

## The Rapture

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 29, 1998.  
Scripture lesson: Matthew 24:36-44.

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

Christ is coming again! Christ will come to judge between the nations. "People shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Christ is coming again! We don't know when he'll come. We do know, however, that our "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." We know that "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."

Christ is coming again! We affirm it in the Apostles Creed: "from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead." We affirm it in the Nicene Creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Every day we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We sing about his return.

Watchman tells us of the night,  
What its signs of promise are.

---

In the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving we say,  
Christ has died,  
Christ is risen,  
Christ is coming again.

Christ is coming again! "But about that day and hour no one knows."

1. I believe that Christ is coming again - *today*. This morning. He'll come to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Risen Christ will say to us, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into them and sup with them and they with me." The Sacrament of Holy Communion is dress rehearsal for the banquet Jesus spoke of where people will come from east and west and north and south and eat with him in his kingdom. Come and receive the bread and the wine. Come and receive Jesus Christ crucified for us, and so feed upon him that he may be made one with us and we with him. Christ is coming again in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

2. Christ is coming again. He'll come again when we breath our last and die. Jesus once said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. And I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you *I will come again* and take you to myself that where I am there you may be also." I read those words at every funeral. No one knows the day and hour of his or her death. <sup>But</sup> I know I'm closer to my death now than I was last year. And I want to be prepared for death. I want to put aside quarreling and jealousy. I want to die at peace with my neighbors, both my friends and enemies. We need to forgive people before we die. We need to make restitution to some people. We must be ready, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

3. Jesus is coming again! He comes to judge his church. In the book of Revelation the Risen Christ addresses the church in Sardis (in what is now the nation of Turkey). He warns, "I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death; for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, *I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.*" Might these words be applied to the Oxford Presbyterian Church? A particular church may lose its sense of purpose, lose its love for Christ, and become a dead institution kept alive artificially. When that happens it falls under the judgment of Christ. Christ comes like a thief. Our church will be stolen from us and given to others who are alive. We've all seen abandoned church buildings. One time they were alive with prayer and mission and singing and good works. Now they're dead. Sometimes, not always, a church dies because it has lost its purpose. I wonder if that's what's happened to main line churches. In January, I plan to attend a four day seminar entitled, "How Mainline Churches Can Grow in Quantity and Quality" sponsored by the Alban Institute. In the past 30 years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has lost 30 percent of its membership. How can we turn this trend around? We need to take to heart the words of Christ. If you do not

wake up, *I will come like a thief*. Therefore, "Keep awake!" "Remember what you received and heard; obey it, and repent."

4. Jesus is coming again! He will come again at the end of history. George Buttrick wrote in the Expositor's Bible, "Jesus plainly believed that history has an apocalyptic character: it is not an interminable squirrel cage, or a meaningless running down of the clock, or an inevitable ascent, for God is always at work in our world and in (human) freedom. God has his 'little advents' day by day, and a climactic advent in each (person's) death, and at the last that advent in which (God) writes *finis* to the story of this planet. Therefore (we) should always be ready."

Automobile bumper stickers appear frequently with the warning: "The driver of this car may be suddenly missing." The meaning is that the driver is a Christian and will disappear when Jesus comes to take his church out of the world in what is known as the secret rapture. Some Christians hold that Christ's second advent consists of two aspects. The first phase is said to be ~~when he comes secretly for his church. Then a period of tribulation on earth takes place.~~ After the tribulation the second phase of Christ's second advent will occur, when he comes openly with his church. Adherents of this viewpoint claim that all believers will be taken out of the world at the rapture. Only unbelievers will be left on earth to face the rigors of anti-Christ's reign. This belief is enormously popular now-a-days. It's largely based on one verse of scripture: "two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left." But it's not really supported in any of the great creeds of the church. And, in my reading of church history, it's a belief virtually unheard of before the 1800's. But what's important, is not how we imagine Christ's return, but that we're ready <sup>for the consummation of all history.</sup> And we prepare ourselves by doing what Jesus told us to do. We feed the hungry, we give drink to the thirsty, we welcome strangers, we clothe the naked, we take care of the sick, we visit prisoners. In obedience to the words of Jesus, we go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us. How many of those things are we doing as a church? as individuals?

Thanksgiving we were expecting guests for dinner. Checked the papers  
at watches... look out window... listened for car door. At the same time - clean up, prepare  
dinner, dress.

One Christmas Presbyterian minister and writer Fred Buechner was in Rome. He went to St. Peter's cathedral to see the pope celebrate mass. Pius XII was pope. Buechner waited two hours for the service to begin. Finally the pope arrived carried on his golden throne on the shoulders of Swiss Guards. They carried him down the central aisle and Buechner was close enough to see him pass right by him. The pope was an old man, gray, with gaunt, ascetic face wearing a white skull cap and white vestments. Through his thick glasses his eyes looked larger than life, like owl's eyes. And as he was carried down the aisle he leaned forward and looked into the crowd, squinting, searching the faces of thousands of people. Buechner writes, "I could not escape the feeling that he must be looking for someone in particular." Buechner imagined that the pope had been searching the faces of those crowds in the Vatican for years, looking for someone, someone he thought might be there that night or any night, someone he hoped would be there. Was he looking for Christ? Are we looking for Christ?

God of the future, you are coming in power to bring all nations under your rule. We confess that we have not expected your kingdom, for we live casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and peace. In your mercy, forgive us. Grant us wisdom to welcome your way, and to seek things that will endure when Christ comes to judge the world.