

Weal or Woe: The Second Coming

TEXT: Amos 5:18-24; Revelation 20:11-15; 21:1-8

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on March 15, 2026

My first appointment as a pastor was to a small town in rural NW Florida called Cross City. It's the county seat for Dixie County, FL, in an economically depressed, socially conservative area. The average income in town was \$15,000 per year, and that hasn't changed much.

There were tons of churches in that small town. At the time, in the mid-90's, there were by my count 42 churches serving a population of under 3,000 people. And that didn't count the people who set themselves up as preachers on the radio.

The radio preachers might be from nationally syndicated media, but it was also pretty easy for local and regional folks to just set up their own shop, call themselves preachers, and hit the airwaves on an AM station in their local areas. Podcasters can do that today, but with national and international reach.

That meant that I was exposed to a lot of...unique...theology and biblical interpretation as our members came to tell me about what they had heard the previous week.

If you remember the 1990's, there was exponential growth in the number of people who believed that Jesus was coming back in the year 2000. I heard many of the calculations about why that was definitely the case; but the creativity award goes to the calculation of one of the radio preachers that one of my members bounced into church all excited to explain to me. It was based in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10.

The preacher explained that the character of the Good Samaritan was a Christ figure, which isn't too far off base. It was Jesus' point in the parable that it was the Samaritan and not the priest or the Levite that he wanted his followers to emulate.

With the Good Samaritan as a Christ figure, the man beaten to a pulp and left to die in the road represented the world in need of saving. So, okay; I'll quibble with the fact that it removes personal responsibility for loving our neighbors and puts all that just on a divine Savior to step in and clean up our mess; but not too far out of bounds, given the region I was in.

But once the Samaritan gets the man bandaged up and takes him to an inn for recovery, the preacher's interpretation got more creative. In his interpretation so far, he has Jesus saving the wounded world (through his death and resurrection, which of course happens in year one in our calendar), and taking him to an inn for recovery. In the preacher's continued analogy, the inn is the church.

And then the Samaritan, aka Jesus, gives the innkeeper two denarii to pay for the man's care, and promises that when he (Jesus) comes back through, he'll pay anything additional that might be owed. A denarius was a unit of money in Jesus' day; but more specifically, it represented about a day's wage. The innkeeper got two, so two day's wages.

Psalm 90 verse 4 says that one day is as a thousand years in God's sight. THEREFORE, Jesus giving the innkeeper two denarii before promising to return is code for Jesus predicting that he will come back to claim the world he saved (in the year 1) in two thousand years--the year 2000. The woman was so excited she could hardly contain herself.

The 90's were also a time when Christian radio evangelist and President of Family Radio, Harold Camping, began predicting the Rapture and end of the world. Judgment Day, by his calculation was not in 2000, but

rather September 6, 1994, just a few months into my Cross City appointment. When it didn't happen, he admitted to an error in his calculations and moved the date to September 29 and then to October 2.

Camping was still at it in 2005 when he calculated that Jesus was due to come back on May 21, 2011 and then on October 21 of 2011. Before his passing in 2013, he admitted that he should have paid attention to Matthew 24:36 where Jesus says that no human being will know the day or the hour and that his efforts to say otherwise were sinful. But those efforts also made him millions, raking in money from folks like those I lived among who couldn't afford it, but who were desperate for him to be right.

Camping's ability to dupe the same people over and over again, for over 17 years, when nothing he ever predicted came to pass, was something that was actually studied and published in an academic journal out of the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2016, which looked at the unique combination of the role of the national reach of Family Radio, "Camping's authoritarian and charismatic presence," his "lack of succession planning," and "the sense of 'networked individualism' that Family Radio cultivated amongst its followers over time, effectively allowing its listening audience to personally select for message and doctrine."

Of course, Camping wasn't the only one. There were those who made millions by picking a date, encouraging people to sell their homes and worldly possessions, empty their bank accounts, donate them to the group, and then gather here or there to experience the moment together. Sometimes those were suicide cults, like Jim Jones, but others were just hucksters, who pocketed the money and took off. There were also those who made millions from books and movies that stoked the fear.

In the 1970's, I was deeply immersed in Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. My copy was dog-eared, and I had the whole interpretation down, chapter and verse, by the time I was 18. *The Late Great Planet Earth* did with the apocalyptic vision in Revelation what the Cross City radio preacher did with the Good Samaritan, only without specific dates—except implying it would happen within the lifetimes of those reading the book, which definitely helped sales. He used a system of interpretation for the book of Revelation developed in Britain in the 19th century and, instead of a local radio program, Hal Lindsey had a national publisher to spread the word, and spread it did.

As a teenager, I didn't know the interpretation was that recent, or that the same system also discounted all of the teachings of Jesus as being for his time only, and not for ours, because we moved into the "age of the church" once Paul came on the scene. I was just focused on the delightful fact that someone had finally made sense of all the plagues and beasts and horns in the book of Revelation, and that coherence just made me think it had to be true.

I was in my Baptist church every Sunday morning, an Assemblies of God church every Sunday and Wednesday evening, and a charismatic Roman Catholic prayer meeting every Tuesday night, and no one had taught me any differently. At that point no one in any of those places talked about the end times at all.

Given that history, I was not new to that interpretation in the 1990's, which was also when *The Late Great Planet Earth* was out of vogue and the *Left Behind* series of books, rose up to take its place. There are now 16 volumes of the *Left Behind* books, and then came the movies.

By the time I was serving in Dover, NH it was a franchise, and the hours I spent in pastoral counseling spiked as I tried to talk people down off the ledge after they read the books. But my counseling appointments didn't spike nearly as high as the bank accounts of the *Left Behind* authors.

And, of course by that time I had both years of lived experience and full theological training, and knew that Martin Luther had only agreed to include the book of Revelation in his German translation of the Bible in the 16th century if he could put in a preface to it explaining that the book was talking about the contemporary situation and persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire under emperors Nero and Domitian.

What interests me about all that in terms of this sermon series about what we believe, is that the core Christian affirmation that we make every communion Sunday when we say, "Christ will come again" does not

have to lead to all that madness. The book of Revelation doesn't even have to lead there. And it didn't, until the 19th century. And yet here we are.

To get at anything like what is defined today as the Rapture, you have to piece together several different Bible passages, and interpret them in very specific ways to come up with people suddenly disappearing from their cars, homes, and offices. And the ideas just about *that* have been so further dissected that there are warring factions of belief about whether the Rapture will come before, during, or after the horrific plagues and battles described in Revelation chapters 13-20 and known generally as the "Great Tribulation."

It's bad enough that those interpretations and the fear they evoke have been used by hucksters and grifters to make millions off the desperate and terrified; but they have also, in some quarters, given people a strong appetite for war—particularly war in the Middle East—and for environmental destruction.

Because, in the apocalyptic vision, the earth is destroyed in war and flame and then Jesus returns with a shiny new earth in hand; and because Revelation kindly gives us a location for that final war near the hill and city of Megiddo in NW Israel; there are those who have come to think that they don't have to figure out a date for all that, they can just push to get those things happening now, so that Jesus will be forced to come and bring the new earth and all our lovely rewards.

We don't have to inconvenience ourselves to save the planet—it's destined for the flames anyway. No need to sacrifice anything to keep it livable; Jesus is bringing a new one. And since we need a war near Megiddo for Jesus to return, the Hebrew for hill of Megiddo is "Armageddon," why not just start one up in the region? At the very least we should support any hostilities in the area; because Jesus will come in the end and then we'll get our new earth and Jesus will enforce the Ten Commandments for a thousand years on earth and everything will be great.

There is a congressional investigation going on as we speak of a whistleblower report, citing over 200 complaints across 50 units in three branches of the military, of officers—not chaplains—officers in the chain of command, pushing such views about the purpose of fighting a "Holy War" in Iran.

I would be more skeptical of such reports if I hadn't been watching the idea grow and metastasize my entire adult life, after being immersed in it myself for years, and then, with my theologically and biblically-trained ears, listening to the public statements of people in the highest levels of our government and reading the weekly Bible studies that are being taught to the Cabinet, US Senate, and US House, and in 42 state houses across the country.

Pete Hegseth is a proud sponsor of the studies, put out by Capitol Ministries, which are online for anyone to read. I've been warning, preaching, and lecturing about them since at least 2018. Mike Pence was a House sponsor and, when he became Vice President, he pulled all but one or two of the new 2017 Cabinet Secretaries from those who attended those weekly Bible studies.

There was a less-detailed but equally dangerous version of this belief about the "Day of the Lord" in ancient times as well, and the Hebrew prophets took it on. The reading you heard earlier from the prophet Amos lambasts looking forward to that day. It's a passage that Martin Luther King used in his speeches, warning that when God shows up—whether it's the Jewish "Day of the Lord" or the Christian Second Coming of Jesus—if you've mistreated the poor and those in need and have engaged in corruption in your dealings with the world, then maybe you want God to hold off for a bit, because God is not going to come bearing party favors.

And if we've intentionally destroyed or shrugged in apathy as the earth, in Paul's words in Romans, "groans for its redemption;" if we are eager for fire and war to engulf the very home God crafted for us, very specifically to try to force God to come right now and give us a new one, like some spoiled brat?

There is no person in the divine Trinity that is going to be happy to see us, let alone reach down and rapture us out of suffering the consequences of our own arrogance and hubris, no matter how many times we've

cried, “Lord! Lord!” There are times when I think Martin Luther was right; and he should have canned the book of Revelation.

And yet, when we push all of that aside and go back to the core Christian affirmation that “Christ will come again,” there is a much more positive direction that belief can take. It’s represented in the hymns I chose for this morning, but also simply in the hearts of those who yearn for peace and justice, rather than war and retribution. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream!” cried Amos.

The desire is also in the hearts of those bent to earth, toiling without sabbath, forced to breathe polluted air, eat food tainted with toxins and filled with plastic, who long for “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

I can’t stress enough that, for the downtrodden of the world, the belief that there will one day be justice for what they have suffered, and a world where they don’t have to go hungry, aren’t kicked when they’re down, and are counted as being just as precious as everyone else—even if they have to wait until an afterlife or the end of the world to get it, is the only thing between them and life-ending despair.

You can put aside the question of whether the belief is true or misguided. It is, in many cases, necessary to get through the day; and woe be unto those who exploit that desperation for personal gain.

So how do we keep a belief that can be truly helpful from turning in a toxic direction that seeks destruction rather than healing and division rather than wholeness? That’s the root of my question with all of these beliefs. Jesus focused on judging beliefs and prophecy by their fruit. How do we make sure our beliefs are leading to life-giving fruit before it’s too late?

Part of that answer, I think is having more than a sound bite. The full phrase that we recite together in communion is: “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again,” and there’s probably another whole sermon that could be devoted to how each of those things informs the next. But, for the question of how to keep our beliefs from developing toxic strains, I think we need the part of the Great Thanksgiving that the presider says right before that, calling that full proclamation, “the mystery of faith.”

Most of us enjoy mysteries, to some extent, but we have a generally low tolerance for any mystery that we have to just let be for an undefined period; and we have an even harder time saying that it is, ultimately, unsolvable. When we bring that impatience to religious matters and try to define and understand things that are, by definition, beyond our ken; we’re asking for trouble.

I’ve said before that I think the early Church Councils did no one any favors by suggesting, through the creeds they produced, that we could dissect and understand God’s nature. That’s not how it works. Human beings may have opposable thumbs, but we don’t have the ability to define something qualitatively greater than ourselves. And if we don’t believe God is qualitatively greater than ourselves, then we don’t have any business identifying with any of the monotheistic religions.

I have believed since I first wrote *Blowing the Lid Off the God-Box* in 2001 that our beliefs, rituals, and practices go off the rails by proclaiming certainty about the nature of things we simply cannot know. We get in trouble when we shut out mystery, or demand that all our time must be spent in solving it with our minds rather than simply watching what kind of fruit grows when act on it and see whether the consequences are something Jesus would celebrate or condemn. “What would Jesus do?” is kind of cringe now, but it’s still a useful metric.

If we can let some aspects of our faith remain a mystery; if we can be a little less certain, and a lot more humble, about what we are capable of knowing and what is known only to God; we can just get about doing the Lord’s work.

Going way back to Jesus' own disciples who wanted to know about the Day of the Lord and when it would all go down, and kept pressing him on it; Jesus told them not to bother trying to figure it out. No one would know the day or the hour, as Harold Camping finally came to remember. No one *could* know. Not even Jesus knew, he said. To spend time on the question was to waste the one precious life we have each been given to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

Remember that the only judgement day description Jesus gives us is all about actions—feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison. That is the business we are to be about in this life; and it is for those things, and those things only, that Jesus says at the great day of judgment, “Welcome into the Kingdom of God.”

Now maybe that means, “do these things in this life and then you get to go to a different, lovely place after death.” But it could also mean, “do those things now and you’ll start to see God’s kingdom taking shape around you, ultimately finding that you have helped to create that kingdom that has, at last and through the efforts of millions like you, come to earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.