few verses earlier in the Gospel this morning, we’d have heard the disciples themselves ask Jesus that very question: “Teacher, when will this be, and what is the sign that this is about to take place?” (Luke 21:7) And Jesus tells them, repeatedly, “Don’t worry about that. You don’t get to know the exact date or time. Just know that I will be with you, no matter what.”

We read these words of the Gospel on this Sunday in early December, in the midst of several weeks in which our Sunday scriptures are all pointed in the same direction: The Advent (that is, the coming, the arrival) of the Kingdom of God. We’ve moved from Jesus’ parables about “The Kingdom is like” this or that, and now we hear much more specific, even graphic, illustrations of “This is it!”

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar\\_C.\\_Whisenant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_C._Whisenant), accessed 2 December 2018

Jeremiah: “There shall be justice and righteousness in the land.” Those who have been fearful and anxious shall live in peace and safety. Those who have had their lives turned upside down shall be restored; those who have had no place, a place shall be made for them.

The Psalmist: “To YOU, O Lord, I lift up my soul”...my entire self, all that I am. “Show me your ways; teach me your paths; lead me in your truth and teach me. You, O GOD, are my salvation, in you I put my trust.” The kingdom, the dominion, the reign of God, is God’s. No earthly institution (not even the Church) is capable of containing it, or even living fully into it.

Paul, to the People of the Way living in Thessalonica: “May God strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” Here again, “heart” is not merely the internal organ that pumps blood; “heart” is a stand-in for the whole self, integrated and complete. The hope, and the promise, is that those early followers of Jesus would be ready to meet Jesus at any time, in whatever form or season or circumstance they might discover his presence among them.

This morning we begin to read from the Gospel of Luke. But not at chapter 1, verse 1. No.

We begin smack in the middle, in the final days of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem happened a few verses earlier, with palm branches and crowds shouting “Hosanna in the highest!” “All glory, laud, and honor, to thee, Redeemer King” has been sung; the Last Supper, the arrest and trial and crucifixion will take place in a matter of hours. Jesus and the disciples are in the Temple, where he has predicted the destruction of not only the buildings around them, but the entire city of Jerusalem.

By the time these words were written down and published as the book we call “The Gospel according to Luke” the events Jesus predicted had come to pass. The Temple, the city, the nation, had all been annihilated by the Romans.

Jesus isn’t telling his hearers anything they don’t already know. In fact, he’s giving them words of courage and hope and strength in the midst of the mess and the destruction and the disaster: “When all this happens, you will know what to do. Stand up, lift up your heads, know that I am with you. And that I am coming, even in the midst of the mess and the destruction and the disaster. Be on guard, be alert, don’t get ‘weighed down’ by day-to-day distractions. Keep your eyes open, don’t be afraid!”

The problem with keeping our eyes open is that we see things that make us afraid, that are hard to bear.

Refugees displaced from home, begging for sanctuary at the border.  
Victims of poverty and warfare, living in unspeakable conditions.  
Leaders in state and nation who neglect to serve the good of all, and instead serve only themselves and those who can profit them.  
The suffering of those who are ill, and those who grow wealthy as a result of that suffering;  
the abuse and degradation of the environment, God’s beloved creation, the list goes on.

And you have your own list. The family member or friend who is in such trouble; the child who is putting themselves in danger by their behavior; the situation at work that is tearing you apart.

And it is there, just there, precisely there, in the midst of the mess, in the center of the disaster, in the very place of destruction, that God shows up. In the mess, and in spite of the mess, God is there. Perhaps to do something, or perhaps just to be present, in solidarity with those who mourn. Perhaps to invite action, to challenge the way things are, to call us who bear the name of Christ to reach out in love and care, to say “No” to the powers of death and destruction. Perhaps to simply “Be With.” To say, in word and action “You are not alone.”

In his short powerful book, *What Are We Waiting For?: Re-Imagining Advent for Time to Come*<sup>2</sup>, William Petersen (sometime dean of Bexley Hall Theological Seminary) quotes a poem written on the eve of World War 2, as an answer to the question “What is Advent about?” Because, as Petersen points out, it really isn’t about the journey to Bethlehem, or the birth of the Child, or even the Incarnation (if, by that, we mean only the physical person of Jesus of Nazareth.) It’s much, much, much bigger.

We’re actually going to sing that poem later this morning. (No, 8:30, not you all.) Listen:

O Day of God, draw nigh/In beauty and in power;  
Come with thy timeless judgements now/to match our present hour.

Bring to our troubled minds/uncertain and afraid,  
the quiet of a steadfast faith/calm of a call obeyed.

Bring justice to our land/that all may dwell secure,  
And finely build for days to come/foundations that endure.

Bring to our world of strife/thy sovereign word of peace,  
that war may haunt the earth no more/and desolation cease.

O day of God, draw nigh/as at creation’s birth,  
Let there be light again/and set thy judgments in the earth.<sup>3</sup>

This is the hope, and the prayer, of Advent: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.  
As the judge who judges in compassion at the consummation of history, and as the surprising stranger who shows us the presence of God in the midst of every day.  
Come, Lord, and do not tarry.

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Petersen, *What Are We Waiting For? Re-Imagining Advent for Time to Come*. (New York: Church Publishing Corporation, 2017), p. 29-30

<sup>3</sup> Robert Baggart Young Scott, *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), #600 & #601