

Pentecost +23 2020

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Amos 5:18-24, Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

We are living through tense times. We had record voter turnout in the last election. Many of the people I talked to on the right and the left were voting because of concern for the nation's future. Though they differed in response both were anxious about the state of the country. In recent weeks, we've watched the infection rates of COVID increase. It is not clear when we will see a breakthrough. The ties that bound our allies together have been fraying, and many nations are embracing a renewed nationalism. Our culture feels as though it has drifted far from the roots of Christian faith as alternate neo-pagan practices are on the rise. Almost anywhere we turn it seems as there is cause for anxiety.

This anxiety is partly a sense of our own powerlessness to address these issues. We are thrust into a rapidly changing, devolving world, and it seems as though there is nothing we can do to stop it. The problems are too great. The divisions too strong. We carry a general sense of possible gloom hanging in the air.

Our Amos reading warns that the day of the Lord is a day of darkness and not night. Our Gospel reading, admonishes the five foolish virgins who do not prepare for the long wait in the dark. Their lamps run dry. The wise virgins prepare for the long night of watching and waiting for the bridegroom. The passage from 1 Thessalonians finds hope in the promised coming for the Lord for both those who have already died and those who remain alive. This week we hear the Word that holds together judgment and hope. In some ways, we are walking in this path that feels like judgment even as we look for hope.

Paul writes a letter encouraging the church at Thessalonica. Over the last few weeks, we have not spent any time reflecting on these lessons. I confess that I don't remember ever teaching from Thessalonians. Today, I am going to try and give a snapshot of this letter for I believe it speaks a word of hope to us even as it did to the Christians there so long ago.

This is one of the first writings of the New Testament, preceding all four Gospels. In one sense, this letter and Galatians represent two of the earliest Gospel proclamations in the New Testament. Thessalonica is just down the road from Philippi. According to Acts 16 and 17, Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi. When they are released, the city leaders ask them to depart.

They pass through a couple cities and decide to stop in Thessalonica. The Book of Acts says that Paul reasoned in the synagogue for three weeks. We're not sure how long Paul and Silas stayed in the city. It was at least three weeks and possibly for a few months. Some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas. Several Greek families also joined this newly emerging community of faith. At some point, the Jews in the city cause a revolt against Paul and Silas, and they have to leave rapidly.

They leave a community of believers in a pagan city. These believers have no Bible to study. They can read texts from Old Testament, but the church of Jesus Christ is so young there is no writing to study. They are lacking the kind of support system you would think a new set of believers needs.

Just imagine the disorientation. They have accepted the Gospel and in so doing can no longer return to their former lives in the city. The Jewish Christians are no longer welcome in the

synagogue. The Greek Christians come from a culture of many gods, mystery cults, and Roman cults including the cult of the Emperor.

They would feel a certain disorientation as their old life has become alien. Their new life is filled with joy, but they still have many unanswered questions. Imagine friends and family talking to these converts and encouraging them to return to the traditions of their culture.

These new believers would feel their own personal sense of disconnectedness while also feeling exclusion and pressure from those around them.

Timothy visit the community and brings news of their faithfulness back to Paul but also questions and struggles. Paul writes a letter of encouragement to the community. In the Greco-Roman culture, this letter is in the form of a friendship letter: written to renew the bonds of friendship, to rehearse common memories, to address any concerns, and to offer confidence for the well-being of the friends.

Though Paul didn't write using chapters, I am going to briefly summarize by our chapter designations to help us get a sense of the highlights in this letter of encouragement. Paul begins the letter by giving thanks to the Father for the saints at Thessalonica and remembering them in prayer by celebrating their faith and faithfulness to the hope found in Jesus Christ our Lord.

He discusses how these saints have become examples to congregations in other regions. Their faith and witness sound forth from Thessalonica to those in Macedonia and Achaia. Paul emphasizes how the Thessalonians have turned from idols to the true God and now wait "for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." (1:10)

Then Paul shifts. In chapter 2, he discusses their suffering. Historically speaking, it does not appear there were any martyrs in the region at the time, but many of them would have been suffering social and relational pressures. Many would be experiencing rejection, isolation, and a sense of loss. Paul encourages them that they are living out the faith much like Christians suffering in Judea, referencing the Jewish believers who have been kicked out of the synagogues.

Then once again Paul reiterates both his joy in them and his anticipation of the Lord's return, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy." (2:19-20)

In chapter 3, Paul transitions to speak of his longing for the saints at Thessalonica. When he could no longer bear the separation, Paul sent Timothy to them to encourage them, learn more about their situation, and bring a report back to Paul. As Paul celebrates their faith, he prays that he might see them face to face. Then he rehearses for a third time the hope he shares with them in the coming of the Lord. He prays, "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." (3:11-13)

In chapter four, Paul emphasizes how our hope takes shape in a simple life of holiness and love. Paul then returns a fourth time to our hope in the coming of the Lord. This time Paul rehearses the story of Jesus dying and rising again. Even as Jesus passed through death to life in the resurrection, His followers also pass through death to resurrection life. All who have died will rise again in His coming. All who are living will rise to meet Him, but they will also be changed thus in a sensing passing through death into life.

At last we come to the final words of the letter in chapter five. Paul encourages the brothers and sisters to watch expectantly for the coming of the Lord because the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. He will come suddenly and without warning. With this in mind, we encourage each other daily not to lose hope, but to live toward this coming hope. We live as children of light and not as the children of darkness in our culture.

In First Thessalonians, Paul expresses his deep bond of love for the people and his longing to come and see them soon. He encourages them in his absence. Even as he speaks of his own longing to come to them, he talks about Christ coming to them and to all His church in His return. We do not think of this return in a way that suggests Jesus has been on some other planet. He is present among even now by His Spirit, but Paul is rehearsing the great promise of Christ's reappearing when all the world will behold His glory and the glory of His saints. It is a day of judgment and a day of vindication for God's people. Paul returns to this theme of Christ's appearing again and again.

Our living hope in Jesus Christ, takes shape in day to day attitudes, activities and even interactions with people around us in the culture. This future hope is a present reality in our lives. Today I want to briefly puzzle over one aspect of Christ's return. How does this future hope reshape our daily lives, our worship, our faithful obedience?

Here are two possibilities:

1. Our understanding of death and the promise of bodily resurrection, can change what we value and how we live now.
2. The coming of the Lord reveals His faithful love poured out both in life and death. We enter into that pattern of love even now.

First, we might see how the resurrection has changed the meaning of death. In the Greco-Roman world, the afterlife is one of disembodied spirits with no power to do anything real. There is regret for inglorious death. This leads to a Greek virtue of glory in battle. Warriors strive for glory in this life and rehearse that glory in the afterlife.

The Gospel anticipates physical resurrection not disembodied spirits. Thus, the afterlife is not a place of regret or remembering past glory. It is a place where we will continue to grow in communion and serve in glory.

Just as Christ is physically risen, we follow. Our bodies will be glorified in ways we may not fully grasp now, but this promise gives us hope that we will continue to live and serve and participate in the kingdom in tangible ways. This frees us from pursuit of empty glories.

The followers of Christ are free to embrace virtues alien to the Greco-Roman world like humility and mercy. Even in our own culture that is consumed with pursuing self-fulfillment at all costs, we are free to let go the endless pursuit of things and jobs and wealth to enhance our own self-worth. Our self-worth is rooted in God's love for us and His promise of faithfulness to us.

We are free to live lives of quiet grace without always seeking to demonstrate how great we are to others. We are free to humble ourselves, to let go, to lose the argument, to pour out our lives in love.

This brings us to the second reason why this future hope can shape our present actions. In our reading today Paul offers a vision of the Lord's dramatic descent and the church's dramatic ascent. He writes,

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 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. (4:16-17)

Christ is descending to join His beloved family and to heal His beloved creation. Those who have died will gather with those who are still living. All enter into the fullness of His resurrection with glorified bodies. This promise of reunion is part of the longer story of God's faithful love to His people across the ages. He is free to humble Himself and pour out His love in surprising and sometimes unexpected ways.

Philippians 2 rehearses the story of Jesus Christ humbling Himself and taking the form of the servant. The Son of God descends into the life of humanity, being born in the likeness of man. Then he further humbles himself unto death even death on the cross. In this act of pouring out His life in death, He opens a way of healing and redemption through His own body. The Father raises up the Son from death to life. Jesus now ascends from the tomb to the resurrected body. Then after teaching His disciples for a season, the Son ascends to glory to the right hand of the Father.

In this pattern, we see the Son descending in mercy and ascending in resurrection life. Each week, the church rehearses this story the story of Jesus Christ offering himself. As the Eucharistic liturgy reads, "In obedience to your will, he stretched out his arms upon the cross and offered himself once for all, that by his suffering and death we might be saved. By his resurrection he broke the bonds of death, trampling Hell and Satan under his feet.

At the same time, the church rehearses our own participation in this offering. Our offering is a time of giving tithes and offerings, but it is also a time to bring ourselves: our failures and our successes. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord in worship. We lift up our hearts. We enter into the movement of God's descending and ascending in Jesus Christ. Just as the Lord transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, He is transforming us into a glorious people. A people whose lives reveal Jesus Christ.

In one sense, we are anticipating the return of the Lord every week as we act out the drama of descending and ascending in Christ.¹ Our offering is simply an act of obedience in following Christ in His offering. We ascend as He ascended, and He meets us in this place. We celebrate with all the hosts of heaven and all the saints the Eucharistic feast. This is a similar image to that of Jesus descending with all the saints and the church who is alive ascending to meet Him.

This weekly rehearsal trains us to become a people who daily present our bodies as living sacrifices. We live lives of humble obedience practicing this rhythm and trusting that in His time, the fullness of this activity will be unveiled, and Jesus will be revealed for all creation to see even as all the saints of God both living and dead enter into the fullness of resurrection life with transformed and glorified bodies. These rhythms transcend the anxieties of the age.

This hope translates into our pattern of living, into a life of faithfulness. Paul reminds his friends to continue walking and living out the simplicity of their faith by walking holy, loving truly,

living quietly, minding their own business, working with their hands, and serving honorably before those outside the faith.

Throughout the ages, God's people have lived and walked through crumbling kingdoms, persecutions, wars, famines, plagues. They live always looking forward to the promise of His faithfulness. Even as the world seems to crumble, they continue to sing and live out praise to God. They shine out like lights in the universe.

Even as we face anxiety in ourselves and the culture, we turn our hearts and minds to the promise of God's faithful love revealed in the coming of Jesus. By His grace, we are free to pour out our lives in love in small and hidden acts of faithful obedience.

¹ Douglas Farrow, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, ed. R. R. Reno, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 123. "The latter event begins a new and distinct movement in what can be called "the anaphoric work of Christ," by which the whole creation is presented to God in and with Christ (Farrow 2011: 158). We must distinguish the heavenly parousia from the earthly, the ascension from the second coming, recognizing in that distinction a time between the times, a eucharistic time, a pause in which the Church has its own anaphoric work to do, especially on the Lord's day. But it is equally important to see that Paul is thinking these two events together, as movements that ultimately coincide in God's one great work of exalting Jesus, and us with Jesus. He wants the Thessalonians, like the Philippians, to reach out with him "for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).