First Sunday in Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

*Jesus returns to bring peace and joy.*

Congratulations you have all survived the end of the world! In fact, according to a Wikipedia page titled “List of Dates Predicted for Apocalypse Events” since 1980 there have been over 30 proposed dates for the rapture and the end of the world, so you and I are doing really well at surviving doomsday.

The popularity of such works as the Left Behind series and The Late Great Planet Earth testify to the obsession that some people, notably Fundamentalist Christians, have with trying to predict the exact date and time of the supposed rapture and end of the world.

The word rapture does not occur in the Bible. Revelation the supposed go to book for the end of the world never mentions it. In order to get the idea of the rapture you must very carefully take a few sentences from select books of the Bible completely out of context, twist them further, throw in some bad math, and a dash of fear.

Lutherans do not believe in the idea of the rapture because it is completely unbiblical, and it arrogantly assumes a human being could figure out the details of the end times when Holy Scripture is clear that even Jesus the Son of God does not know the details. We heard in our gospel reading two weeks ago Jesus even warns is disciples not to listen to anyone coming saying “the end is near” for they are liars.

The Fundamentalist idea of the rapture turns what is meant to be good news into a terrifying fear tactic to try and scare faith into people, and it misses the good news that God intends in the unexpected coming of Jesus.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent an important season in the Church when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day, but we also remember that we are still awaiting the return of Jesus and so we continue to pray “come Lord Jesus.”

Our reading from the gospel according to St. Matthew talks about waiting and at first it might seem like it is talking about the rapture idea so popular with Fundamentalists.

Jesus has been asked by his disciples when the last day will be and how they will know. Jesus tells them that even he does not know only God the Father has that knowledge and God the Father is keeping that hidden. It then tells them that it will be like the days of Noah when the flood came.

Now remember how the story of Noah goes. The world is filled with wicked and evil people. God decides to send a flood to sweep away everyone except for the family of Noah who are righteous and who love and obey God. Except for Noah and his family no one had any idea there was a flood coming until it arrived. They were all taken by surprise.

Now this idea that the return of Jesus will involve a sweeping away of the wicked presumably to judgement probably does not sit well with us. We don’t like to think of Jesus as a judge because what do judges do? They hear legal cases against people and determine the punishment for crimes. We are far more comfortable with Jesus doing healing miracles, holding little children, and snuggling a lamb that we are with Jesus as judge.

These reading seems to sound a lot like the Fundamentalist rapture of fear idea. Except for the major fact that Jesus is not saying, “I am coming unexpectedly so be very afraid and start stocking up on batteries, canned food, and water jugs.”

Jesus is saying, “I am coming at an unexpected time but have faith that I will return, be watchful, and in the meantime preach the gospel by loving and serving your neighbors and telling them my story.”

Our world year after year still suffers from the same problems of Jesus day. We have systematic poverty, we have people suffering or dying from disease and illness because they can’t afford their medical deductible, or they are denied coverage.

We have wars that claim the lives of thousands every year. We have greed that has blinded many to the needs and suffering of those around them. We have leaders who abuse their powers to maintain the status quo as they see fit instead of being servant leaders.

We have racism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia, and every form of division and hatred you can think of still going on despite the claim that we are an advanced society and culture.

Looking at our world it can be hard to believe that Jesus really is planning to return, and how many of us actually think about Jesus returning during our own lifetimes?

This is why the promise Jesus gives us that he is returning is joyous news. Jesus promise to return is a promise that Jesus has not forsaken our hurting world, that he does care deeply for the suffering that goes on, and that Jesus will return to set things right and bring the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

God cared so much for our world and the suffering of creation that God came down from heaven and was born of the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit as Jesus our Lord. Jesus loved this world enough that he died for it on the cross so that all who believe receive forgiveness and a new relationship with God.

Jesus loves this world enough that he rose from the dead to bring the promise and hope of the bodily resurrection and eternal life to come in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus loves this world and us enough that he promised to return to set things right, to make all things new, and to bring the fullness of the Kingdom of God where there will be no more suffering, poverty, illness, persecution, or dying.

For those who have faith and trust in the promises of Jesus the return of Jesus is not a terrifying notion of the rapture or the annihilation of the earth. Instead it is a comforting notion of hope that Jesus cares for our world and he plans to return to bring about more joy and wonder than we can imagine.

So, all through the year but especially during the season of Advent we are hopeful and waiting. We don’t have the details of when Jesus will return and we don’t need to. Instead we will await the return of Jesus knowing the joy he will bring, we will focus on preaching the gospel and serving others while we wait, and we will continue to pray together “come Lord Jesus.” Amen.