

All Saints – (2017)
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Revelation 7:9-17

As I mentioned last week, I've had the privilege of officiating at a number of funerals. Some deaths are more difficult to understand and more difficult to accept than others. As difficult as it is, death is something we must face; we don't have a choice. Given our druthers, we would probably wish to die with our boots on or quietly at night in our sleep. But that's not usually how it goes.

It seems that, usually, people die after an illness or after an injury though we all hear the news stories of people who die as a result of terrorism, war, some random shooting, or auto accidents. But no matter how death occurs, people still wonder – people still question the meaning of life and death and what happens after death.

In Paul's 1st Letter to the Thessalonians, a portion of which we heard today, the Thessalonians have asked Paul about the fate of those who have died before Jesus' 2nd coming. The Thessalonians were expecting Jesus' return any day: today or tomorrow or next week at the latest. But as the days and weeks passed on, they wondered what would happen to their loved ones who had already died before Jesus' return, "Would they be taken up in the rapture?" At the heart of their anxiety, and often of our own, is the question, "Where is our hope for the reign of God in the midst of an uncertain future?" Where is God in the midst of death and tragedy?

Our own hope-seeking questions are likely to be much different from the ones faced by Paul and the Thessalonians. Our theology and the way we live our faith has moved us on from expectations of Jesus' imminent return. Scared Thessalonians, aware that at any moment, the Romans might break down the door and take them away to their deaths, learned that there was a power greater than Rome. They learned that even when the foundations of their lives were shaken God was there. There may be some who have come into this worship service today shaken badly, carrying all kinds of weights -- internal and external. All the things that sap our energy and make life miserable cannot be checked at the church door or put away in a box.

So, Paul writes to the Thessalonians and to us, "[So] encourage each other with these words." People naturally grieve the deaths of their loved ones and they grieve other losses as well. What Paul is addressing is the Thessalonians' shortage of hope. Paul didn't want them to grieve as ones who had no hope, for *the Christian faith, when fully grasped, is laced with hope*. The Thessalonians, it seems, still had not quite understood the part of our faith that says that nothing, *not even death*, can separate us from the love of God. But with his

description here, Paul's making the point that the dead in Christ are at no disadvantage to the living when the Lord appears.

Thus, when we Christians grieve over a loved one who has died, we have grounds to grieve as those who *have hope*.

Understand that Paul is not chiding the Thessalonians for grieving. They are as sorrowful as anyone else when their friends and loved ones die, and Paul sees nothing wrong with that. But he's not simply saying what we sometimes hear when a loved one dies, that he or she is in a "better place." Rather his point is that death is not only a force against us, but against *God*, and God is already moving against death and will be victorious. Part of God's action against death took place at the resurrection of Jesus, and the rest will take place at the general resurrection of all the faithful when the kingdom of God fully dawns.

Thus, Paul is not telling the Thessalonians not to grieve or to be any less sad when their loved ones die. *But he is saying that they should understand what has happened within a different frame of reference.* Without the gospel, we view death as an end. With the gospel, we view it as a passage to the future God has prepared.

Thus, we Christians mourn our dead just as much as anyone else does, but we do not mourn as those who have no hope.

Consider how much better that is than other options:

- If you are locked into **biology** alone, then what you have, looking at death, is not hope, but only an explanation. You can refer to the scientific findings that everything, including human cells, eventually breaks down or wears out. And nothing after that.

- If you believe only in **fate**, then what you have, looking at death, is not hope, but only resignation. "When your number is up, it's up," you say. And nothing after that.

- If you rely on **philosophy** alone, then what you have, looking at death, is not hope, but only an event that renders life itself as ultimately meaningless. "So, make the best of your time here," you say. And nothing after that.

But if you follow Jesus, then what you have, looking at death, is a confidence that the world as we know it is not the whole story, a confidence that the love of God does not leave us even at the graveside or even in the grave itself. And there is plenty after that.

Fred Craddock, preacher and storyteller, told of a young woman who learned she had a potentially fatal illness. She had surgery, and then some treatments. For a time, she was able to get on with her life, but then at a routine check-up, she learned the dread disease was back.

There was more surgery, and further treatment. This time it took more out

of her. Recovery was slower. But the patient persevered and returned to her life again.

Some years later, during another routine check-up, she learned the disease had once again returned. This time, the prognosis was grim. She spent some time talking with her friends; she prayed; and she decided there would be no more surgery, no more heavy treatments. The young woman went home. Her friends gathered round.

One day, Death came and knocked at the door. Her friends rushed to the door and leaned against it to keep Death out. Death went away.

But Death came back, and this time Death not only knocked, but Death also leaned on the door as though to push it in. The young woman's friends leaned against it all the harder. Death went away.

A short while later, Death came calling again. Death knocked on the door and leaned against the door. The friends made as if to stand against it, but the young woman said no, move away. They looked at her as though she were crazy. She couldn't possibly know what she was saying. They refused to obey.

But she told them again, in a louder voice, to move away from the door. When they saw the steely determination in her eyes, they knew she meant what she said, so they moved away. Sensing no resistance, Death pushed open the door and came into the room. The young woman was sitting, propped up on pillows, waiting for Death, looking Death right in the eye.

When Death saw the strength of her spirit, Death looked beaten and ashamed. Death took her then, but Death knew that, by the power of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the communion of saints gathered there in that room, there was no triumph to be had that day. Death had been beaten again. Paul, in his Letter today, and the Book of Revelation, tells us today that things are different in God's kingdom.

I saw the movie musical "Fiddler on the Roof" for the 1st time more than 50 years ago and the message of that story has stuck with me since. When the curtain goes up in Fiddler on the Roof, a dim light outlines a house. As the light grows stronger, you see the roof. Then music, violin music. Where is it coming from? Oh there, a fellow on that sloping roof with a violin at his chin and a bow in his hand. He's sawing back and forth. But what a place for him to be playing a violin!

It taxes him to stand there. Life taxes him too, all the problems of a father with five unmarried daughters. The story unfolds with its humor and pathos. Days go by. Changes come. That's the way with life. There's a sort of rhythm to life, you know. We come; we go. We start; we finish. We work; we play. Days come; days go. Just like the song has it: "Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset."

With the sunrise, the day begins. With the sunset, the day ends. But, the good news of Christianity reverses that order. The world says: Sunrise, sunset.

The gospel says: "Sunset, sunrise!"

The sun sets for all of us, but there is a sunrise tomorrow! Sunrise for eternity! That is something to celebrate.

The Los Angeles Dodgers won the World Series this past Tuesday and Los Angeles has been celebrating. In spite of the coronavirus pandemic and social distancing, there was dancing on the field, champagne celebrations in the Clubhouse and fireworks all night in the sky over Los Angeles. But those celebrations will pass away and few will remember them. Those celebrations will be nothing compared to the heavenly party. Revelation tells of a victory celebration that will last for all eternity.

"I saw a vast crowd," John writes, "too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, "Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"

That's why I've scheduled one of my favorite hymns for my funeral and for today, "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be! When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!" The assurance of this refrain, as the assurance of this scripture, is that all believers -- those alive when Jesus returns and those who have died before his return -- will all go to heaven. Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica includes many assurances. This is one of them. Don't worry about those who have already died. Jesus will not leave them behind. They will also be raised; they will also go to heaven. You will join them in heaven.

It's worth noting that early followers of Christ believed that Jesus would return during their lifetimes. Clearly that was not the case. Many were waiting for the return of Jesus. Some put their whole lives on hold waiting for Jesus, laying aside the work that God had provided for them to do, waiting on hilltops for Jesus to appear, trying to determine the exact date when Jesus will return.

Some today are like those Thessalonians. Some have given up living in the here and now. When we do this, we cease to follow Jesus. We cease to care for the least among us. We cease to fully live. The hymn "When We All Get to Heaven" reminds us that we will rejoice when we are with Jesus. Yet we are called to proclaim the hope, the compassion and love of Jesus in the world, right now, right here. When we do that, others can be assured that we will all see Jesus when it is time to do so!

Asking the questions that address our need for concrete signs of hope is a healthy and necessary part of our lives of faith, as individuals and as a church. But in the midst of questions, we must also encourage each other by our hope that in Christ we are, and will be, with God always. "When we all get to heaven" – "sunset,

sunrise!”