

You may or may not have noticed the picture that hangs on the wall in the foyer of this church. It is the picture of a lion, a lamb, and a dove, cuddling together. It is not the state of things as they are now in the world. Lions do not lie down with lambs. If they had grown up together they might possibly lie down together. But the wildness of the lion would work against that. Lions can be trained, but they are never tamed. You must never assume that a lion will not bite its owner, or even its friend. My niece had, at one time, a dog, a cat, and a rabbit. All of them were inside pets and played together. But they were all tame animals. Lions are not tame.

That picture does not show how things are now on earth. Such a condition as the picture presents has never existed on this earth as far as we know. Perhaps it was that way in the beginning. But it has not been that way since sin was introduced into the world. We would label that picture as science fiction. It would take a miracle to bring about the conditions that picture presents. Only God could do such a thing.

Well, that is exactly what God tells us will happen. One day in the future God Himself will bring peace, real peace to the earth. It will be a peace between all people and all animals.

We are going to read a passage from the prophet Isaiah that describes this peace. It begins rather strangely. It speaks of a tree stump and a new tree shoot that comes up from the roots. Some of you may remember that the father of King David in ancient Israel was named Jesse. The opening verses speak of Jesse as a stump and one of his descendants as a new stalk that will grow up from the roots. Towards the end of the passage is the part described by the picture in the hallway.

Isaiah 11:1-9 (NIV) A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Last spring, my neighbor chopped down a holly tree that was on the property line between my yard and his. For most of last summer there was just a stump where the tree stood. But in late summer a new stem came up from the base of the stump. A new

holly tree is growing from the roots. That is the picture this passage begins with. The new shoot was a foretelling of the coming messiah from God, Jesus.

There are many prophecies in the Bible. Most of them refer either to the first coming of Jesus or his second coming. When Jesus returns to earth, He will bring a time of great peace and prosperity. This morning, I'm going to take you from now to eternity. First, let us read what the Baptist Faith and Message says about the end times.

X. Last Things

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in heaven with the Lord.

Isa. 2:4; 11:9; Matt. 16:27; Matt. 18:8-9; Matt. 19:28; Matt. 24:27, 30, 36, 44; Matt. 25:31-46; Matt. 26:64; Mark 8:38; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 12:40, 48; Luke 16:19-26; Luke 17:22-37; Luke 21:27-28; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Cor. 15:24-28, 35-58; 2 Cor. 5:10; Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 1:5; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:14-18; 1 Thess. 5:1ff.; 2 Thess. 1:7ff.; 2 Thess. 2; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Heb. 9:27-28; James 5:8; 2 Peter 3:7ff.; 1 John 2:28; 1 John 3:2; Jude 14; Rev. 1:18; Rev. 3:11; Rev. 20:1-22:13.

That first sentence speaks to the purpose of God. God had a purpose for creating the world and everyone on it. To accomplish that purpose, God initiated a plan. Within that plan, there are different outcomes for different people. God has planned one outcome for those who follow Him and another outcome for those who do not. We usually describe the first outcome as heaven and the second as hell. But there is more to it than that. This morning, I want to lay out for you what I believe the future holds for those of us on planet earth.

Here are **Several general truths about our current age:**

1. God has given all people enough evidence to believe in, and seek, God.

God created us to have a personal relationship with Himself. He has given us enough evidence to believe that He exists and to begin to seek Him. If we do seek Him, He will give us further information about Himself so that we can enter into a correct relationship with Him. That further information is the Good News of salvation through Jesus.

2. Many people reject the truth of God and make up something else.

This is described in Romans, chapter 1.

3. Most people live for self, indulging in sin.

Paul, the missionary, describes this for us in Ephesians. He does not mention specific sins, but rather the general attitude of sin.

Ephesians 4:17-19 (NIV) So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles (unbelievers) do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity

(to God Himself), they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

This is what comes naturally to us from the moment we are born. We live life for us.

4. The devil is running loose and causing us trouble.

1 Peter 5:8 (NIV) Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The devil is running loose on planet earth, getting into all kinds of mischief and opposing the things of God. He is our enemy and we must guard against his influence.

5. When a Christian dies in the current age, the soul goes to heaven and the body decays on earth.

The souls of all the Christians that die in our current age are in heaven, awaiting their resurrection bodies. So far, Jesus is the only one to have received a resurrection body.

This is the current situation of planet earth. As Christians we are to turn away from sin and live for Jesus. We are to give up our sinful ways.

For Christians the next event will be really good.

> The Next Event: The Rapture. The word rapture means to be "caught up" or "snatched away". We learn about it in 1 Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NIV) Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Jesus will appear in the sky over the earth, bringing with Him all those Christians who have already died. The Christians who are alive on earth when this occurs will suddenly be transformed into our resurrection bodies and rise up into the air to meet Jesus. And from then on we will be with Jesus. This will lead into a transition period between our current age and the next age. This transition event is called.

Think a moment about what it will be like when all the Christians on the planet disappear. Try to imagine the reactions to this. There are many on earth today who believe themselves to be Christians, but are not. They will be greatly disappointed when they are left behind. And many will be converted to Christianity. Among them will likely be many Jews. There will be a great spiritual awakening among Jews and many will be converted to faith in Jesus as their Messiah.

There are many people of other religions who believe that Christianity is untrue and their religion is true. Some of these will become disillusioned with their religion when all the Christians disappear and will be converted to Jesus.

There are also many people today who believe in God, but do not follow any particular religion. Some of these, too, will be converted to Jesus.

That will still leave many millions of people, even billions, who reject the truth. Such people will come to dominate the world and they will persecute Christians as never before. This will be the start of the transition period from our age to the next age.

> **The Transition Period: The Tribulation**

This will be a very bad time for the people living on earth. It will last for 7 years. Look at the following passage with me in Colossians.

Colossians 3:5-6 (NIV) Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

This wrath is not hell. Hell is the ultimate consequence for sin. But this part of God's wrath is a period of time on the earth when God will punish the sin of those living in that time. The book of Revelation paints a dismal picture of this time. God will bring great disasters on those who continue to do evil and reject the truth of God. It will include both natural disasters like tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, disease, and draught, and even worse God-made disasters. It will be as much a call to repent of sin as a punishment upon sinners.

There will be much terrible suffering during those 7 years. But God is merciful and they will not last any longer than necessary.

> **The Next Age begins when Jesus returns to establish Himself as King over all the earth.**

This will be the fulfillment of that Isaiah passage. His return will be sudden, without warning, and visible to all. At the beginning of that time, when Jesus returns to earth to rule, Satan will be bound up from His evil doings on earth.

Revelation 20:1-3 (NIV) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.

Then Jesus will have his angels separate the people of earth. Jesus spoke of this in His parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. All the non-Christians who are alive on earth when Jesus returns will be gathered up and judged and thrown into hell.

With no one left on earth except Christians, it will be a great time to be on the earth. Jesus Himself will rule in righteousness and justice, solving the problems of the world.

Go back to that Isaiah passage. It says the one to come will not judge by what he sees and hears. That is what a normal human judge does. A judge has to see and hear evidence and try to determine guilt or innocence. But Jesus will know who the guilty are and what they have done and will rule accordingly.

Now, people will be born during that time. Not all of them will become Christians. Many will resent the perfect rule of Jesus. Even a perfect ruler will not be accepted by the evil person. Look what happens at the end of the thousand years.

> **Satan released.** (Revelation 20:7-10)

He will gather an army of those discontented and unsaved children of the redeemed on the earth. But Jesus will defeat this army with just a word.

> **Final judgment of all the dead.**

All the unsaved dead will be raised from the dead to face judgment before God. Most will be thrown into the lake of fire, and Christians will all be united with Jesus to live on the new earth that God will create at that time.

I want to end with the final sentence of that Thessalonians passage.

1 Thessalonians 4:18 (NIV) Therefore encourage each other with these words.

There is great encouragement here for the follower of Jesus.

There is also great warning for those who are not following Jesus. You may be speaking it. You may be making a show of it. You may be fooling others. But in your heart you know it is just a sham. You are not fooling God. If the rapture occurs this week, you will grieve your lie. Sure, you can become a Christian then, but it will be much harder then to live for Jesus.

You need to humble yourself before Him today. Admit your sin. Admit your need for the Savior. Turn your life over to Him in repentance and obedience.