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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Left Behind: The Prequel

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Luke 21:25-26

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We know how the story ends. When we bring the Christmas trees out, when we put up all the decorations, candles, and wreaths, when we put up the Nativity, we know how the story ends. Even though we leave the baby Jesus out of the manger, we know he will be born. We are told we have to wait, but we know how the story ends.

All this “Apocalypse Now talk” from Luke’s Gospel doesn’t even faze us. We love the movie versions:

- 2012, the year the Mayan calendar ends and surely so ends the world as we know it, in theaters now.
- The movie “28 Days Later”, survivors aimlessly wandering in an empty London, evading those with a virus which induces zombie like symptoms.
- “Independence Day” when an alien invasion destroys New York City.
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day, the nuclear holocaust we all fear.

Not only movies, but don’t forget the popular book series: *Left Behind*, all 16 books. A group of teens are left behind when other friends and family members are taken to heaven by God in the “Rapture”.

I have had people walk out of church during my sermon once (well, maybe more than once), when I said I did not really believe that Jesus was coming again. I said I struggled with the whole Rapture notion, that there is to be a day when God is going to swoop down to earth, separating out the good from the bad, bringing only the chosen ones into Heaven. That’s when there were audible gasps from a few, and they told me later that they were praying for me, so that I would not be left behind. If they had stayed to hear the rest of the sermon, they would have heard my belief that I do not think we have to *wait* for God to come at a later time, an end time, a Rapture time, because I believe God is already here amongst us, alongside us, nudging us, encouraging us, calling us to be the love, the Christ-light, to others, here, now, with every person.

Why wait for the Rapture, when you can live justice now?

Why wait for the end time, when there is so much to be done in this time?

Luke’s Gospel was written and heard about 85 A.D., and it was heard first by Gentiles, non-Jews, outsiders. As non-Jews, they had come to hear about Jesus, and they wanted to hear more. They too had seen the Temple destroyed 15 years ago by the Romans. They had seen their Jewish neighbors attempt a revolt against the Romans, only to be crushed, only to have their beloved and beautiful Temple destroyed, and not only their Temple, but their beloved and beautiful Jerusalem. This attempted revolt by their Jewish neighbors was not a spur of the moment revolt. The revolt came out of decades of oppression, dating back to 167 BCE when the Greek Emperor Antiochus IV banned all foreign religions. For Jews that meant no circumcision and no sacrifices. For Jews that meant it was illegal to even own a copy of the Torah.<sup>1</sup> For Jews, they longed for a day when the oppression would end, when the world of the Greeks and then the Romans would crumble, when the faithful would rise up, and they could worship in peace, live in peace, and build their lives in peace and harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, p. 23.

So Luke borrows words from Mark's Jewish Gospel and Luke describes an end time, when the sun and the stars begin to fall. Rome was known as the Sun, and like their Jewish neighbors, these non-Jews were ready for Rome to fall.

They were ordinary people, living ordinary lives, and they too faced the same political and economic powers that were crushing them. They were mothers who were nursing their babies. They were farmers and tradesman trying to make a living and provide for their family. In the midst of a time of instability, they had heard in Jesus' words, seen in his actions, 'stability'. Fear not. Be not afraid. God is faithful. There will come a time.

"Despite anything and everything anybody and everybody can muster against us"<sup>2</sup>, God leads the future. Not politics, not economics, not the babble of would-be leaders wearing God-masks and claiming divine authority.<sup>3</sup>

With God there is no "Left Behind". Rather God leads us all into the future, not a predetermined or predestined future. There is no God out there with a chessboard, moving the pieces around, knocking some off, letting others survive to the next round. Rather, God enters into our lives with us.

God stands beside us as we make our choices. When we feel like we are in checkmate, God suffers the loss with us, and invites us and equips us with the courage to play again, to live into our futures, our individual and our corporate futures.

Lewis Carroll writes in his story *Alice in Wonderland*:

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar...

"I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present," Alice replied rather shyly, "at least, I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I may have changed several times since then."<sup>4</sup>

Maybe that's it...changes, change, comes so quickly to us in these times. Whatever happened to those transition' times, those in-between times when we had a chance to make major changes in our lives? "I think I'll look for a new job in the next year or so" has been replaced with "Sorry, you are out of a job today. Pack your things." "I think we might retire soon" is now "How do I not only work a few more years, but also welcome in my daughter's family because she lost her house?"

Transitions seem to come more quickly these days. That in-between time, that time in-between one time or place and another time or place, is when we have to live with things not being so clear or comfortable.

How do we live with the 'not familiar'?

How do we live with the 'not comfortable'?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.angelfire.com/journal2/laterallyluke/LLK212538ADV1.html>

<sup>3</sup> Feasting on the Word, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*.

How do we live with the ‘not yet’? It seems we have less and less time to say goodbye to the old before the new is already upon us. Thanksgiving is barely put away and Christmas is upon us. We are almost sick of Christmas because the stores have had sales and decorations up since September. In fact, do they ever put Christmas all the way away?

We know how the story ends, so why do we have to go through all the hoopla, all the candles, all the waiting? Why can’t it just be Christmas now?

The season is called Advent and Advent means “coming”. So, just what is coming? Christmas? Presents, shopping, stress, bills, disappointment, joy? Is Christmas coming or is the Christ coming? Rev. Robin Meyers, United Church of Christ pastor from Oklahoma City says in his book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, we even need to stop worshipping Christ and start following Jesus.

The Jews and Gentiles in Luke’s time were waiting for a Messiah: someone who would lead them from their pain into hope. You can bet that they were not just sitting around waiting. They were actively waiting. They were listening to all the voices, and sorting out the truths. They took their hope and matched it with expectation, matched it with watchfulness. They were trying to be alert, and when they saw what they saw in Jesus, they said, “Aha, here it is.”

Where are the places where we say, “Aha, there it is? I see Jesus.” Will we see Jesus, will we follow Jesus, this Advent?

We only have a little over four weeks to do this Advent living, to live with expectation and alertness. We only have a little over four weeks to live the usual unusually well. In the everyday events of life, in the everyday interactions with people, in the attitudes that color our judgments and motivations, we can take these next four weeks and embrace the changes and the challenges. We can take these next four weeks, and although we know how the story ends, we can live with all the mystery and all the magic anyway. We can wait for the moment of the birth of a child, knowing that that birth is ordinary and extraordinary, for it is the revelation of God.

Friends, Advent living faces the future, not with doom and gloom, but with expectancy and possibility. Advent living is not about the fear of the stranger but the welcome of all. Advent living is not about waiting for the Rapture, but it is about living in the already while we long for the “not yet”.

“Jesus does not intend for us to predict when he will return. Rather, Jesus is urging us to live as if his return were just around the corner. There is no time to nod off in a waiting room. Rather, we are to be more like a waiter who is continually busy in serving others and so has no time to sit down and count the tips.”<sup>5</sup>

Christmas is coming. So is the Christ. So also is the opportunity to follow Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Feasting on the Word, p. 25, Martin Copenhaver.

