

The Bible is not for calculating but for Christ

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Here we are one Sunday before Christ the King Sunday, the end of the church year. The texts are stronger in terms of judgment, especially judgment on those who are leaders, and then also the note of hope that we find in 1 Thessalonians.

As we have noted, there are many today, particularly among evangelicals and Baptists, who are caught in end-time thinking. Dallas Theological Seminary, which has over 2,000 students and over 100 faculty, is a major center for study of "the Rapture" and end times. And Dallas Theological Seminary is not alone. There are many such schools, neighborhood Bible studies, and preachers. We ask ourselves: What do we Lutherans say to this?

Related to this is how people love signs. Some surveys report that 40% of Americans claim to have seen an angel. Few of them consider what Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:14: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Their angel is never Satan in disguise. It is always: "I have a special sign, evidence, a private miracle." It gives them something more than living by faith in Jesus Christ.

At the end of the church year, we focus on the end-times: When, where, and how will it happen? We don't know. It's not for us to know. As Paul states in 1 Thessalonians 5:2: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." And Mark 13:32: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor even the Son, but only the Father." These texts are right there for everyone to see. Yet many go on to say: We can use the Bible to interpret the events of our day and figure out the end-times.

This is not a new phenomenon. Already in the year 140 A. D. there was a man named Montanus who said: "God the Father was in the Old Testament, God the Son was in the New, and I am the Holy Spirit. Listen to me." He used the Book we call Revelation. People didn't know what to do about him and his claims, but that controversy was one the important things that pushed the church into shaping up the canon of the Bible.

About 1200 A.D. a man named Joachim of Fiora calculated the end-times were coming soon. That was a time of great unrest and upheaval. This went on until the time of Luther, who also understood that the end was coming in his generation.

In the 1700's there was in Germany a Lutheran Greek scholar of some note, named Johann Bengel. His meticulous study of the Bible led him to believe that dates and time periods were related all the way from Genesis to Revelation and the end times could be predicted on this basis. His calculations of the end spread from Germany to England and the United States.

In England in 1830 a pastor named John Darby claimed to have received a special illumination from God about the end-times: There would be a "Rapture" in which Christ would snatch up believers. This was an idea that no one in church history prior to the 1800's had ever thought of or imagined. But this idea, once begun, has continued to have a strong grip on evangelical Christianity. It has led to Christians using numbers in the Bible to make complex and detailed charts to graph out the sequence of events in "God's plan."

In this country in the early 1800's, a preacher, William Miller, prophesied that the end of the world was coming in 1844. When the time came, his followers, over 100,000 people, sold their property, put on white robes, and went to the tops of hills and mountains, but the end didn't happen. It turned out to be what they called "the Great Disappointment," and they became what we know as the Seventh Day Adventists.

Rapture preachers appeal to Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where he writes about "we who are alive who are left shall be caught up . . . in the clouds," and also to Matthew 24:40-41: "Two men will be in the field; one is taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left," and Luke 17:34-35: "That night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together; one will be taken and the other left."

Some Rapture preachers are "date setters;" others are "date teasers." The Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the end would come in 1917. They were "date setters." When it didn't come, they said it came spiritually, but not in physical form.

In our day Tim LaHaye, author of *The Left Behind* series, is a "date teaser." He doesn't lock into a specific date.

People who are focused on calculating, on using the Bible to figure out God's plan and timeline, don't face the question: How does Scripture work? What is it all about?

When we Lutherans consider prophecy, we say it is three things: Retelling, forthtelling, and foretelling.

Retelling. First, prophecy is all about the great event of the Old Testament, the Exodus. The Lord took the people out of slavery, gave them a land, and promised them a future. Out of that the Old Testament says because God is like that, therefore he was consistent with himself at the beginning, and so we can look back.

Forthtelling. And therefore, the Lord is consistent with himself now. Most of what we call "prophecy" in the Old Testament is what we today call "preaching": This is who God is, and this is how he acts. He acts with judgment and to give us a hope.

Foretelling. Then there is a small portion of prophecy which is foretelling, looking toward the future. But it is not in the way of saying we can calculate the time and the season and

the place, but rather, God gave us an Exodus, and he will give us an Exodus again. God gave us a covenant, and he will give us a new covenant. God gave us a kingdom, and he will give us a new kingdom. God gave us a king, and he will give us a new king. God gave us the city of Jerusalem, and he will give us a new Jerusalem. God is the one who is the Lord and he continues to be the same way.

We can see this in certain examples. The Book of Jeremiah says all will be restored in seventy years. We know that the restoration was in 538 B.C., and we can calculate the Exile at 597 B.C. or 587 B.C. No matter what kind of mathematics you do, it doesn't come out to seventy years, because what the prophet was really saying is that it is about the lifetime of a man. Seventy years is three score and ten. This is not claiming special, inside knowledge of a divine timetable.

Or consider Isaiah 7:14, which is important for us soon in Advent. It says a young woman shall bear a son and you shall call his name Immanuel. That is first of all for the people right there, and it did come true that a young woman bore a son and they called his name Immanuel. But then in God's good purposes there are things which happened much later, but in no way do we say that Isaiah is giving us the times and the season.

Why do people get caught in calculating and claiming signs and the like? First of all, it's about being on the inside, having inside information. Then of course there is that feeling that I am in the elect. I've got it made because I can calculate the times and the seasons.

This is not a question of what God could do. There is no reason that God couldn't have created the world in one second with all the geological strata and all the books in all the libraries and all whatever is, just like that. It is rather that God takes our lives and our future seriously and becomes involved in our lives. That's who God is, not what God could do, but he is in Jesus Christ.

Then there is that temptation, which is a temptation of the evil one, to say: "Well, Lord, I know I should believe you, but please give me a sign. Give me an extra something, a feeling, a private miracle, so that I know you are Lord."

Matthew 16:1-4 warns us about this. The pharisees come to Jesus and say: "Give us a sign." Jesus says to them: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

The sign of Jonah? That is the cross. Jonah was the one who was swallowed by the whale, died, and then tossed up alive on the beach. It was a way of describing what the Lord was doing on the cross. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:22-24: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

This relates closely to I Thessalonians, which has a lovely passage that concludes: “We thank God constantly for this, that when you received **the word of God** which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, **the word of God** which is at work in you believers” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Remember this is Paul writing about the year 50 when there was no “book,” no Bible. (As we know, 1 Thessalonians is the oldest book we have of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. Most of the other writings weren’t written until much later.)

Paul here is not referring to **the word of God** meaning “the book.” He’s referring to **Jesus Christ**, to the message of **the cross** and of what Jesus Christ has done for us, and to the certainty we have not in signs and calculations but that he has made us his own in **Baptism**, and that he has conquered sin, death, and the devil on the cross, and that we have this “word of God” at work in us.

This is what the Bible is for. Not a book for calculating times and seasons, but for preaching Christ, crucified and resurrected. He is living now and he is with us in Word and sacrament.

Our hope is not in calculations, in signs, or experiences; our hope is in him. As Paul writes: “He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24). This is a sure hope. Amen.