

“Faith in the Midst of Chaos: 4) The Kingdoms of This World”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15b)

A number of years ago, when I was seeking to be ordained as a Presbyterian Minister, I was keenly aware that in the Presbyterian Church, young ministers being examined by Presbyteries for ordination were often asked the question: “What are your views of eschatology?” In case that is a word with which you are not familiar, “eschatology” is the study of theology that has to do with the “last things.” In Christian terminology, that often had to do with the “Second Coming” of Christ, “The Last Judgment,” and the General Resurrection of the Dead.

In most Presbyterian Churches today there is little, if anything, said about the end of human history. Most Presbyterians have never heard a sermon on the “Last Judgment” or the “Second Coming of Christ.”

Much of this language is derived from the Book of Revelation. In the Presbyterian Church there was often discussion about the “millennium,” the thousand year rule of Christ that marks the end of the world. Inherent in this question was the issue of a great period of tribulation that was associated with this thousand year rule. One group in the church was called the “pre-millennialists.” This group believed there would be great suffering and torture for Christians before Christ would come again to establish his kingdom.

Another group, the “post-millennialists,” believed that this period of tribulation would take place after the thousand year rule. Fortunately, for many of us, there was a third alternative, namely the “amillennialists” who either didn’t believe in a millennium or didn’t seem to care one way or the other and that seemed to be where most of the younger ministers seem to fit in.

I.

One of the distinctive aspects of the Book of Revelation is that it is concerned with the end of human history. In some ways that is very strange for people today. There is a great deal of interest in the beginning of human history. Scientists today speak of the “Big Bang” theory – the primal explosion and expansion of the universe that that created the cosmos in which we live.

Few people today, however, seem very concerned about the end of human history.

The Book of Revelation is very concerned about this issue. In Chapter 11, Revelation speaks of these two witnesses that God sent to Jerusalem. They were prophets, much like Moses and Elijah. They had the power to close the skies to rain as well as to turn rivers into blood. Then the author tells us that these two prophets were killed by an evil beast that arose from the sea. But after three and a half days, these holy men were taken into the heavens to be in the presence of God.

This became the occasion of the seventh angel who blew his trumpet and announced that the kingdoms of this world had become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

This morning I want to speak about Christian hope in terms of human life but also in human history as well.

II.

In the beginning, it is essential to note that human life is very frail. We were reminded of that this past Thursday with the announcements of the death of two very popular cultural figures: Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett. Both of these individuals represented a form of eternal youth. Michael Jackson in his early years was often referred to not only as the “king of pop” but as a Peter Pan who would never age.

The modern world in which we live does not have much interest in death. That is typical of a culture that values self-realization and self-mastery. Some years ago, Jessica Mitford wrote a book entitled *The American Way of Death*, which was an expose of the American funeral industry. One of the things that Mitford observed was that most people in this country don’t use the word “death.” We say of a person that he or she “passed on.” Funeral homes often were noted for this. Rooms where caskets were kept were called “reposing rooms.” There was almost an obsession with avoiding any reference to the finality of death.

And yet, the Bible takes a very realistic view of death. It is part of the human experience. The author of Psalm 90 speaks of a God for whom “a thousand years is like yesterday when it is past or a watch in the night.” The Psalmist teaches us to number our days that we may have a heart of wisdom.

III.

The Bible is not only realistic about the reality of death, it is also insistent on the possibility of faith in the future. This faith is spoken of in different ways in the New Testament:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrew 11: 1)

“Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.” (I John 5:4)

The hope of which we speak is somewhat different than what people generally think of as hope. In common speech, hope is based upon what may be desired, not what is certain. An unemployed person may hope to find a job. A homeowner may hope to sell a house.

When the Bible speaks of hope, it does so in a different fashion. Christian hope is spoken of as something that we wait for expectantly, because we know it cannot disappoint us.

Christian hope has always been expressed in terms of our belief in the resurrection of the dead and in eternal life. But Christian hope has also always been expressed in terms of our hope for human history.

Christian hope, on the one hand, gives us great confidence about the future. Max Weber, a German philosopher, once wrote a book entitled *Protestantism and Capitalism*, in which he made the point that Protestantism, with its emphasis on the work ethic, and the possibilities of human history, inevitably lead to capitalism. That is certainly true in the life of John Calvin who did much to encourage business and industry and who was called by some as “the father of democratic capitalism.”

As Christians, we should never expect too little of human history. There is much that we can do to make the world a better place.

On the other hand, we must not expect too much from human history. Because we are all creatures and sinners, there will inevitably be failure and frustration. Reinhold Niebuhr once referred to Christian hope as constructive realism, which proposes a middle course between skepticism and fanaticism. Skepticism is the failure to believe that we can actually achieve greatness. Fanaticism is the delusion that we can achieve more than is possible.

It is this great emphasis on hope that gives Christianity a great deal of its power. George Kennan, who for many years was the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, once observed that Marxism was doomed because it could give no real answer to the human problem of death. Kennan wrote:

“As an adequate and enduring personal philosophy, Marxism has many deficiencies; but the greatest of them is that it has, in contrast to Christianity, no answer to the phenomenon of death. That is why there is nothing more pathetic than a Marxist funeral; for to the Marxist, this formality celebrates nothing more than an inexplicable, unpreventable, and profoundly discouraging event in the human experience. Unable to give meaning to death, Marxism is unable to give meaning to life. The helplessness is the guarantee of its impermanence and ultimate failure of the person philosophy and political ideology.”

IV.

The Book of Revelation is an important book for many reasons. Not the least of these is that it is a book that speaks about the Christian hope for the future in two ways that are extremely important for all of us.

The first is the “Last Judgment.” That is certainly implicit in the scripture from which we read today. The author of Revelation envisions the power of God to overcome all evil. The words of Revelation are immortalized in the “Hallelujah Chorus” by Georg Handel:

“The Kingdom of this world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.”

The doctrine of the “Last Judgment” has never been a central point of faith in the Presbyterian Church. For some it is a frightening and foreign concept.

One of the most powerful parables that Jesus told was the “parable of the sheep and the goats” in Matthew 25. In this parable Jesus mentions the coming of the Son of Man in his glory. In the parable, Jesus sits on a throne and all the nations are gathered before him. According to that parable Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are destined for the kingdom that God has prepared; the goats are destined for eternal punishment. The amazing thing about this parable is that salvation depends on acts of human kindness: feeding the hungry, giving a cup of cold water to one who is thirsty, visiting those who are sick and in prison.

Theologically, the problem here is that it seems to contradict the New Testament assertion that salvation is by God’s grace, not by human works – even these works of compassion. Perhaps this parable is important because it does not wipe out the distinction between good and evil. It is true that we are saved by grace through faith. But that does not nullify the need for all of us to use our energy to wipe out the suffering and sorrow of the world around us.

A second symbol that the Book of Revelation holds before us is the symbol of the Second Coming of Christ. Again, Presbyterians, like most Protestants, have not placed a lot of emphasis on this doctrine. The images of Christ coming on the clouds of heaven with a trumpet to slay the dragon are impressive, but they cannot be taken literally and a great deal of damage has been done by those who have tried to take these images too literally.

But the notion of the Second Coming does affirm that God is indeed Lord of history and that human history will not come to a conclusion either with a whimper or a bang, but rather by the will and intention of God.

Frances Pickens Miller, who was a church leader and statesman in the political life of Virginia for a number of years, served on the staff of General Dwight D. Eisenhower at the conclusion of the Second World War. Once, a young lieutenant under his command was talking with a Russian officer, who asked the American, “Have you read Karl Marx?” The American lieutenant responded that he had. “Then”, said the Russian, “You know how all of this will turn out.” The American responded by asking the Russian soldier if he had read the New Testament. “If you have,” he said, “You know how this will all turn out.”

The Christian doctrine of the end is simply the affirmation that the God who created the world and the God who redeems his people will bring his creation and his people to fulfillment and to judgment.

God reigns. This is the Christian hope. It is the persistent theme of scripture, from creation (Genesis 1) to the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21).

It is this hope that allows us to say with the author of Revelation “And he shall reign forever and ever.” Amen!