

“Understanding the Rapture”

Liturgical Date: Proper 27 A

Primary Texts: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, is the Epistle Lesson from 1 Thessalonians 4. The title of the sermon is, “Understanding the Rapture”.

Are you familiar with the doctrine of the “rapture”? Perhaps you are not. If you pretty much only listen to Lutheran sermons and get your theological information from Lutheran sources, we don’t generally use this word (and many other denominations don’t either). The word does not appear in most English translations of the Bible. However, I would guess that a good many of you have heard of it. This because it holds a prominent place in American Christianity: especially among many Baptists, Pentecostals, and non-denominational Christians. It is familiar to many people who are not even that religious. Best-selling books have promoted it, such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey in the 1970s. And a series of books that later spawned movies called *Left Behind* have sold near 100 million copies since the first one appeared in the late 1990s. The rapture is tied into the End Times, which is our focus at this point of the Church Year, and the end of the world is the theme of many Christian-based movies.

So, what is this teaching about? There are several theories to the actual timeline and events that will happen at the end the world when Jesus returns. One of these views is called Dispensational Premillennialism. It is actually the most complicated of the End Times views and involves many different events and multiple returns of Jesus as opposed to only one. If you have had people telling you that the current war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza means that Jesus is

coming back soon, there is a good chance they subscribe to this view. Dissecting the whole theology of Dispensational Premillennialism is too broad of a topic to cover in this one sermon, but an important feature of this view is what is commonly called the “rapture”.

This teaching is that before a Great Tribulation period of seven years, Jesus will secretly return and take those dead and living that have truly believed in Him to heaven. The idea is that Christians will literally just disappear and be taken to heaven by Jesus. Books and movies depict a chaotic scene as cars and airplanes are suddenly unmanned and those remaining in the world try to figure out what happened to all these people. The people left behind are not aware that Jesus has taken His people away, as this rapture has been “secret”. Those that ascribe to this view see the Great Tribulation as an incredibly dark time when the seals, trumpets, and vials that you read about in Revelation take place and massive amounts of people die under a satanically controlled world. But if you are true believer in Jesus, you get to miss all of that because you are in heaven with Jesus. As the world descends until untold horrors, you are safe up in heaven with the Lord.

This view is very common, if not the dominant view, among Protestants in America. Much of the appeal of this view is obvious, isn't it? Because we read about the judgments that befall a sinful world in the Book of Revelation and they can be downright scary. But what if you could miss out on that? It is kind of like the old Star Trek show where when he was in danger Captain Kirk could say, “*Beam me up Scotty*”, and be whisked away from danger. That would be great wouldn't it? All the persecution and bad stuff happening, I get to miss that.

But at this point, we must ask is this actually taught in the Bible? Is this the best way to interpret the events of the End Times? Well, as you might have guessed since I said Lutherans don't generally even use the word “rapture” and you likely wouldn't be familiar with all of this is you are listening to and reading

Lutheran teaching, the answer is no. In fact, you won't find any teachings about this until fairly recently in the history of Christianity.

There are several people who began to teach this idea in the early 1800s. Very prominent among them was an Englishman named John Nelson Darby. The idea gained popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The *Scofield Reference Bible*, one of the first Bibles to contain a large number of notes in addition to the Biblical text (think Study Bible) was published in 1909 and was heavily promoting this idea. A good saying when studying theology is, "*If it's new, it's not true.*" (Lutherans like that, right?). If for 18 centuries of Christian History no one taught something, then there is a good chance that whatever they are teaching is not correct. Think of all the great minds in the Early Church like Ambrose and Augustine and in the Reformation like Calvin and Luther, and none of them read the Scripture and said, "hey I think that this teaches that Jesus will secretly return and whisk believers away from trouble before He comes back and everyone sees Jesus." We must understand that this idea of a rapture before a seven-year tribulation period has no theological writings until about 200 years ago. In the scheme of things, it is recent doctrine with 1800 years of theological tradition not supporting it.

So where do the supporters of this view go in the Bible to promote this view? Again, this sermon is not meant to be an exhaustive review of every text they will use, but one of the places they will go (perhaps the strongest text they have) is what we heard in our Epistle Lesson from 1 Thessalonians. This is because it speaks of the dead rising and those Christians living being brought up to be with Jesus. Verse 17, "*Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*" Specifically, the Greek word translated as "caught up" in our English Bibles is *harpazo*. In the Latin vulgate it *raptus*, and this is where the English term "rapture" comes from.

So, it is not even in the original Greek, but in the Latin translation that the Roman Church used for centuries.

The problem is that this text and others they like to point to such as “*one is working in the fields and is taken and another is left*” only seem to support such a secret return of Christ if that doctrine has already been taught to you. Because for 1800 years no one thought it did. What these texts have always been interpreted to mean is that they are referring to the return of Christ, which only happens one time (not 3 times as the DP teach) and as meaning that as Jesus taught His return will catch many people by surprise. The Christian Church has always taught that the return of Christ is visible, not secret-until this rapture teaching came along.

Even our text for today contains elements that refute this secret rapture idea. If you back up just one verse to verse 16 it says, “*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and the with the trumpet of God.*” A shout from the Archangel Michael and a blasting trumpet don’t seem to support a secret vanishing of Christians from the earth!

Now if this doctrine is not historic to the Christian Church, not taught by Lutherans nor many others, and doesn’t have strong support in the Bible, is it heretical? Remember that heresy is a very serious matter as it means that if someone ascribes to it, they are outside of the Christian faith. No, Dispensational Premillennialism and this doctrine of a secret rapture are not heretical. It is not correct but believing it does not put one outside of the orthodox Christian faith. I have known, and perhaps you have too, many fine Christian people who believe this and they will be in heaven with us. One time a minister who believed in this secret rapture was debating another minister who did not believe in it. The minister who believed in the secret rapture asked his minister friend, “What if you are wrong and I am right, and Jesus will secretly take us away?” His friend answered, “Well, then I will apologize to you on the way up, brother!” The point

is, that if they had faith in Jesus, they would both end up in heaven with Him, despite their different views on the End Times.

None of this is to say that this doctrine is not important. We want to have our theology correct and based on the clear teachings of the Bible. Furthermore, the danger in this rapture doctrine is that it provides a false sense of security. The Bible clearly teaches that before Jesus returns, things will get worse in the world- they will get very bad for people, especially Christians. I don't relish being the bearer of bad news this morning, but if we are living on earth during those times we need to be prepared and strong in our faith to make it through those persecutions and judgments. There is no escape hatch before Jesus returns. We will be here until that Day of Judgment when our Lord returns. We eagerly await that glorious day, but we must be prepared for challenging times before Jesus' Second Coming.

You may have noticed that when I have spoken of the "rapture" this morning I have often said "secret rapture". That is because there is distinction. Do we Lutherans believe in a "rapture"? In a sense, yes. We certainly believe that Jesus will return, and we will be taken with Him to heaven to live eternally. Our text from 1 Thessalonians clearly stated that. We will be "caught up", or if you want to use the Latin we will experience "raptus". But we reject the idea of a "secret rapture" where Jesus makes a type of "pre-Second coming" that only Christians know about and experience. We believe, as the true Christian Church has always taught, that Jesus will return one time. It will be a visible return that all will be aware of. It will come at a time not known to us; thus, we must be like the wise virgins in the parable recorded in St. Matthew 25. Our lamps must be filled, we must have faith indwelling us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and then we are ready. When Jesus returns, all the living and the dead will be judged and believers will enjoy eternal fellowship and blessing with Jesus in heaven.

I have focused a good bit this morning on what 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is *not* telling us. But before the sermon closes, I want you to know what the text *is* telling us. If we understand this text is not teaching some secret return of Jesus that no one “discovered” for 1800 years, then we must ask what is the point of the text, then? What we should take away from this text is that Jesus is surely coming back, and that God’s Word here is very encouraging to us.

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Apostle Paul, is giving the believers in Thessalonica-and us-a good Word. When he speaks of those who have “fallen asleep” several times in the text, he is referring to those who have died knowing Jesus Christ. Sleep is often used to describe death in the Bible. It is a bit of a softer way to put it, much like we might say today “so and so is no longer with us” or “has passed” rather than “they are dead.” The assurance given here is that we may grieve those who have died, but if they were in Christ, we do not grieve as those without hope. Those who have physically died are cared for by the Lord. Everyone who believes in Jesus, that He died and rose for them will be with Him. It is long-standing tradition that this text is often read or referenced at funerals.

Verse 15 told us that, *“that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.”* What this means is that they are with Jesus now. They have essentially got to heaven before us, but our Christian loved ones are cared for by the Lord and await us joining them. A wonderful thing to think about when we are grieving. And who is going to get us to them? Jesus Himself. We may die before Jesus returns and join them. However, if we are alive when Jesus returns, we have no need to fear. Because the angels and Archangel, and even Jesus Himself will make sure we get to where we are supposed to be. This current world is out temporary home, but heaven is our eternal destination.

At the very end of the text, we heard a wonderful promise that is really the bottom line here, “*And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*” Isn’t that great? Isn’t that comforting? No complicated timetables are needed. When we have Jesus, we will always be with Him. Because He is always with us. Whether we live here or in heaven, whether we physically die before Jesus returns or are here when He does. We shall always be with the Lord. “*Therefore comfort one another with these words.*” (v18)

The peace of God, which passes all understand, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.