

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Think back with me to the late 90s. The clothes were different. The slang was different. The hair was different. And there was a surge in popularity of sixteen books known collectively as the Left Behind series. You might remember them cluttering the end caps of checkout lanes at grocery stores. The series depicted the end of times, and people gobbled them up. They made a movie out of the books starring the transcendent Kirk Cameron, if memory serves. In general I try not to offer too many opinions on books, music, or film when I preach — after all, these are matters of taste and not of the Gospel — but I can tell you with some authority that these books were and are garbage.

The Left Behind series is based on a funny little culdesac of Christian thought that was birthed in the 1830s by an Irish preacher named John Nelson Darby. The Rev. Darby had done his own translation of the Bible, and he became convinced that in it, a person could glean with some exactitude the way in which the world will end in flames and suffering. He also posited, based on some verses here and there, that an elect group of people would be saved from this Armageddon and raptured up into heaven, while others would be left behind. Hence the titles of the books.

Some friends at the seminary were studying this stuff, and during a break in class, they staged a rapture by bringing spare clothes and leaving them on their chairs for the professor to find. It was a pretty good bit.

Since Darby invented the Rapture, people have been fascinated by the idea that, one day, friends and neighbors will be sorted into good and evil, and the good ones will just float into space. I think we're fascinated by the idea that we could be mid-conversation and find our neighbor being lifted off this earth into heaven. It's a lousy form of Christianity, but I'll admit it makes for a pretty good story. And millions of copies sold would agree.

I poke fun at the Rapture and the Left Behind series this morning mostly to make what I hope is an important distinction. There is the apocalypse of popular culture. And then there is the apocalypse of the Bible. And they are two very different things.

“As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. To another [Jesus] said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Our Gospel writer is using apocalyptic language this morning. You can tell because it is jarring, immediate, and demands that you rethink everything. The needs of the kingdom of God are so

utterly urgent that there is no time for funerals, there is no time to tend to the fields, and there is no place of comfort or safety for Jesus to lay his head. Why is Jesus saying things that are so drastic?

Jesus is talking about the apocalypse. Not the kind that you can imagine from television or terrible books. Apocalypse is a Greek word that means “to lift a veil” or “to reveal.” Or, put another way, an apocalypse is a revelation. Jesus is using urgent and confronting language to lift the veil that has settled comfortably over our eyes. Jesus is saying: that thing you think is of ultimate importance? Your family, your fields, your home? They are not of ultimate importance. Let me lift this veil and show you the things that really matter — the work of the kingdom of God.

This should be making you terribly uncomfortable. My family is not important? My livelihood is not important? My home is not important? And yet that is precisely what Jesus is driving at in this passage. The language should get us uncomfortable enough that we can see in a whole new way — that we can see the world without its veil.

What have we all agreed together not to see? Have we agreed not to see the most segregated city along racial lines in the entire country? Have we agreed not to see internment camps along our southern border? Have we agreed not to see the poor or the grieving in our midst? Or is there some other thing in your life that you have agreed not to see right now? I’m sure it’s something.

And so Jesus gives us a shock. Jesus removes a veil so that we can see clearly, just for a minute, with the eyes of God.

And given this special vision, what are we going to do about it? We are not called to be raptured up into heaven while the world burns. Instead, we are called to do the exact opposite. We’re called to go down into the world — into the mess, the struggle, the hard work, and the rough edges. When someone on the street sees you coming, they should think, “Oh, here comes that nutty Christian; they must be here to heal the sick, tend the dying, or soothe the suffering in the name of Jesus.” They should see you as people of special vision to see the hurts of the world and begin to address them. Do not go up to heaven. That’s not where your work is. Stay down here on earth and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. See with the eyes of God, and our healing work will be clear.

It seems strange to be thankful for an apocalypse. But think of these verses like the cure to our spiritual cataracts. All of a sudden we can see what needs to be seen, and by seeing we have taken the first step toward healing the world. Go out and use your God eyes this week — not to see heaven, but to tend to this earth. Together we can ensure that no one is left behind in the city of God. Amen.