

# Welcome

When I say, "Second Coming," what pictures emerge in your head? Sun blotted out and moon turning to blood? Four horsemen wreaking havoc?

There's one particular word I bet comes up for a lot of us: Rapture.

If you grew up in the Evangelical church, this idea was inescapable. In the 80s, churches held screenings of the movie *The Thief in the Night*. I was in high school when the Left Behind books came out. My youth group went to a youth conference where two years in a row they talked about the End Times. And central to all that was the Rapture, the idea that, before Jesus returns, he's going to sort of pop down out of heaven and take just the Christians to heaven while the rest of the world turns into a hellscape. Rapture books and movies are filled with images of clothing left behind in piles while now-driverless cars and pilotless planes crash. Kids my age would come home to an empty house and have panic attacks because we were sure the Rapture had happened and we'd been LEFT BEHIND!

There's even a super famous (in Christian circles) song about it - no less than DC Talk covered it (again, in the 90s). It goes like this:

*Two men walking up a hill: one disappeared, and one's left standing still. I wish we'd all been ready...*

Sound familiar? If it does, I have some truly bizarre news for you: the Rapture is not in the Bible.

Let me say that again: the Rapture is not an idea you can find anywhere in the Bible.

In fact, the whole idea of the Rapture - that God would take all of God's people away and abandon the world to the forces of evil - that idea runs counter to the long story of the Bible.

What we are going to see today, here at the beginning of Advent, is God's deep love for the world.

# Message

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the beginning of the Church year. Advent is a season of preparing for Jesus' arrival - Christmas. Think about that for a moment: the beginning of the Church year is marked by waiting. By preparing.

That in and of itself is counterintuitive. We mark New Year's by making resolutions - we're going to be slimmer, richer, bolder, smarter in the new year! We do, do, do.

But faith says, "Let's begin by waiting. By watching. By preparing." Let's let life be a response to God's action.

We're preparing for Jesus' return to Earth, what Christians call the Second Coming. And for a couple of thousand years, we've thought the best way to prepare for Jesus' *second* coming is by looking back at how God's people prepared for Jesus' *first* coming.

So: Advent to prepare for Christmas. A time to look forward by looking back. This year, our series is called, "I'll be Home for Christmas." We're going to be looking at the Gospel of Matthew. In the passages this Advent season, we're going to hear about what the world will look like when God returns, and how we can be preparing even now for that life.

Today is really about the big picture. Whose world is this?

As Christians, we confess God as our creator, and as the creator of the whole world. But a lot of us, when we think about the end of the story, have this idea that God will abandon the world to the forces of Evil and death. In a real way, that's what the idea of the Rapture claims: God takes all the good people away and lets the world descend into madness.

When we frame it like that, it's pretty obvious that the Rapture is bad theology. The good news, here at the beginning of Advent, is that God has not abandoned the world. God is not going to abandon the world. In fact, God loves the whole world. Particularly as we approach the holidays, it's a very good reminder for us!

So turn with us to [Matthew 24](#).

This is part of a segment in the Gospels that happens during Jesus' final week of life. Things are getting *very* tense, and his followers keep wondering when he's going to reveal himself as the Messiah and ascend to power.

At one point, Jesus stops to warn them about the approaching Day of the Lord - which is a day the Hebrew prophets have long predicted, the day when God takes the world back from evil people and finally establishes lasting justice and peace. It's the day that, on the other side of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we'll come to call the Second Coming.

Of course, everyone wants to know *when*? Is it going to be tomorrow? End of the week? A few months? So listen as Jesus offers his description. And if you're someone who was raised on Rapture stories, you're going to recognize this:

"However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows."

"When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes."

"Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left." -- Matthew 24:36–41 (NLT)

There's the Left Behind language right there! Two men walking up a hill (well in a field, because 'field' doesn't rhyme with 'standing still' as well). One's taken and one's left! Boom!

This is classic Rapture stuff: in an instant, one person is taken away to heaven and the other is Left Behind. Obvious, right?

Except... did notice that first paragraph there? The one about Noah?

"When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes. -- Matthew 24:37-39

Noah of 'and the Ark' fame. When God judged the world with a flood, Noah was the one person found faithful. God warned him, and he built a big boat for him and his family and the animals. Jesus says that this new Day of the Lord will be like that last one (which is actually another common refrain among the prophets - they looked to God's actions in the world before to understand God's future actions).

Jesus says that in Noah's day, people were just doing whatever they wanted, ignoring God and God's people and then the flood came and swept them all away.

Wait a minute. In Noah's day, who got swept away... the righteous or the wicked?

It was the wicked.

And in Noah's day, who got Left Behind? Uh... it was the righteous. Noah and his family. God's people!

So, if we're taking Jesus at his word, when he returns, he's not coming to take us all away from a world that's sliding into chaos and terror. No, quite the opposite. Jesus is returning to reclaim the world that has always been his.

This is the great truth the whole Bible proclaims.

John's gospel opens by declaring:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.

The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. -- John 1:1–5 (NLT)

And the sermon to the Hebrews says:

And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. -- Hebrews 1:2

And the song quoted in the letter to the church in Colossae says:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.

He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. -- Colossians 1:15–17 (NLT)

And who can forget the most well-known Bible verse of all time, John 3:16?

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him." -- John 3:16–17 (NLT)

God loves the world. God loves the world so much that God *died* for the world - not to condemn the world, but to save the world!

Friends, this is why Rapture theology is not just wrong but harmful. It declares that Sin has won, that ultimately, God will abandon the world to the forces that seek to corrupt and destroy it.

But nothing could be further from the truth. God loves the world, and God refuses to abandon God's creation. In fact, Jesus' death on the cross is how God takes the world back from the forces of Evil, from sin and death, from injustice and dehumanization.

God will not let Evil win. That's a song worth singing.

## Song

The disciples weren't worried about the Rapture (that's an idea that's less than 200 years old, actually!). They wanted to know when Jesus was going to do the thing. Announce his Messianic mission, kick out the Romans and reestablish God's rule.

Again, that's not terribly far from where we are. How many of us crave the holiday season as something of a distraction from the state of our world? How many of us look for the fake snow and lights on trees and escapist rom-coms to inject some hope and cheer into a world that feels ever more hopeless?

How many of us want to know when Jesus is coming back?

How does Jesus answer the disciples' question? How does he answer our question?

"No one knows the day or the hour... not even the Son of Man." Jesus says, "Look, y'all: I have no idea either."

So we don't know when Jesus is returning.

What DO we know? That God is not abandoning us. That God is in fact at work - in small ways, where we least expect.

That's why, in terms of instructions regarding the End Times, Jesus' advice is pretty simple:

**"So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected. -- Matthew 24:42-44**

Jesus says, "Stay alert! Be prepared!"

Isn't that a fascinating piece of advice? It's why the major theme of Advent is preparation. We don't want to be caught unaware. We want to be ready for Jesus' return.

What does that readiness look like? For Jesus people, it's both personal holiness and love of neighbor.

We take seriously our own journey of transformation, making space for those spiritual practices that create room for the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus.

And we're working to live in solidarity with the most vulnerable among us, asking how we can love our neighbors the same way we love ourselves.

That's particularly poignant here in the holiday season, as our schedules become crowded and our to-do lists sprawling.

So here at the beginning of our Advent season, I want to invite you to pause. To take a deep breath and consider this good news:

God has not abandoned you. God has not abandoned us. In fact, Christmas is the ultimate proof of exactly how far God will go to save us!

Let's respond to that powerful good news by coming to this table, at God's invitation.

## Communion + Examen

Coming to the table is a way we remain prepared, remembering Jesus' first coming and watching for his return.

When in the last week have I made space for God?

When in the last week have I made space for my neighbors?

In this Advent season, what might be a barrier to making space for God and my neighbors?

What does being alert and preparing well look like this Advent season?

## Assignment + Blessing

Meditate on God's love for the world this week. How is God calling you to love the world, too?