

November 11, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

## Apocalypse: Is the End Near?

Matthew 24:36-44; Matthew 25:1-13

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We come this morning to the end of our series of sermons in which we have been looking at various questions that people both outside the church and inside the church have been asking about God, faith, and religion. We've thought together about, God, the Bible, Jesus, the Church, redemption and predestination,

Today the final word that we are going to look at in this particular series is the word *apocalypse*, and the questions that are associated with the word apocalypse a word which we generally use to refer to something that happens at the end of time, and which raises the concern as to whether we know, or can know, when that end is, and whether or not it's coming soon. Let's think together then about the word apocalypse.

Right off the bat, I need to say that the original definition of the word has nothing to do with the end of time! Literally, it means 'a revelation,' or 'a vision,' or 'an epiphany.' That is, something has now come before our eyes that we see more clearly than we've ever seen before. We perhaps couldn't see it before but now we see it: we've had a 'vision' or 'revelation.' That's what the word means – though of course in common usage, the word apocalypse no longer means that – at least not at first glance. The common usage has changed the word, so that now is a word which we all understand as having to do with the end of time, with events that will happen at the end of time: cataclysmic events, devastating events, consuming events that will bring everything to the end . . . such a time will be 'apocalyptic': of huge proportions, of enormous, devastating proportions, and will bring time, or at least some part of time, to an end.

This change of the meaning of apocalypse from any vision, any revelation to a devastating revelation of the end of time, has occurred because of one book that is in the Bible – at the end of the Bible, the book that we call the Revelation of St. John, which contains within it some devastating images of the end of time. The 'Revelation of St. John' is the full title of the book. In the original Greek, that title is 'Apokalupsis Ioannou.' That's its title. In Greek, the word 'apocalypse' used here, simply means 'revelation': so, the Revelation of St. John, referring to the whole book, the whole revelation, not just the devastating part of it. But because

the devastating imagery in the book of the Revelation of St. John is so powerful the word took on this new understanding, with 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' having to do primarily with the devastating events that will occur, especially at the end of time. These events are portrayed as awful, terrible . . . even, 'apocalyptic.'

Now, of course, *not all* of the Bible is concerned with the end of time, although *all* of the Bible *is* concerned with apocalypse, the 'ongoing revelation of God' to people like you and me. In fact, some of the Biblical revelation seems to have no concern at all with the end of time, or with devastating events, but with getting in with life here and now! But what *can* be said about the Bible, and indeed can be said about just about all of the Bible, is that God's people have always had a concern for the future -- they've always dreamt of a day in the future, somewhere in the future, when evil would be no more, when evil would be destroyed, and when justice would fill this earth; a time when God would clearly be 'revealed' as God, when what is all now murky and mysterious shall become clear: faith will turn into sight. That is, in this future, we shall be given an 'apocalyptic vision,' in its true sense, of who God really is, and of the justice and peace, the true worship and adoration of God, who now can be clearly seen.

- Think, for example, of the promise to Abraham at the beginning of the Bible (Genesis 12:1-3): "Through you *shall* all of the peoples of the earth be blessed." In other words, there will come a day when your descendants will bless the earth. A wonderful day will come. This is a hope for the future.
- Or, think of the vision of Isaiah (11:6-9) which we sometimes read at Christmas time. The imagery of the wolf lying down with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. And then there is this image of a child sitting at the hole of an asp (a poisonous snake), something that can sting or bite or devour, but the child is safe. "This will be the day that the earth is filled with knowledge and the glory of God," says Isaiah, "As the waters cover the sea."

What a marvelous hope for the future is raised here! And that hope continues throughout the pages of Scripture. Indeed, this hope, this hope-filled approach to the future, is something that is vital to those who believe in the God of the Bible. Let me put it this way: while there may be a short-term purpose for evil in this world, unless God ends evil at some point in time, God isn't God! Or to put it another way: it's ok for God to be 'hidden' or 'inactive' for a short time, but there must come a time when God is revealed to be God; when God has to 'come out of hiding' and prove himself. We can live with the mystery for a while, but this future day, this day we hope for, must surely come, or we are all lost! And that's the hope which fills all the pages of Scripture: the day-to-come when God would be revealed to be God.

Many Jews expected this day to come *in the days of King David*, Israel's greatest king a thousand years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom of

Israel expanded, grew, was wonderful, marvelous, David was a great king but it didn't come then. David, sinner like the rest of us, let them down.

And then many others thought it would come *when the temple was rebuilt*. It had been destroyed around six hundred years before Christ came: terrible days in the life of Israel, when the people of Israel taken off into exile. And then hope arises again slowly: the exile ends; the people return to Jerusalem, and the temple is rebuilt. With the temple being rebuilt, they were sure God's glory (God's apocalypse) would be manifest to one and all. But, sadly, the hope didn't last; it wasn't long until life went back to 'normal.' Hope rising and then hope dashed.

And then this hope was tied in with *the coming of the Messiah* himself, a descendant of King David, who would sort out all the wrongs in the world and would make them right. He would destroy evil with the power of his word. Furthermore, many people believed that Jesus was that Messiah and that he would herald this 'Messianic Age' as it came to be called: the new age, a wonderful age, when peace and justice would prevail.

BUT... Jesus *has come*, and, yes, we are among those who believe he is the Messiah; but this 'new age' *hasn't come* yet, has it? Indeed, if I ask some of my Jewish friends why they don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the main reason that I have received is linked to this very issue: *when the Messiah comes, the Messianic Age is supposed to come as well, and it doesn't seem to have come. The world doesn't seem to have changed that much in the past two thousand years. Peace has not come. God's people are not seen to be victorious and injustice still reigns over righteousness.*

And if this is a problem for Jews today, as it is for many of them who want to take Jesus seriously, yet who cannot believe that he is Messiah, it also needs to be said that it was also a problem for those who were looking at Jesus, wanting desperately to believe in him as the Messiah, back two thousand years ago when he lived here on earth. Some of Jesus' followers actually asked this question. John the Baptist was perplexed about Jesus (Luke 7:18ff; 3:16-17), as if to say: *How come if Jesus is the Messiah, how come that life is still a struggle? How come that evil still abounds? How come injustice prevails? Doesn't God have a plan to restore paradise? To bring us back into the garden of Eden? Doesn't God have a plan for justice to come on the earth and evil and illness and unfairness and all those horrible things to be done away with? Is it ever going to happen? Where's his winnowing fork?! Where's his fire or passion?*

Of course, as in the past from time to time, *hopes still run high that this might happen*. With Jesus or without Jesus, the hopes run high that a day will come when the earth will be truly blessed and our lives will be blessed with it. One of those periods of time was not long ago.

Historians will point out that at the end of the 1800's there was an enormous sense of hope that the 1900's would be *the* century in which the knowledge of God would fill the earth, and justice and health and peace would prevail. With

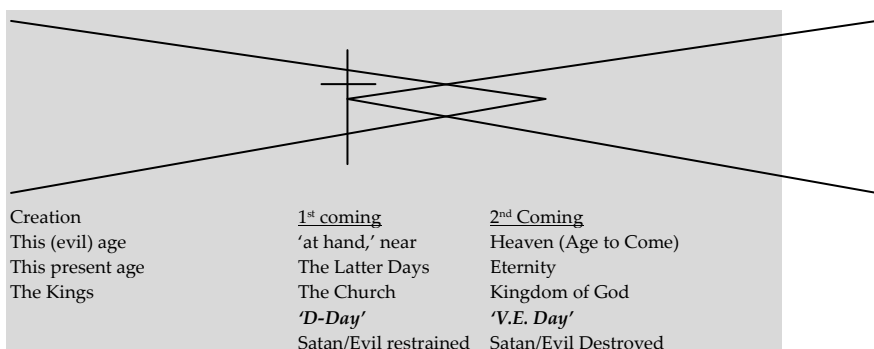
the rise of science, with the rise of technology, with the rise of our own nation, it seemed as if everything was getting better and better day by day . . . until, that is, 1914 and World War I!! And then, God forbid, World War II, and the devastation that took place there! Those dreams came crashing down and people discovered, further in the twentieth century, that technology and science and knowledge can be used *as much for evil as for good*, and that the power of evil to use any instrument for its purpose is as alive and well today as ever it was. Indeed, the last century was the most devastating century in all of human history. Stalin and Hitler; Pol Pot and Saddam; Rwanda and Bosnia and Afghanistan. And you move into our own century: Terrorism and the Twin Towers. And corruption and greed in our own nation –Enron, Tyco and the whole sub-prime mortgage fiasco. Lives crippled by obvious terrorism and by economic greed. Hundreds, thousands, millions of lives. With all of this, we’ve seen again how fragile our world is. As the Scriptures say, “No one is righteous. No, not one.”

Lasting peace and justice seem to be as far off as ever they were. Which was something those first followers of Jesus knew well, and since they were trying to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, it truly bothered them! But it wasn’t as if Jesus was oblivious to the problem, the disconnect. Indeed, Jesus taught his disciples about this very issue, though some really couldn’t ‘hear his message’ because they were so involved in expecting something different.

- They were expecting an immediate solution to their problems.
- Jesus taught them that *God’s plan* of renewal and restoration had not been shelved or forgotten.
- Jesus taught those who were listening that *God’s passion* for healing the earth and for healing relationships and bringing in the Messianic Age had not been shelved or forgotten. But that the time would still come, in the future – but it would come, when God would be seen to be God, revealed as God. There would be an *apokalypsis* in its true sense. A revelation of who God was and who God is. This had not been shelved and it had not been forgotten.

The key to Jesus’ understanding of this Messianic Age, though, was this. Instead of this being a one-phase operation, it was a two-phase operation. Not a ‘one-phase coming’ but a ‘two-phase coming,’ in which God’s plan and purpose for the destruction of evil would take place.

This is where I need to ask you to take out your insert, your handout for today’s sermon and have a look at the little diagram that you find there of two V-shaped pieces put together with the ends that are overlapping.



What Jesus taught and what the early Christians believed, including the Apostle Paul writing so much of our New Testament, was, in fact, that

- the age of the Messiah, the Messianic Age, *began when Jesus came to earth*, when he lived and he died and when he rose again.
- But it would not be completed, it would not be seen in all its fullness, the full revelation would not come until he returns again.

The best way that I've ever found to think about this in human terms, in order to show that this is not just an imaginary way of thinking about things, but is how so much change in the world actually takes place, is to look back in fact to World War II, and to think of two critical days in the victory of the allies in WWII. Those two days are D-Day and VE (Victory in Europe) Day, eleven months apart.

Think about D-Day and the invasion of Normandy, as the first coming, as it were. It was a day of great violence, of great destruction, a day of great pain, but it was absolutely critical that the allies faced that day, and passed through that day, if the war was to be won. From our perspective, we know that that was the day when the victory became possible, and even inevitable. To begin with though, on the day itself, it might have seemed to many as if all was lost, a scene of terrible, apocalyptic, devastation. Yet, with that day, the outcome of the war was never in doubt. From that day on, *the last days* of the war had begun. The *latter days* of the war had begun. The *beginning of the end* was in sight. BUT the end itself was not yet.

Indeed, from another perspective, it seemed as if the battle was even more violent following D-Day than it had been before that. The enemy was willing to fight 'to the death' from that point on, with a grim determination which was stronger than ever. But, once again, from our perspective, we know that it was a losing battle for them. D-Day changed the course of the war, and the outcome was now inevitable.

Keep in mind, however, *that no one knew how far away the end, VE-Day, would be*. While a few people might have spent some time guessing, that wasn't the main issue; indeed to make it the main issue would have been to create a significant and demoralizing distraction. Rather, *the* issue was to keep on fighting harder

than ever, until the battle was finally done, and the victory was finally won . . . not in one stage but in two.

Or, let's play with this image, again for a moment, especially in its relationship to the timing of the ultimate victory: the timing between D-Day and VE Day. Think of those troops landing on the beaches of Normandy and they now have to scale not just the cliffs, but a huge range of mountains. From where they are on the beach (and this is not geographically correct but it's an image), from where they are on the beach, they can see the final mountain up ahead of them but between them and the final mountain, there is a range of mountains – like our view from the Appalachian foothills. Whenever you're at some foothills, it seems as if the mountains in the distance are not distant at all. ^^^^^^The mountains pile up one on top of each other and when you stand at the foothills you completely lose a sense of perspective as to how far away the big mountains actually are. All of us know is this. You cannot see with human eyes how far away they are – but it *seems as if* they are really close, when, in fact, they are further away than you think. All you really know for sure is this: that one thing leads to another: the foothills lead to the mountains, to the ultimate goal.

Theologians call this view, in its relationship to time, in relationship to seeing events away in the future as if they were close or imminent, as 'prophetic fore-shortening.' AND this is what Jesus wanted to reveal to his friends who were wondering with all their hearts whether they had any reason to hope that Jesus really was the Messiah and that evil would be destroyed and justice would prevail.

He didn't want to teach them the exact time of the end, when it would be. Indeed repeatedly, and that's what we read in those two sections of Matthew's gospel (24:36,44, 50; 25:13), repeatedly, at least four times, Jesus says, "**I don't know when the end is coming.**" *Four times he repeats it, and what's the only conclusion we can draw from that?* Well, if the Son of God doesn't know when the end is coming, who are we to know when the end is coming? And why should we even bother with when the end is coming if the Son of God did not know? It is as if Jesus is saying to his disciples repeatedly, "*Don't spend a moment's time, don't spend a moment's time trying to figure it out. Just fight with me until the end because the end is coming and the end is secure.*"

One of the most stunning things about the Christian church in the last hundred years in particular, though it certainly happened before that as well, but in the last hundred years in particular, is the amount of time and energy spent on trying to figure out *the details of the end*: talk about 'the rapture,' talk about 'the millennium.'

For example, the passages of Scripture which speak about what is called 'the rapture,' or the passages that speak about the millennium are very few, just a handful of verses on which whole theologies have been written (see below).

And possible interpretations of those few passages are numerous! I have in the insert three different views of the millennium each of which are possible from Scripture. It's quite amazing, each of those verses is open

to multiple interpretations. For example, with the millennium the most prevalent view is what's call the Pre-Millennial view. But there is also the Post-Millennial view and the A-Millennial view (which tends to have been the Presbyterian view through the years). Three different vies! But, you need to know, that I happen to know which is Jesus' millennial view. I don't know if any of you know which is Jesus' view of the millennium? In fact, it is neither Pre-, Post- or A-! The right answer is . . . that it is the Pan-Millennial view! Truly . . . the Pan-Millennial view says, "It will all pan out in the end."

And, from our passages of Scripture that is ALL Jesus wants his disciples to know! That is the clearest thing in the midst of the all of the symbolism associated with 'the end.' "You don't know," says Jesus! "Even I don't know! SO, you don't need to know." All we need to know is that D-Day has come. Jesus invaded the earth two thousand years ago. He lived. He suffered. He died. He went through hell, like D-Day for you and me, to lead us back to God *and to bring in the end of the age*, to initiate **the latter-days**, the beginning of the end; days which began *then* and which continue *now*.

The 'apocalypse' is not just about the very last few days of the world, but about the days (in the diamond in the diagram) days between the first coming and the second, between the foothills and the highest mountain, between D-Day and VE- Day. This is where we live, and live with the strong hope and confidence that one day, Jesus will finish the job he has started.

That's his pledge. That's his promise. Between now and then, you and I are caught in the middle and we will face some bright days which will look *more like heaven than hell*. But we will also face some dark days which will look *more like hell than heaven*, days that will seem to be apocalyptic.

- And in the midst of those, when it looks as if hell is going to win, Jesus says, "*Don't believe it for a moment. I will win. The victory is secure. It was secure from the moment I first came; and I will finish the job.*"
- In the midst of this mix between heaven and hell, Jesus says to us, "*You are my soldiers. You are my team. Fight the fight with all your might, with all your heart, with all your strength. Be my foot soldiers from now until the end. You don't know when the end is coming. Live as if it's tomorrow and fight to win the victory with me.*"

"About that day and hour," says Jesus, "no one knows neither the angels of heaven nor the Son but only the Father. Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Therefore, you must also be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." And what an apocalypse that will be! But, be fully assured in the meantime: he is coming, and he will finish the job, and he calls on us to be on his side, to carry out his work, between now and then.

#### **KEY MILLENNIAL TEXTS AND VIEWS**

**Revelation 20:1-6** (mentions the millennium)

1.Then I saw an *angel* coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the *bottomless pit* and a *great chain*. 2He seized the *dragon, that ancient serpent*, who is the

Devil and Satan, and bound him *for a thousand years*, 3and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out *for a little while*. 4 Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw *the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years*. 5(The rest of the dead did not come to life until *the thousand years* were ended.) This is the first resurrection.

**Matthew 24:40-41** [read in the context of 24:36-44] (mentions > left behind== the rapture)

**36 But about that day and hour no one knows**, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. **40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meat together; one will be taken and one will be left.** 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Daniel 12:1-3 (mentions tribulation)

12> **At that time** Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be *a time of anguish*, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.* 3Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

## **2 Peter 3: 8-10**

8 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*. 9The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is *patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance*. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

## **1. Post-Millennial** NOW B 1000 years is figurative

Bringing in a golden age

A long period of righteousness and peace; world eventually Christianized = OT Latter days see Is.9:11; Ps 22:27

= Parables= Aleaven@Matt 13:33; Christ's eventual return

## **2. A-Millennial** NOW B 1000 years is figurative

The present reign of Christ through the Church, or the reign of the saints in the church triumphant; Ends with Christ's sudden return

## **3. Pre-Millennial** FUTURE B literal 1000 years: 2 Phase Return

a. The Rapture (Matt.24:21, Dan.12:1)

Christ comes for the church, his bride, Either pre-tribulation  
Or post-tribulation

b. The Revelation

Subdues the anti-christ, Brings in a 1000 year reign of peace  
1000 years ends with brief, fierce satanic rebellion, and ultimate resurrection.