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## The ABC's of Faith E – Eschatology

Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.... 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 25:31-40 31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Those of you who have traveled with your children on car trips, or those who remember doing so as a child with your own parents, know that there is a universal cry and question, repeated in as whiny a voice as possible, increasing in frequency the longer the trip. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Say it with me: **“Are we there yet???”** There's a shaggy old joke that goes like this: A street preacher one evening went into a bar, climbed atop a barstool and began preaching to the crowd. And at the climax of that impromptu sermon, he shouted: *“Everyone who wants to go to heaven with me, raise your hand.”* Most of the hands in the room went up. Again he hollered: *“Everyone who wants to go to heaven with me, raise your hand right now.”*

This time, every hand in the room was raised — except one. The preacher went over to that one and said: *“Friend, don’t you want to go to heaven when you die?”* Calmly the man looked up at him and said, *“Oh! Sure. I just thought you meant that you were taking a load right now. And I’d just as soon wait.”*

How does it end? Our bored child travelers trapped in that car and our bar patrons wondering whether the time is now or later and lots of others we could name share the same situation: they all want to know **“how the story ends.”** And that very same theme, of course, has been a part of Judaism and Christianity since their dawns, and speculations about “how the story ends” are in fact a part of every world religion that I know anything about. Just as virtually every religion has a creation story that is meant to explain how things got started and what it all means, so too do religions share the same urge to give shape and form and meaning to what will happen at the other end of things. You don’t have to be religious, either, to wonder about how things began and how they will end.

In fact, in the last 15 years or so there has been a veritable deluge of end-of-times movies and novels. The first of those movies may have been “Independence Day,” but it was followed quickly by ones like “Waterworld” and “The Postman” and “The Matrix” series. They join novels like John Birmingham’s magnificent and disturbing trilogy After America, which paints a grim picture of life in the United States after a mysterious cosmic event destroys 95% of the country, or the equally disturbing One Second After which describes what life would be like in one small town after a nuclear electromagnetic pulse destroys all electronics. And then there are many, many zombie movies and tv shows of late which usually portray some dire and disturbing end-times scenario and purport to show who will survive and how they will do so. I could name other examples, but our culture, for one reason or another, has indeed been suffused with thinking about and worrying about the shape of “the end of things.”.

The topic for this morning's latest sermon in our "ABC's of Faith" series is "E–*Eschatology*." And while I suspect that it's not a word that 95% of you have heard, and while it does tend to be a word used mostly in scholarly discussions of religion, it's nonetheless a word which names something that every single one of us has indeed thought about. For "eschatology" literally means "thinking about the end things" or "thinking about the end of time." And the Bible is full of images and speculations about the "end of time," the "eschaton." There are in fact, as I'm sure you know, some churches and some preachers that purport to be able to tell you exactly and in excruciating detail what will happen, when it will happen, how long will each stage last, etc., etc. It seems like every few years someone – as a man in Oakland, California, did a few years ago – will announce that he knows the exact time the world will end, and urge their followers to sell everything and gather together for that end-time moment. These folks often take their cue and interpretive flights from some of the images in Revelation, forgetting that that letter is best understood as a kind of "code book" originally written at the turn of the first century to bolster and comfort other Christians during an era of terrible persecution and not as predictions about the future. This morning, then, I *could* have chosen for our scriptures to talk about this topic something from Revelation, or I *could* have chosen dozens of other texts from the gospel of Mark or Paul's earliest writings, or the Book of Daniel or any number of others. But I finally chose the two I did this morning because I believe they illustrate three important things for us to keep in mind about this topic. Now, as always with these topics in this sermon series, we can only begin to scratch the surface. Nonetheless, what I want to focus on this morning may help us all think about what our faith might mean – and not mean! – in regard to thinking about "eschatology," the end of things.

First point. One very common interpretation of "the end of times," one which you've no doubt heard more than once is what is called "rapture theology." And while

its adherents argue over the details, the basic point is this: at some point at “the end of things,” God will choose certain people and will suddenly and bodily take them “up” into heaven, ejecting them in an instant from whatever they are doing. In its more lurid depictions, rapture writers talk about how “at the rapture,” airliners will suddenly be pilotless, leaving them to crash and kill people. Or I have read depictions of family dinners where one spouse is suddenly raptured, leaving behind the other spouse and a child or two who didn’t make the cut. And then most rapture theology goes on to say that those “left behind” will in fact be consigned to hell before, during, or after a cataclysmic battle between God and Satan which God will win as the cosmos is destroyed and the end of time comes.

Let’s think about this, though, because I think that such a view is **not** good news, is **not** in line with the God of grace and love that we worship. To me, this sort of view is not a depiction of a God who loves all, but in fact **blasphemes** a God whose deepest desire is that all would know Him. I have a cousin who once sported a bumper sticker on his car that said *“In case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned.”* And he would talk about how he didn’t care – and how he believed that God didn’t care – that his suddenly driver-less car would likely cause a terrible accident (and I found it interesting that he “knew” he would be one of those chosen!). Again, though, think about what is implied in all of this: if this is true, then it means that God is not in fact the tender shepherd who cannot stand for even one sheep to be lost; it means that God is not the mother hen who longs to take Jerusalem under her wings, saints, sinners, and all; it means that God is not the One who, scripture says, wills and hopes that no one will be lost. It would be very difficult to worship a God who was that kind of God, wouldn’t it? You might be *scared* of such a “rapturing” God, you might want to *placate* such a deity, but could you really **worship** and **adore** and call perfectly **good** a God who might pluck your spouse into heaven or who might pick and choose one of your children but not the

other? I just cannot believe that this is the way the “eschaton,” the end of things will be, because I know and you know and have known the tender and abiding mercies of God, not God’s capricious and divine despotic power.

Second point about eschatology, the “end of time,” the “end of things.” It is not only certain Christians who speculate about how things will end. Just as scientists and ordinary folks have wondered about the beginnings of things, so too has the question of the end of time long-engaged folks. For example, some scientists say that in some sense, there really will be no “end of time,” for what will happen over unimaginably long eons will be that entropy wins, the force that is driving things apart and that one day every atom in the universe will simply be infinitely distant from every other one and there will be no universe in any sense in which we are familiar. This would be, in essence, the icy end that poet Robert Frost describes in his poem “Fire and Ice” when he says “*Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice.*” Other scientists and cosmologists take the fiery option and say that one day a cascading series of supernova - exploding stars – will have a chain reaction that immolates everything that is.

Now, it would be a mistake to look to the Bible for scientific guidance about these questions, just as it would be a mistake to turn to science to discover and know the content of our faith. For you see, the Bible does not purport to be a book of facts in the sense that an encyclopedia is a book of facts. No, the Bible, written over the course of three thousand years by scores of writers – and building on oral traditions that go back millennia more than that – is best understood as a witness to the ***meaning of things***. And to cut to the chase, in the Christian witness, the culmination and summation of the meaning of things as regards questions about the end of times can be best found in those beautiful words from St. Paul:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things*

*present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is a passage usually and appropriately read at funerals. But it **could** be a passage read **whenever** we are asking about what it all means and what is this world's ultimate destiny. Now, if we are looking for "the mechanics" of that ultimate end, we will not find the answer in the Bible, for the Bible is not a book of science, a book of facts, or even a book of predictions. There are dozens of images in the Bible about the end of time, the eschaton. But what Paul's beautiful words tell us – and why if I could only take one Bible passage to a desert island it would be this one! – is that **whatever** the mechanics, **whatever** comes, now or unimaginably later, God can be trusted not to ever cease loving us or this world. God can be trusted. Period. For you see, it is much more important for our faith to discern not so much the "mechanics" of how the end might come, not so much "the day and hour," but rather to discern what God wants us to understand and to do as we abide in the assurance that we can trust God to bring things to a good end, even if we don't know or understand the "mechanics" of it all.

Finally – third point – it is **because** of that very assurance that nothing will separate us from the love of God that we can and should be both freed and motivated to seek to live our lives well, to live them morally, to live them in a way that seeks to serve this world and not simply take from it. And that's finally the point of our other scripture for this morning, that stark parable that Jesus told about "the end of time" when He will be asking some questions about whom we clothed and fed, about which vulnerable ones we tried to protect, about which of the poor whom we tried to help, and which ones we tried not to leave to the machinations of injustice and xenophobia and hatreds and biases against class or race or gender or ethnicity or orientation.

Is this a "literal" description of the eschaton, the final end of things? I don't know.

Again, I don't think that's the really important question here, nor the real point that Jesus was making. Rather, this teaching, this parable, is indeed the reminder to us that we are called to be creators with God. For God has created us, sustains us, loves us, enfolds us in the divine arms and always seeks our good and never to harm us. And unlike all those zombie apocalypse movies and shows that say that the way to deal with the end of things is to huddle in a small group of "the chosen," ignoring the world and its ills and evils and not caring about those who will not be "saved," Jesus' parable asks us instead to join in helping God to create a world where more folks are housed, more folks are fed, fewer folks are marginalized and hurt and abraded by injustice or by ideas which demean and dehumanize them. When Jesus says "*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,*" he's not scolding or threatening, He's offering the **opportunity** and the **challenge** to join Him in His ministry of feeding, of loving, of caring, and of justice.

So now you know a new word: eschatology. But whatever it turns out that the final end of things are, you also know an old, old truth: that *whatever* comes, God will, as the saying goes, be good all the time and will never delight in hurting. You know that *whatever* the "mechanics" of how the end will turn out that God can be trusted. You know that *whatever* the end may be, Jesus Christ wants you in the here and now to join Him in loving and serving, offering hope and healing to all whom God puts in your path. For that opportunity, thanks be to God! Amen.