

## Rapture Roulette: Finding Eschatological Peace

Isaiah 40: 1-11, 2 Peter 3: 8-15a

Many of you are familiar with my story. I became a Christian at the age of eight. That means I made a decision to be baptized and then join church. After that, I participated in the my particular church's programs such as Sunday School and children's choirs. As I got a little older, I started volunteering to work in nursery during the worship service so I could skip having to listen to the sermons.

Around the time I turned fifteen, I read author Hal Lindsay's book *The Late, Great, Planet Earth*. It was a fictional account of apocalyptic expectations around the second coming of Christ. Of course, Mr. Lindsay did not think his book was fiction. He fancied himself a prophet and predicted that the second coming was expected very soon because of all the biblical signs pointing to it. I was fascinated and got excited about Christianity once again.

Gradually, I came to realize that Lindsay's work was largely fictional and not based on any credible scholarship. With the help of some significant people in my life, and with God's Spirit working in me, I began redirecting the focus of my faith. I found other compelling aspects to church and have managed to keep the sense of excitement. In fact, I still feel excited about the Christian faith today.

Expectation of an imminent and cataclysmic second coming of Christ was very present in the New Testament, including today's passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. This expectation often dominated the face of Christianity over the years, though seldom more than it does today. Sparked in the late 1960's by Hal Lindsay's book, expectation is fueled today by the *Left Behind* book series.

These fictional books are seen as literal and biblical writings of prophecy and prediction by a large group of Christians, primarily Evangelicals. For many Christians, every aspect of faith gets pushed back against the specter of the end of time. The central belief in their faith has become the image of an eschatological Jesus riding back into history to give the bad guys their due and to reward the faithful.

I've tried to anticipate some of your questions about this whole second coming thing that I have been calling *eschatology theology*.

- Why talk about the second coming now?
- What is it (generally and specifically)?
- What is its purpose?
- What so bad about focusing on eschatology theology now?
- What's the Word for us in all this?

### **Why am I talking about the second coming now, in Advent?**

The reason is pretty simple actually. Christ, whose coming is marked at Christmas, was seen by very early Christians, most of whom were Jewish, as the answer to the apocalyptic hopes of Israel. During Advent, we are focusing on the promises of Christmas, including today's promise of peace. While eschatology theology is not peaceful, it speaks in response to people's anxieties and desperation. In the desperate

search for peace, it offers the promise that God is in control of all things, despite the evil that is all around.

### **What is the second coming?**

Also known as *apocalyptic*, the rapture, the *parousia*, and the end of the age, it is a belief grounded in a very specific style of prophetic writing. Apocalyptic writing began in the land of Persia with the religion Zoroastrianism. It spread to Judaism during and after exile the Babylonian-Persian exile. It was later passed along to Christianity.

Apocalyptic was a written form of prophecy that is always very dramatic. There are exotic and dangerous creatures and, ultimately, the universal battle of good vs. evil marking the end of the world

Only a small part of Christian literature is apocalyptic. Traditionally, very little of the Christian message involved the second coming of Christ. Now, however, this has become a major point of Evangelical Christianity and, by extension, of the Christian message in the world today.

Apocalyptic prophecy has two main features. The first is personified cosmic dualism. There is a good god vs. an evil god and these gods both are personified. They have the characteristics and appearance of persons. In Persia, the two gods were equal in power. In the Jewish and Christian versions, Yahweh God is all-powerful and the eventual result of the conflict is clear from the outset.

The second feature is that the apocalyptic view of life in this present age, controlled by evil, is pretty pessimistic. The only hope lies in the destruction of this age and the coming of a new and good age. There is no way to bring this new creation into being except through intervention by God.

The word apocalypse means "vision" and these writings are often set in the form of a vision. Apocalyptic works are often ascribed to a famous person, such as with the Revelation to John and they often, though not always, involve a messiah figure. They generally refer to their time of writing with a message for that present age. These works are not a prediction of far future events, but an interpretation of the present and near future.

Apocalyptic literature tends to appear at times of great distress in which people feared the end of their world. In the twentieth century, interest in eschatology seems to have risen post World War II in response to the nuclear threat, communism, and a universal paradigm shift – the transition from modernism to post-modernism.

Jesus' teaching was quite different from the perspective of apocalyptic writing. Jesus taught that God's new creation was a present reality in the process of becoming in this age and in this world. He taught that God's "kingdom" was actually breaking into the present age in his own life. This in-breaking "kingdom" was brought on by the transformation of persons and was bringing about the transformation of societies and the entire world. Jesus' teaching offer a very different view of what's going on

The author of 2 Peter was not teaching an apocalyptic theology, but rather using a common understanding of an expected, but delayed apocalypse. This author's goal was to reassure Christians: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord

one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. “ So don’t worry about how long it is taking. You can count on God and on Christ. “The Lord is not slow about his promise, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

God’s purpose

### **What is the purpose of eschatology theology?**

The author of 2 Peter (not Simon Peter) writes, “in accordance with [Christ’s] promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace.” He restates what Paul and other New Testament writers point to as God’s purpose: the transformation of persons and societies not according to Roman law, Roman values, and Roman peace, but rather according to the values of God, the values taught by Jesus, the values of justice.

The purpose of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament is to reassure those suffering persecution and experiencing tribulation that the fledgling Christian church would survive. It was offering these followers hope and the assurance that God is in control. To Christian writers, it offered a context for focusing their message in bold relief – “Do it now or else!”

### **What’s so bad about focusing on eschatology theology now?**

Examples of apocalyptic theology such as the *Left Behind* series represent either fanciful fiction or poor theological scholarship. Beginning with poor scholarship does not lead to good endings a positive theology, or a healthy faith. In some extreme cases, believers actually encourage movement toward a literal Armageddon, the ultimate war between the armies of good and evil in the belief that this will expedite Jesus’ second coming.

Eschatology theology tends to foster an “us against them” focus on retribution: “God’s going to get you,” rather than a movement toward reconciliation. It tends to foster a denial of God’s intimate presence in the world, seeing God rather as waiting above clouds, keeping score, and getting ready to march on earth to annihilate all who are not genuine believers.

### **What is the Word for us in all this?**

Where does eschatology theology connect to our lives as individuals and our life as church? Contemporary biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan can help us make this transition. Crossan reminds us that Paul really expected Jesus’ to come back, end the age, and usher in the Kingdom of God very soon. As the years passed, it became clear that Paul was wrong, at least about the timing. Two generations after Paul, the author of 2 Peter was trying to reassure his readers that God would still keep that promise. Two thousand years later, many are still anticipating that coming and telling people it should be “any time now”. Like Paul, they appear to be mistaken.

Crossan offers some wisdom: “whatever details we give about the human future are *usually* wrong, but whatever details we give about the divine future are *always* wrong.” Having said that, there is much more to the lesson for us.

Jesus and Paul proclaimed a new age coming whose coming has already begun. Whatever was erroneous about the timing or the culmination of this new creation, the Christian faith proclaims loud and clear that the new age has begun. And there’s more. The new age has begun and its coming involves us – you and me. It is a joint effort of God and people.

Crosson challenges us with this question: “Do you believe the process of making the world a just place has begun and what are you doing about joining the program?” It is precisely here, that the Word meets us.

What are you and I doing, individually, to make the world a more just place, a place of hope and hospitality? How are we reaching out to form community with the untouchables and seeing the poor and being present to the broken among us? Those are big questions and I offer only two simple thoughts toward an answer. First, eschatology theology reminds us that the time is now to live the way we ought to live, the way we want to live deep down inside. Two, our part in bringing in the new age depends on how we utilize our own talents and life choices. Dream extravagantly and act positively!

What are we doing as a church to make the world a more just place? We are doing some pretty good things, actually. It’s a good beginning. But if all we do as a church is more of what we have already done, we will fail miserably.

Have you ever seen a discarded snakeskin? At one time, it was integral to the snake, to its movement, its protection, and even its very life. But there comes the time, when it needs to be sloughed off and left in someone’s garage.

The snakeskin is a good image for us as a church. For almost seven years, we have been church, learning about ourselves and becoming the congregation we are today. It’s time to move forward on our journey, letting go the experiences and the practices that no longer serve us well so that we can embrace our own future.

Eschatology theology reminds us as a body that the time is now to live the way we ought to live, the way we want to live deep down inside. What you want to be as church, what you are convinced God wants us to be, now is the time to be church that way. Our part in bringing in God’s new age depends on how you and I utilize our community’s talents. It’s also about the choices we make.

The decision we will make in two weeks, whether or not to buy the building at 7917 Main Street is extremely important to us as a congregation. Its important lies not in whether we buy that particular building. What is important is the choice we are making to move forward as a congregation. The building is symbolic of a new age in the life of Crossroads Church. What is important is that we choose to dream extravagantly and, in the Spirit, act positively. When we live this way, we will discover the truth that, what we have believed by faith, we will know by experience, that the reign of God is already living within us. “Thus says the Lord,” writes the prophet

Isaiah, "No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new thing, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?"

O God, who set before us the great hope  
That your Kingdom shall come on earth  
And taught us to pray for its coming,  
Give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning  
And to work for the perfect day  
When the whole world shall reflect your glory;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Percy Dearmer)