**Sermon for November 12, 2023 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “Oh, Rapture!”**

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

Well…it had to get said sooner or later. I have waited my whole preaching career to talk about *this* text, to cross *these* complex and confusing bridges. I love bridges; invariably designed to connect places, but the bridge labeled Rapture is almost always a bridge that divides, which is sad, since this entire passage was intended to comfort people, to bring people of faith together. But sin and arrogance and anxiety have done their work over the centuries, and a discussion about these words is usually to be avoided if at all possible.

It is worth noting that even though I just *said* centuries, this notion of the Rapture had not gotten very much airtime at all until the 1830’s, so not even two full centuries of debate yet, but the debate has been vigorous. It is one of the primary dividing points among Protestant Christians, and one of the frequent mocking points among our detractors. And even though United Methodists are not overly enthused about the Rapture, we need to know the thinking, the arguments, the doctrinal positions that can weaken and even sever friendships and marriages and families and, of course, can destroy congregations, as well.

The Rapture is, I would say, a specialized subject within the faith, and every specialized subject has its own unique vocabulary. So, let’s lay a little groundwork here, and briefly *define* the terms that we cannot leave aside if we want to discuss this subject intelligently. The first of these terms is the big umbrella under which this all gets argued out: **eschatology**. This is the *study* – you knew that, right, just like biology is the study of life and cosmology is the study of stars and moons and planets, the cosmos – similarly, eschatology is the study of *eschaton –* the end times, as we say. It is accurate but still unnerving to know that there is a nationwide chain of adult care facilities named ESCHATON; I wish I were kidding. The end times, which figure more prominently for some Christian imaginations than others, include all the other terms we need to define this morning.

The first of these, I suppose, is the **Judgment Day**, the proposed deadline for humanity to get it’s act together. This concept is plenty confusing: does it happen at the end of recorded history, for all humans who have ever lived? Does it happen individually, either right after our bodily death or sometime way down the road? Does it even happen at all? *All of these possibilities* have Scriptural support, and we don’t all take holy writ with the same authority, so let the squabbling begin! And while there is not sustantial agreement about the Judgement Day, there is pretty strong consensus that it will happen after a promised **millennium** of peace and concord. This one should be easy, right, a millennium is a thousand years. Simple! But, knowing that the Scriptures are sometimes *factual* with their numbers, and sometimes *symbolic*, the ice beneath us gets slipperier. I think the Bible basically agrees with itself that a ‘time of peacefulness’ will precede the Judgement, but the actual length of that period is widely contested. Add to this that a seven-year period of horrible, character-building trauma known as **The Tribulation** is forecast to be part of life on Earth, either before the millennium, or after it, or possibly right at the halfway point. Isn’t Bible study fun?

We are nearly there…tied into all of this is the promise of **the second coming of Christ.** Here, the various authors of Scripture are basically no help at all; is the return of the Lord a global, public event, or a private, individualized event? Is it separate from the Judgement Day, or must it precede it? And, most confusing of all, does it come before or after this loosely-described millennium? And all of this brings us finally to today’s idea, **The Rapture**, which holds that Christians, both dead and alive, will be literally snatched up, out of harms way, and deposited into Heaven, to be with God and one another forever. Lovely...but since this idea is only described in this one, single place, confusion abounds here, too. Is it designed as a reward for those who survive the Tribulation? Is it designed to scoop up all the Christians before that great suffering even begins? You can see why we haven’t completely untangled these ideas, even after nearly three millennia to do so.

Nevertheless…allow me another pass with the de-tangling brush, if you will. The theological hair that we are combing out is **The Rapture**, just that idea. And I will impose a common matrix upon the discussion – let me share with you, as I understand it, the *What, When, Who, Where, and Why* of this convoluted subject. And we will start with the simple ones, the non-debatable ones. We’ll begin, then, with *What*. *What* is the Rapture? It is the plucking up, snatching up, scooping up of both living and newly-resurrected Christians, removing them from the Earth and setting them gently down in Heaven. That’s *what* the Rapture is…okay so far?

The next easy one is Where. *Where* will the Rapture take place? This idea is not controversial, thank heavens: the Rapture will take place among the human family, all over the planet. If there are humans on *other* planets, I suppose God will scoop them up too, but this is beyond the scope of our discussion for today! We know the *What,* and we know the *Where*, and we even sort of know the *Who*. I say ‘sort of’ because we are not in agreement about *Who* deserves this redemption from earthly calamity and torment…and we range widely from the notion that *all* will be redeemed through smaller and ever diminishing subsets of Christian practice, eventually concluding that the Rapture of the true believers, whoever they are, will be so small as to go unnoticed in the world. With this in mind, let’s take a little mental break and talk about the Triune Forwardite Running River Baptists. Even though I could not find their website online, I am told that this small denomination has *very precise* standards when it comes to the Lord’s chosen ones. Not only must they be baptized, which is kind of a broad requirement in the extended family, but they must be baptized in the name of the Trinity, and must be immersed, dunked *forward*, not backward as we so often see, and this ritual *must be performed* in a running river. They would hold that anyone not meeting these criteria is not a ‘real’ Christian. Tough muffins for us, huh? Nobody here will be raptured, according to the Triune Forwardite Running River Baptists! Similarly, some Pentecostal churches discount the validity of one’s faith if you cannot speak in tongues; some Catholic sects require demonstration of miracles or the appearance of stigmata to be considered an authentic believer; the standards vary considerably across Christendom. So, while the *What* and the *Where* of Rapture were clear, the *Who* is somewhat opaque. But not nearly as opaque as the final two discussion areas…

Into the deep end of the pool we go…*When* will the Rapture happen? We are asking at least two questions here: *When*, chronologically, but also *When*, sequentially? Chronologically we are mostly in agreement that the timing of this event *cannot* be known. Only God knows, and is evidently bound to secrecy. And since we cannot *empirically* know when, we try to work out the math from *context,* and our interpretation of world and local events. And it becomes a cosmic game of Clue, trying to reason our way into preparedness, and our situational reasoning falls into three main camps. Each of these **eschatological** views moors itself to the seven-year **Tribulation** as described in the Book of Revelation. So *When* will the Rapture happen? If you believe that it will happen in order to rescue the faithful from all the bowls of wrath that God is ready to pour out on the world, that would make you a Pretribulationist, raptured *before* all hell breaks loose. If, on another hand, you believe that all of humanity will suffer together for a time, and Christians will have a little more time to be useful and faithful, then the Rapture would happen in the middle of the Tribulation, about three and a half years after all hell breaks loose. Believing that would allow you to print Midtribulationalist on your business card. The remaining hand, of three, would be to believe that Christians must endure the *entire* Tribulation, helping others, converting others, God giving everybody one last chance to sign up. After the Tribulation, then, the worthy would be swept up to heaven – that view is the one we call Postribulationalism.

I swear, I do not think I am wasting your time with all of this, and I hope to persuade you of that. But to do that, we need to address one more parameter: *Why*? *Why* would God rapture the Christians and leave everybody else behind? And while admitting that we cannot know the mind of the Almighty, we are all God’s children, and the most persistent question on all children’s lips, everywhere you go, is *Why?*

I find that the question of *Why* God would extract some folks and leave others behindto be the toughest nut to crack, because it supposes a kind of Christian superiority that is not supported by the rest of Scripture. We are not the only ones around with ideas about the end times: all three Abrahamic faiths plus the Persian-based Zoroastrianism have similar ideas about Judgement Day, Tribulation, similar ideas about the Millennium of peace and concord. Most other world faiths have distinct concepts addressing the end of the human story as well…so why do *we* get to skip the tough stuff? Why do the Christians get off so easy? What makes us more special than other members of God’s family? Add to getting to leave before the rough stuff starts the perverse doctrine of the redeemed Christians taking pleasure in watching the damned writhe about for all eternity – this is actually a real theological position, by the way – and the question of *Why* there would be a rapture takes on sinister overtones.

Why am I putting you through this? I do feel that knowing all this stuff makes us better, more informed Christians, but I agonize that, for many, belief in the Rapture can lead folks into thinking that they are more deserving, more special, intrinsically worth more than other followers of other faiths, or even worth more than other Christian folk. We are coming soon to our national holiday of Thanksgiving, when we gather for feasting and fellowship with all manner of families: biological families, extended families, blended families, families of choice, families of circumstance…yet all of these categories that we so loosely label ‘family’ are purely human constructs. It seems that God knows only *one* definition of family, and that definition includes *all the kids*, not just the white ones, not just the straight ones, not just the bible-thumping ones, not even just the Christian ones. I find the idea of a Rapture where God scoops up all the ‘good folks’ and leaves everybody else in anguish to be both repugnant and un-Biblical. But some of our brethren have taken this tiny little slice of scripture and fashioned from it a wedge to divide the unworthy from the worthy, the damned from the saved, the bad from the good, like cruel children on a playground choosing up teams. Don’t get left behind, they shout! Make sure you get raptured, they preach! I will say it till my dying day, that becoming a Christian because you are terrified of *not* being one is a spiritual atrocity beyond description.

Enough for today. The Rapture, as with all of the assorted end times ideas, are an unique category of Biblical exploration much more given to emotion and sensationalism than to thoughtful, contextual reflection. Based on the scant Biblical evidence, the by now heavily embellished idea of the Rapture might actually be nothing more and nothing less than what the author said it was…words intended to comfort and encourage each other in this uncomfortable, discouraging world. This Rapture of which we speak could be just another stating of our most foundational beliefs, that God will redeem us, that God will reclaim us, that we will not be stranded without hope in a world gone nuts. I claim this comfort today, as the bombs fall on Gaza and the missiles pound the Ukraine, and American children wander hungry and naked and abused among us. I claim the rapture that comes with knowing that God has more cards to play, more lives to save, more hope to share, more love to give. To paraphrase St. Paul, *We are not uninformed, brothers and sisters, about what awaits those who have already died. We do not need to grieve as others do who have no hope. For this is our hope: since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, the same destiny awaits our loved ones, and awaits us too.* This is God’s doing, God’s initiative, and God’s plan will prevail, in this and in all things. Amen.