



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

THE FIFTH SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST

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A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

So what do we mean by the rapture? Where did this notion of the rapture come from? Is there any truth to it? And why do we even care?

In and of itself, the rapture refers to Christ's sudden return to earth and the 'rapture of the saints into the air.'"¹ In other words Jesus comes back and gets all the good folks and takes them to heaven. This does beg two questions which are very frightening. First, what are we wearing when we arrive in heaven? And what will the age of our raptured bodies be when we get there?

The rest of us would be left behind. (Is it starting to sound familiar?) The rapture would be part of a scheme of distinctive time periods of history or dispensations. After the rapture, the rest of us would be left to a time – a dispensation – of tribulation. Following which, Jesus would come back yet again and lead a violent and triumphant victory over evil and the antichrist.

How did we get here? The idea of the rapture originated with John Nelson Darby in the late 19th century, as part of his scheme of distinctive dispensations in history.² Darby "expected Christ's sudden return and the 'rapture of the saints into the air.'"³

Such Premillennial Dispensationalism, as it was called, took hold in America in the late 19th Century, and was further facilitated by the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. The Scofield Bible had annotations promoted the idea of dispensations and the rapture. Over 2,000,000 copies were sold, and Premillennial Dispensationalism became insinuated into Protestant Bible study in the United States.⁴

Seminaries were even instituted around the dispensationalist scheme of Biblical interpretation, including the Moody Bible Institute in 1886 and the Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924. Moody has about 50,000 alums today.⁵ Dallas Theological Seminary has around 15,000 in over 100 countries.⁶

¹ *Id.*

² Alistair, Mason, "Dispensationalism," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*. Adrian Hastings, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 170

³ *Id.*

⁴ Mason 170.

⁵ <https://www.moody.edu/About/>.

⁶ <https://www.dts.edu/>.

And Moody owns and operates 70 FM radio stations in 24 states, as well as a digital channel on the Internet.⁷ Even the Scofield Bible has drawn an update in the form of the *Ryrie Study Bible*, published in 1978 by Charles Ryrie from the Dallas Theological Seminary. Get the leather-bound red-letter edition from Christianbooks.com today – on sale for \$33.49 with free shipping.

Even today, the rapture remains quite popular and compelling in some corners of Christianity and in our culture as a whole – most notably represented by the best-selling *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, volumes 1-16 available on Amazon in paperback for \$215.64. The series begat a motion picture starring Nicholas Cage – \$9.32 on Blue-ray, also from Amazon. Let me say for the record that I am disinclined to take seriously any movie starring Nicholas Cage, but that has nothing to do with the rapture.

Nor apparently does the Bible. Because try as I might, I have yet to find the word rapture in the Bible. Nor has anyone else. Let me also say for the record, the word “rapture” does not appear in *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*. It does not appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. It does not appear in the *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*. It does not even appear in the index of *The Bible for Dummies*.

Our *Book of Common Prayer* is similarly silent. Our Episcopal tradition, expressed in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, state instead that Jesus ascended to heaven and will return only once in glory in the true end times to judge the living and the dead.

We should not be surprised then that whole scheme of the rapture rests on a faulty, convoluted interpretation of the Bible that necessarily requires non-Biblical additions and emendations that conveniently distort the true meaning of Scripture embraced by our tradition. Even Tim LeHaye admits that the theology of Christ’s coming back again twice in the midst of the dispensations is nowhere laid out in Scripture.

Furthermore, it begs the question why God would have hidden anything so important as the purported rapture in disparate and unrelated texts that would have to be pieced together like a complex and confusing jigsaw puzzle. And why was it hidden for 1800 years until John Darby somehow figured it out?

⁷ <https://www.moodyradio.org/stations/>.

The rapture also misappropriates the Revelation to John as a predictor of end time events rather than the Scriptural assurance of God's ultimate victory. Revelation in all its apocalyptic imagery and language is the story of the God who loves us and comes to live with us in the person of Jesus Christ.⁸ It assures us that God will remain faithful to us always, and gives us hope even in the face of the terror and evil that stalks the corners of the world today.

Second, the theology underlying the rapture sees the world as evil, an ancient heresy long ago laid to rest. Earth becomes the realm of the antichrist, and as Chicago evangelist Dwight Moody explained the rapture, "Individual survivors might be rescued, but the vessel itself [is] beyond hope." Nothing could be more at odds with our understanding of a God who created us, called us – and all of creation – loves us, and never would leave the world behind.

No wonder the entire theology surrounding and supporting the rapture is roundly condemned by most Biblical scholars and Christian Churches, including the Episcopal Church.⁹

Do we wonder why do these fabricated theologies and bogus understandings of God and Scripture persist? In the complex and often confusing times we live in, people may just lust for clear cut answers, and the rapture draws them into a comprehensive, overarching narrative that is simple and, as such, quite appealing.

But sadly, as journalist and ordained Baptist minister Bill Moyers observed, "One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal."¹⁰

Should we be concerned? As columnist Nicholas Kristoff observed, "[I]f Jesus is a warrior who kills all those who disagree with him, that image should raise public concern. The danger is that born-again followers will seek to follow their absolutist script in the political realm."¹¹ "God so loved the world that he sent World War III."¹²

Sadly, one consequence of the Left Behind theology is its utter disregard for the earth and our environment. Those who insist the rapture is coming must hope it will occur before the seas and temperatures rise to destructive levels.

⁸ Rossing xvii.

⁹ Rossing 21.

¹⁰ Rossing x, *citing* Bill Moyer, "There is No Tomorrow," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, January 30, 2005.

¹¹ Rossing viii, *citing* Nicholas Kristoff, "Jesus and Jihad," *New York Times*, July 17, 2004.

¹² Rossing 10, xvii.

Yet we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This is not a prayer that contemplates our escape from earth. It is not a prayer that contemplates our fleeing to a bunker, guns in hand. It is a prayer that acknowledges that our obligation is to create God's kingdom on earth, not just wait around for Jesus to rescue us and rapture us to heaven, leaving our clothes behind.