

## LUKE 21:5-19 WHAT DESTINATION WAITS? NOVEMBER 18, 2001

### INTRODUCTION

As I was thinking about this sermon I was thinking about two books. Actually, a book and then a series of books. The series of books I have not read, but I have seen them every time I go to a book store, which I do fairly often. The series has two authors, or one author and another person credited with the idea for the theme of the books. The authors name is Jenkns I think, and the originator of the series is Tim LeHay. The series is about the future time of the Rapture. Are you familiar with the Rapture? I am not really too familiar with it, but I know that in American fundamentalism there has been a dispute about the end time, as to whether God brings about the end for all persons, living and dead and the reign of God begins, or whether the Son of Man comes in the air, and those who are saved are taken out of existence into heaven and the earth is left to the rule of Satan. The later view is the Rapture. I looked a little at the history of these movements and the origin is interesting. It goes back to the early 1800's in America and Great Britian. A group of people from Presbyterian and Baptist tradition in the US and in Great Britain a single person, who was disturbed by political intrusion on ecclesiastical affairs in the Church of England and saw the same apostasy in the Dissenting Churches in Great Britain, began a movement. This movement was begun based on the notion that there was so much heresy and apostasy loose in the world that it must certainly be the Last Days. A great deal of effort was spent on trying to combine the Old Testament and the New Testament into a unified view of history itself and thus identify where they were as of that very moment in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, and the judgment was that it was the Last Days. This series of books is rooted in that concern of what began nearly two hundred years ago that it is the Last Days. It latches on to one tradition in the same movement. It is about the time when the Son came and took into heaven the faithful Christians and left behind the others for the time of tribulation. One of the volumes of the series that I looked at in Wal Mart the other day said that 18 million copies of the series had been sold. First I asked myself, I wonder if the sales have gone up since September 11? The second thing I asked myself is, what is going on here? If that many books are sold, you can be very certain that something is being touched in the American psyche. The paradox involved in this matter is that you can bet that the machinery of this present age, which is the cause of the imminent coming of the Last Days, is used in an enormously efficient way to get that many books sold. The fact of the matter is, the publishers bought air time on WJHU, the public radio outlet in Baltimore for short promotions in the last couple of weeks.

The book I have been reading is Plowing the Dark by Richard Powers. It is a novel about a Research and Development arm of a large and rich information technology company, which creates an experiment in virtual reality. There is a space with white walls of a material to which data channels are connected and computers driven by constantly changing and updating software programs feed information. One enters the room and puts on goggles of a sort and the room comes alive before them. It becomes a space that one can enter and explore. Its first experiment is with crayon drawings of crude flowers, trees

and bees. An artist is hired and she begins to work on the concepts and with the technology people they begin to build replicas of great works of art that the wearer of the goggles can enter. First a famous painting by Rousseau, then Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles, and finally the interior of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. One of those involved in the project is an economist. He begins to use the Cavern with a different program to attempt economic projections visually, seeking to gain control of the future through being able to predict it. Those at work on the project begin to reflect on what they were doing, guessing that they were on something so big that it might represent a giant leap in human development, a leap in which human beings would move from creatures dependent on an environment out of their control, to being creatures who create their own world. The novel is about the effort of human beings through their inventiveness, creativity and intellect bring into being a new future, a different future.

These two are linked in a couple of ways. There is not doubt that those who have created the series of books on the Rapture, would see in the characters in *Plowing the Dark* and their interests as one of the signs why the present would be identified as the Last Days. In both instances, there is expressed an anxiety and a curiosity about the future.

## 1. THE TEXT

A. The text we have before us occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels. The most ancient is Mark and Matthew and Luke are based on the Mark account. Matthew and Luke each have some differences from Mark, these differences are driven by either another source, or by the interest of the author or his readers.

B. The event described takes place, again, in the week before the Jesus crucifixion. It occurs in the same place in each of the synoptic accounts. It takes place, pointedly, in specific location; the temple of Jerusalem. All three texts report disciples, generically or by name in Matthew, pointing out to Jesus the beauty and nobility of the Temple, and Jesus noting that the destruction of the Temple is eminent. That there will be no stone left standing on the other. The Temple in question is the Temple of Herod the Great. It was begun in 20 BC and was in continuous construction until its destruction in 70 AD by the Roman Empire. The Temple of Herod was built on the site of the Temple of Solomon and was meant to replicate the glory of the Temple of Solomon. I read some about it; it was a huge, walled space with courts for the Gentiles, Court for Women, Court for the priests and a holy of holies, where the sacred texts were held and was accessible only to the priests. The Temple was destroyed in AD 70, a period of time in which some of the New Testament was written, an event which held the imagination of Jews and the members of the Early Church.

The sayings of Jesus reported are called apocalyptic sayings. They are similar to texts in Daniel, Joel, some of the prophet literature of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament and to what is contained in The Book of Revelation in the New Testament. Apocalyptic literature is about the coming end of history, the coming of God and in Christian literature the return of the Son of Man. The themes of such literature could be threefold. First, it has

been used as a literature about those who are seen to be the enemies of the people of God. Revelation is like this. What it has to say is that those who are opposed to God, to His will and to the people who are faithful to him, will have judgment poured out upon them. Second, in the Old Testament, in the prophetic literature, the judgment that is to come will be meted out to the people of Israel, the people of God, who have been unfaithful to the covenant they have been called to serve. Thirdly, such literature reflected a future time in which God would vindicate and rescue his faithful people who have served him in the midst of a hostile world. God would come and take these faithful, presently suffering people, into himself and comfort them.

## 11. WHAT DESTINATION WAITS?

- A.** We are like the people who listened to Jesus and who later listened to this text, in the sense that the question of the future is a real one for us. A week or two after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, I went to the university to visit my friends. I was chatting with one of my colleagues and she asked me what I thought about prophecy, the book of Revelation and whether or not what we have experienced was rooted in these texts about the apocalyptic future. Her question, the concern behind the question, reflects how mysterious it is to us. I suspect that a lot of that kind of questioning has been going on. Certainly, the remarks of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, which both have backed away from, reflect the notion that these singular, drastic, horrible events **must** reflect the work of God or the will of God. It is certainly legitimate to ask what might God have to do with such a singular, horrible event in our public lives. Such questions need to be so huge and so public to have the issue raised in our lives. The appearance of illness in our lives; the failure of a career; the collapse of a marriage and or a family; the assault of guilt regarding what we have done. Such occurrences can cause us to ask what God is doing to us.
- B.** The future as end is certainly far differently imagined in an age as influenced by science and other academic disciplines. The universe began in what they call the Big Bang. All matter and energy was in a compressed state, a point of matter and energy and at a certain point in time, exploded outward in all directions, spewing forth the matter and the energy that began to develop the rules that govern matter and energy, and over billions of years, while exploding outward, changes took place which allowed for the forming of stars, galaxies, planets, the earth among them. And as much as it taxes our imagination because nothing that reaches our senses in a common sense way confirms it, the universe is still exploding outward. And it is certainly part of the picture that anything that is in movement, will run out of energy and will come to an end. I heard Stephen Jay Gould interviewed on one of his late books. He speculated that the present complexity of the life on the earth is an anomaly for the long period of life on the earth. He allowed as how, life on earth would probably collapse back into the simplest of life forms, bacteria or something like that, precisely because the form of life is so simple and not subject to chances and nuances in the environment.

We also know that our pathway on the earth is one that has caused damage to the systems of the earth which provide us air, water, fertile soil from which food comes and these benefits are coming ever more under stress.

**C.** It is so hard, is it not, for us to sit here in this modest church, in the midst of our modest lives, and talk about the universe running down and the evolution of life on earth revert back to the simple forms from which it came? That that is the case does not, however, free us from the future as a matter of concern and hope. No matter where in our lives we are, the future remains this great mystery to us.

We know that what we are meant for has not and cannot be met in any imagined circumstance we experience in our lives. Some of us do not know this, some of us forget it. We can see it in the frenzies we sometimes bring to normal activity; to shopping, to collecting, to travel, to books, to reminiscence, any number of things. But the message of this text, and the bottom of the wisdom we gain living our lives, is that what we seek is not to be realized in our lives in this condition. We gain such wisdom from our family lives, in which sometimes, what we had expected and hope when we entered them, is rarely realized, and yet at the same time there is caught a glimpse of what is possible. We gain such wisdom in our work lives, when doing what we thought would be that into which we could pour ourselves and find, in so doing, the fullness of our lives that would wipe out all the concerns, fears and anxieties. And again, what is hoped for eludes what is experienced. We gain such wisdom in a search for knowledge which gives us not the dreamed of mastery and satisfaction, but further uncertainty, false pride or genuine humility pounded out of the pretensions and limitations of what we bring to the task.

**D.** There are two things in this text which address this condition. First. The future, so present in our lives and at times so fearful for us, is in the hands of God. It is really hard to know how to talk about this in terms of the destiny of the universe, or life on earth. What we know about them is that they are finite, no matter how long their history. And that everything that is finite comes from the hand of God, and God has made them with an end. God, as the God of the finite, is the God of each of these things, and that each of these things, as the creation of God, is cherished and their ends are not predetermined. But their ends are held in the hand of God. And this, we pray, and hope is so for us, we small, late creatures in the dramatic history of the universe. We know we shall perish. We know that such may come in ways not expected. We also know and fear that the way we live might come to an end before the end of our personal lives. But this too is in the hand of God.

Secondly, there is a note in the text about enduring to the end. In the text there are warnings about persecution for the sake of the Son. There are warnings about being brought before authorities and being tested. There are warnings about betrayals in our lives. There is promise that what is needed in these circumstances will be granted.

## **CONCLUSION**

We know that we need to endure. When we know we are failing, we know we must carry on. We must carry on to the end that draws near either in our imaginations or in fact. We know that we need to be as faithful to the best things we know about. We know that we must gather what we know and have experienced and give it forth to those we love. We know that we must faithfully and patiently face what ever it is the future holds for us for the sake of those we love and for the sake of the rest of the world. We must hold fast; we must witness to what we have been shown; we must preserve what has fallen into our stewardship. And we know that this can only be done in the doing of it. And as we carry on, we are carried along on the wave of hope that we shall find our place in the bosom of Abraham.

Amen