

## **“The Kingdom of God Has Come upon You”**

The text for my sermon on November 12 was 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, in which Paul writes that when Christ comes the dead, those who have fallen asleep, will be raised first to meet him in the air. “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

I said that Paul’s words along with Revelation 20 have been misinterpreted by some Christians to assert that Christians will be raptured, taken away, leaving people left behind. Here is the text from Revelation:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. (Revelation 20:1-3)

The misinterpretation of Scripture results from trying to fit Revelation into a chronological time line. Some in the early Church tried this, but most leaders said much of Revelation is symbolical, especially the numbers. St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.) in particular said the thousand years is symbolical. After him, most of the Church interpreted the passage symbolically up until the Protestant Reformation. At that point some coming out of the Anabaptist tradition returned to the misinterpretation of a literal, historical thousand years. This view took hold in North America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and then became very popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century up to the present time.

The symbolical interpretation of the “thousand years” is that it began when Christ came into creation as the Word of God incarnate. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark have Jesus’ first public proclamation of the gospel of God as, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15; see also Matthew 3:2) The saints have been living in the “thousand years” ever since. The kingdom of God is already present in creation. The second coming of Christ will bring the kingdom in all its fullness – the passing away of the present creation and the coming of the new creation.

When the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by “Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” he responded:

Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (Matthew 12:25b-30; see also Luke 11:17b-23)

The binding of Satan began with Jesus' first coming. Otherwise there would not be millions of saints in all centuries since, including us, set free from bondage to sin, death and the devil. Jesus and the Holy Spirit have been plundering Satan's house.

Martin Luther in his commentary on Psalm 110:2, "The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter," writes about how Christ rules in this "thousand years" on earth:

In his invisible essence he sits at the right hand of God; but he rules visibly on earth and works through external, visible signs, of which the preaching of the Gospel and the sacraments are the chief ones, and through public confession and the fruits of faith in the Gospel. These are the true marks whereby one can really recognize the kingdom of the Lord Christ and the Christian Church: namely wherever this scepter is, that is the office of preaching of the Gospel, borne by the apostles into the world and received from them by us. Where it is present and maintained, there the Christian Church and kingdom of Christ surely exist, no matter how small or negligible the number of the flock.

He emphasizes the power of Christ's rule:

The fact that Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, preaching, faith, the Holy Scriptures, and the confession of the name of Christ continue in the world up to the present time should be proof plain enough for anyone that the kingdom of Christ is being maintained and preserved solely by divine and almighty power. If this were not so, the devil would have been too mighty and strong for it . . . But as long as there is one baptized Christian upon the earth, as long as one pulpit remains, yes, as long as the name of Christ remains known anywhere despite the devil's furious wrath and rage, this due solely to the exalted and heavenly power of the Lord.

Thanks be to God that the kingdom of our Lord has come upon us and we are already living in it.