

SOMETHING IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Jesus sounds like he's talking to his disciples about the end of the world. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." It sounds like Jesus is talking about the end of the world.

I've never given much thought about the end of the world. I've given some thought to my own personal end - my death. I know I'll die. Hopefully I'll grow old and enjoy years of retirement in relatively good health but eventually I know I'll die and it could happen any moment. So I've thought about my personal end but I've never been that interested in speculating about the end of the world. I think a lot of Presbyterians are like me. We associate talk of the end of the world and the return of Christ with fanatics like David Koresh in Waco, Texas and the *Heaven's Gate* cult of several years ago. A former seminary classmate who teaches religion at Whitworth College, a Presbyterian college, wrote to say that his religion department requires every major to write a personal statement of faith in his or her last semester of study. Last year, out of twenty-seven papers, only four mentioned anything about their belief concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. He says it's because Presbyterians just don't talk that much about the end of the world.

But if Presbyterians don't have much to say about the end of the world, lots of other people do. The best selling books in America vividly identify signs that are harbingers of the return of Christ. *Left Behind* by Tim LeHaye is the first in a series of seven best selling novels about the end of the world and the return of Christ. According to LeHaye, at any moment Christians will suddenly disappear and be taken to heaven. Airplanes and cars will crash when their Christian pilots and drivers suddenly disappear in what is called the rapture of the church. After the rapture, most people will be deceived by the anti-Christ although a few people will become Christians. But these few, post-rapture Christians will face the most severe persecution in history. Seven years after the rapture of the church, Christ will return and the battle of Armageddon will take place.

Although I don't discount this theory (it well may be true). I haven't found one reference to the rapture of the church before the 19th century and I don't find it clearly taught in the Bible. Neither do I find the rapture of the church mentioned in the early church fathers. I don't find it in the 16th century reformers, Luther and Calvin. I don't find it in the 18th century preachers of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. I don't find it anywhere until John Darby began teaching it in 19th century England and Charles Schofield popularized the view in the Schofield Bible. But today, in the face of mainline Christians silence concerning the end of the world, many Christians believe the rapture theory is THE official teaching of the Bible and some doubt anybody can be a Christian without believing it.

The official, historic teaching of the Church has been very modest in talking about the end of the world and the return of Christ. The Nicene Creed simply affirms "He shall come again to judge the living and the dead and of his kingdom there shall be no end." That's good enough for me.

I suspect some of you have a hard time swallowing either view: either Tim LeHaye's view of the rapture of the Church or the more modest teaching of the church. One thing I really like about the Presbyterian Church is that we welcome people who have a difficult time swallowing what the Bible and the Church teaches. We welcome doubters and I believe Jesus does too. So I want to raise a question to those of you who have a hard time believing in what the Bible says about the end of the world and the return of Christ.

Do you believe that history has meaning? Do you believe that history has any purpose? Is history going anyplace? Or do you believe history is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?" Do you believe that the universe will simply continue to expand until the it thins out and disappears into nothingness? Or do you believe the universe will begin to contract and disappear eventually into a Black Hole? Put those questions into Biblical language. Do you believe that God or cosmic catastrophes will win in the end – the "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars" that Jesus spoke of? Do you believe that the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ will have the final Word? Or will fear, distress and confusion have the final word? If you believe that history has meaning and purpose then you are well on your way to believing that God will

win in the end -- you're well on your way to believing what Jesus talks about concerning the end of the world and the return of the Son of Man.

I believe God will win in the end. That doesn't mean I always find it easy to believe. Far from it! I've never found it *easy* to believe that God will finally win. I sometimes question whether God has a loving purpose for the universe. I wrestle with my own perplexity and confusion when I see disturbing signs in the sun, moon and stars. I sometimes find myself distressed and confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. Nevertheless, in the face of fear and foreboding about the future that I sometimes experience I continue to passionately affirm my faith in God's good and gracious and loving purpose for this world. *I do not* – *I will not* – *I can not* believe that loneliness, pain, poverty, sickness, injustice, fear, sin and death will win in the end. God is going to win in the end. That hope keeps me sane when the world looks like it's going to fall apart.

When the world is falling apart and everything that used to be nailed down is coming loose, look up! Stand up! Be counted! Don't give in to nihilism! Don't give in to despair! Don't give in to doubt and unbelief? Raise your heads because God is going to win in the end. It's not always apparent. It's not always easy to understand. But God is even now working out his redemptive purpose in history, in and through the distress among nations, the confusion, the roaring of the sea and the waves. One day his loving purpose for this world and for history will be completed (although I do not know when). But in the birth of Jesus Christ, and his life, death and resurrection – I see the beginning of God's final victory and the birth of a new creation.

Let us pray: Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.