

*Living in the Middle of the Story*

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is one of my husband's favorite books. It is *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. A note to the reader indicates this is the only complete, definitive edition of all the famous stories of detective Sherlock Holmes, as written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Perhaps you did not notice, but the hardback cover is missing. Finally fell off. No matter. Randy continues reading it, again and again, though he did say maybe he ought to purchase a new and sturdier volume.

Randy suggested to me, several years ago, that I should read it. I began with the story *A Study in Scarlet*. I never read the entire story. See, I confess I have a terrible habit: I like to read the **ends** of stories . . . **before I'm supposed to**. That's why I rarely read a mystery—I'm always wanting to know "who done it." I skip over vast chunks of material to get to the answer, to solve the mystery, to discover the name of the perpetrator. And once I know that answer, I am reluctant to backtrack and read the rest of the story.

I even do it with other types of novels. You know the sixth Harry Potter book? I **knew** what happened to Professor Dumbledore, I **knew** the girl Harry Potter would kiss—because I looked ahead. Now, I eventually did read that book in its entirety, but not in any kind of sequential order. I know, I know. It's a bad habit.

I can relate to those disciples, standing mesmerized before the temple in Jerusalem. Their teacher, Jesus, has just told them that this imposing structure, built of mammoth stones and expensive materials over years of time, will be destroyed. The disciples attempt to digest that information, but finally, while sitting quietly on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, four of the disciples just have to ask Jesus, "When will this be? When is all this going to take place? What signs will we see, so that we know?"

They are flipping the pages of the story in order to get to the ending, okay? And they are no different from the earliest Christians in the first century after Jesus' death and resurrection, who were certain Jesus Christ would soon return, and kept looking for indications of it. They are no different, in fact, from Christians of nearly every century since. It seems almost everyone wants to know when the world's going to come to an end. When God's final kingdom will be ushered in by our victorious Lord Jesus. When time and history will be no more, the dead will be raised, and Christ will be all in all.

Christians throughout the centuries who have pondered these very things, desiring to know the end of the story, have often looked to scripture for the answers, scripture such as what we read today in our Old Testament lesson from Daniel. In doing so, some people have

produced rather ingenious, intricate, and interesting interpretations of the scripture they've read. Take the book of Daniel, for example. Now, it's scripture that is what we call apocalyptic in nature. (Apocalypse means "uncovering" or "revealing" something hidden beneath the surface.)

Biblical passages like Daniel are considered apocalyptic because they have layers of symbolic imagery through which they speak about the pervasiveness of evil in the world, the suffering of the righteous, and then point to a time when God will right all the wrong by replacing this age with a new age. Daniel itself was written at a time when the Jewish people were in revolt against the Greek Empire—around 165 BC. The Jewish people faced persecution and fear. The book of Daniel spoke profoundly to these suffering people. But apocalyptic scripture from over 2,000 years ago continues to intrigue, motivate and confuse people to view their current circumstances as being the very things described in the scripture passage, and then to predict, based on their interpretation of that passage, the date of the end of the world. That date, predicted many times over, has come and gone. **And we're still here.**

Yet, we remain insistent—we humans are determined to flip the pages to get to the end of the book. One of the latest attempts to do this is what is known in theology as "premillennial dispensationalism." Say that three times quickly. In the mid-1800's an Anglo-Irish preacher named John Nelson Darby took bits and pieces of scripture, portions of Daniel included (along with Revelation and I Thessalonians), tied them together, and predicted for himself and his followers what was to happen. He believed that history was divided into various ages (called "dispensations"), and that Christ would return to earth twice. First, in secret, in order to "rapture" or snatch up any true believers into heaven. This would rescue them from the period of chaos and destruction that was to occur for the next seven years (called the "tribulation"). Then Christ would come one more time to reign for 1,000 years, and usher in a final resurrection of those left on earth who had remained faithful.

Now, a lot of money is being made off of this particular attempt to read the signs, know the outcome, determine the end of our story. Mostly, the money is being made by writers such as Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, whose *Left Behind* novels take up the subject of the rapture, tribulation, and Christ's final coming. They are novels, fiction, yet their popularity indicates that many people understand them as claiming somehow to present biblical prophecy about end times.

Theologian Barbara Rossing, who has written a book called *The Rapture Exposed*, strongly disagrees with the proponents of the rapture theory. Not only does she, through her in-depth Biblical studies, believe they have grossly misinterpreted the original intent of apocalyptic scripture, but she also claims they elevate rapture above what most Christians believe are the most important, basic tenets of our faith: And those are the incarnation of Jesus Christ—that he is the Word of God made flesh—and that he died and rose again. These two most important events in time and history (incarnation and resurrection) declare to us how much God **loves** his creation, **loves** the world and the people he made. But Rossing rightly notes that premillennial dispensationalism and the rapture theory are actually **contrary** to that love God has for his creation. For espousing those interpretations only

leads us to hate this world and everything in it, and encourages us to want to escape this world, and just leave this broken world behind. That's not what apocalyptic scripture was even intended to do—to provide escape. The book of Daniel was intended to declare to those suffering in this world that God was still at work for our sake, that hope and strength were to be found in him. The goal of apocalyptic scripture wasn't to give a chronological listing of future events, but rather, to wake people up to faithful living in **this** world—broken as it may be—and to encourage repentance, and a turning back to God and his glorious vision of peace and justice for all of creation. After all, look how Jesus handles the disciples' anxious questions about the temple's destruction. Jesus responds by advising caution when looking for signs. Oh, he's well aware that people are already looking. Why, he even quotes from the book of Daniel in the verses just following our Gospel lesson. There **will** be wars and rumors of wars, civil strife, natural disasters—all kinds of chaotic events will take place, he says, only they're not signs of the end. Every generation in this broken world will experience those calamities. But Jesus tells his disciples not to look upon those events as **predictors**. He also tells them not to be misled by those who claim to speak for him. There will be false teachers and prophets out there who will not be speaking his truth, who will only make them more afraid, and keep them from trusting Jesus and his words. Such false messiahs could easily convince them to take the wrong paths in life, and certainly one wrong path would be to search endlessly for end signs while neglecting the present good work God has given his people to do.

And what **is** that good work which God has given us to do in this present, in-between time? Our second lesson, from the letter to the Hebrews, clues us in. The writer of Hebrews first says we are to approach God with utmost assurance that through Christ we've been forgiven; that God wants us to come to him. Then we are to gather together as his people regularly, so that we can stir up in one another loving words and actions, and encourage one another through tough times. Above all, we are to live as hopeful people, for God has promised to be faithful. In other words, **we are to live in the middle of the book**. We are to live in the middle of our story-line, and God will be here with us in that living.

Now, it doesn't mean we aren't **ever** to think about the future, about time and history coming to an end, about Christ's return to reign. In just two weeks, we will enter the season of the church year known as Advent, and we'll hear scripture that speaks about Christ's future rule and the kingdom of God. Of course we are to hope in the final transformation of this life into the life of God. But we're supposed to trust that **God** will handle that, **he'll** guide us to the end of the book when it's time, and he's called us, in the meantime—and until that time—to be devoted to living as his people, here, imitating Christ, in a world which needs Christ. **AMEN**.