



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The Rapture
Advent 1, Year A
Sunday, December 1, 2019
The Rev. Amber Carswell

I told my friend Misti that I had found a youth group — an Assemblies of God youth group and that it was just like the church camp we went to last summer. People were excited about God. The music was like a rock concert. I wasn't sure about this hand-raising-while-singing thing in light of all these biblical injunctions against worship that draws attention to yourself and making long, loud prayers in public, but beggars can't be choosers, and I was the new kid in a new school, 16 years old, and a novice at church-going. I was a beggar for friends, and love, and meaning.

One of the many strange thing folks said at this church was this phrase — “when Jesus comes back.” “Well, unless Jesus comes back, I'll see you at Culver's for frozen yogurt.” “We'll have church next week, unless Jesus comes first.” I laughed initially, but they said it with a straight face. This all was news to me.

The Rapture, they called it. Maybe you've heard of it. The way they told it, Jesus was coming back. Really soon. So you had to be ready all the time. Nobody could predict, but the pastor received a word from God and confided it to me. 2014, he said sagely; so looks like none of us made it. Feeding this expectation to an already anxiety-driven teenager was like throwing gas on a live flame. Like what if Jesus came back when I was playing video games? Would he understand I needed a break from spreading the Gospel? What if he came back when I was with my boyfriend? I was sure no explanation would be good enough to keep me from hell and eternal fiery torment. I started having vivid nightmares about going there and living in expectation of the Rapture. A couple of hucksters made millions of dollars off of that same anxiety and fear I experienced as a teenager by writing a whole series of books on being left behind. (What was left behind in those books was actually any shred of responsible theology.)¹

The Rapture. I heard about it another way years later from NT Wright, a theologian: one day, you'll look outside, and you'll see all these folks rising up into the air, disappearing out of sight into the clouds, and you'll say to yourself — well, I'll be damned.

The Rapture as you might have popularly understood it through the lens sold by these religious profiteers dispensing a rotten theology can be summed up pretty handily: the world is bad, one day soon God will come and disappear the ones who are “Real True Christians” off to a heavenly paradise, and everyone else will be left to suffer eternal torment as the bad world ends in various disasters.

Today's gospel is one of a handful of passages from the Bible used to prop up this shifty 19th-century innovation of popular Christianity. Two will be working in a field, one will be taken and the other left. Two will be grinding at the mill, one taken will be taken and the other left.

But even a rudimentary glance at what Jesus says here contradicts these images of the Raptuer. What does Jesus say immediately preceding the description of those taken and left? That it will be like the days of Noah, where a flood came and swept people away. Who are the ones to be taken? The ones who get wiped out by the flood, the evil in the world, not the righteous. The righteous remain. This is NT Wright again,

¹ I have read Fred Clark's dissection of the Left Behind series for years with great admiration: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/>

more seriously: “It should be noted that being “taken” in this context means being taken in *judgment*. There is no hint here of a “rapture,” a sudden “supernatural” event that would remove individuals from *terra firma*. . . . It is a matter, rather, of secret police coming in the night, or of enemies sweeping through a village or city and seizing all they can.”²

Death is coming, and Jesus views this as judgment. The *desired* state, as Wright points out, is actually to be “left behind,” to remain. When we hear Jesus’ story, of course the Passover should come to mind, the central event of the Jewish imagination — those who are sealed will be passed over by death. And in Jesus’ time, the people hearing this originally were living in fear under Roman occupation and would find the image of a government force and taking those you love a familiar one. Actually, it’s a familiar image for us now.

There are no stories in the Bible of God whisking away his beloved people to a supernatural afterlife where they can be happy forever. There is, though, a story in the Bible that gets told over and over, in many ways. Here’s how the story goes: God loves the world, the actual world, and entrusts it to certain people. Humans can’t handle it — violence and degradation follows us. God acts to redeem the good land through a group of people, or a family. Who came to mind for you? Abraham, Noah, Israel, Moses, Joshua — you know the stories. And as the story develops, God’s promise given about a specific land flowing with milk and honey expands to a promise about the redemption of the entire cosmos.

And the people to which this promise was given, through whom God intended to work out this redemption — the people change, too. A flood of violence will come, a doom of our own making visits us, but a holy remnant survives. Eventually that remnant, the ones with whom this promise rests, narrows, from a nation to a family to a kingly line, until finally, the focus becomes intent on one person: a Messiah.

This familiar story has a shocking twist: it would be that this one righteous remnant would not be passed over, would not rise above the flood of violence in the safety of an ark, would not be taken up by fiery chariots or spared our devouring human wrath — he would be the willing victim of perfect innocence who could finally stop returning violence for violence. The other cheek would be actually be turned unto death, and it would break the story that has defined us throughout our existence.

In Advent, we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory. It is not really waiting for his birth; there is a givenness to that truth. We’re also not waiting to be whisked away; we still have these old stories in our hearts no matter the darkness to which our world still descends. Jesus says that this coming again is something that can be missed if you’re not looking; like when you wake up and realize that at some point, your truck has been rummaged through. Two were walking down the street, and one was occupied re-playing the various grievances of the day and one saw Christ. Some folks sat at church, one caught up on texts, another made a grocery list, and one, after the dark season of absence and waiting, saw Christ.

² N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* [London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 366)