

Pastor's Message – 11/12/23
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Last week, we heard again from Paul's 1st Letter to the Thessalonians and its emphasis and focus on the end of the world and the 2nd coming of Christ. Because of days off for one reason or another, the Confirmation lesson on heaven and the end of the world just happened to fall on the same day. I appreciated the opportunity to talk to Lena and Troy about that – about heaven and the end of the world.

Many people have speculated and guessed as to when the second coming of Jesus would happen. While the Bible makes it clear that no one knows, many have tried to nail down the date. William Miller was one who did that. After 14 years of studying the Bible, he became convinced that Christ would return in 1843. When Miller announced April 3 as the day, some disciples went to mountaintops, hoping for a head start to heaven. Others went to graveyards, planning to ascend in reunion with their departed loved ones. Philadelphia society ladies clustered together outside town to avoid entering God's kingdom amid the common people. When April 4 dawned as usual the Millerites were disillusioned, but they took heart. Their leader had predicted a range of dates for Christ's return. They still had until March 21, 1844. The devout continued to make ready, but again they were disappointed. A third date -- October 22, 1844 -- was set, but it also passed. Jesus did not come back in 1843 or 1844. Though the Millerites were excited about and prepared for Jesus' return, he didn't come.

The flaw in the planning of the Millerites was not in the preparation part, but in the choosing of a date. Paul notes in the passage for today that we are to be prepared for the Lord's coming because it will come as a "thief in the night." He urges the Christians in Thessalonica and us today to be awake and sober. We are to encourage each other and build each other up as we await the Lord's return. We can learn something from the Millerites of old. Being ready for his coming every day is a good plan.

Again today, still in Thessalonians, who, as you know, were expecting the end of the world any day, as we finish our reading of this 1st Letter, we are still talking about the Second Coming of Christ. He is coming again but few believe that he is coming quickly. It may not be the end of the macro world, but it may be the end of our personal worlds as we meet our own deaths.

Maybe this passage from Paul is talking to people like us, who may not be interested or worried about when the Second Coming of the Lord will take place. For those who are talking about it, Paul says they should simply continue to be faithful, supportive disciples of the light, to look for the icebergs and the oasis and to continue on the journey of faith. So if we are seeking to be faithful followers of

Jesus Christ in what we do and how we live, the date and the time of the Second Coming will not change much of how we live. And the promise of the Second Coming is not a fearful thing for those who now live by faith.

The war between Israel and Hamas goes on and much has been written about the failure of Israel to anticipate that initial attack. It may be a symptom of a larger problem: one that is closer to home. Consider again verse 3 of our passage today: “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them.” Remembering back to early 2020, no one could have imagined what was about to happen in the first few months of the year. The world was turned upside down by Covid-19. What peace? What security? We thought our plans were made. We thought we knew what was going to happen and when it was going to happen. This virus snuck up on us as a thief in the night and stole everything in the house. Weddings were cancelled. Churches were closed. Professional sport schedules were abandoned. Jobs were lost. People lived on their savings. We believed our lives were secure. Now we understand how life can change so quickly. The apostle Paul reminds us to be watchful and vigilant.

”For you know quite well that the day of the Lord’s return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.” (vs. 2) Paul emphasizes how the Second Coming may come like a thief in the night but will not surprise the faithful (v. 4b). This is evident in several ways.

First, it is very likely that the image of the thief in the night is more familiar than frightening. In verse 2, Paul is clearly reminding the Thessalonians of a metaphor for the Second Coming that they "know very well." Because of this, they are in a position to avoid experiencing the Second Coming as the kind of inescapable destruction described in verse 3.

Second, Paul assures the Thessalonians that they are not in the darkness that makes the arrival of the Second Coming a dreadful prospect (v. 4a). Instead, they are "children of the light and of the day" (v. 5).

Third, Paul attests that the Thessalonians are destined for salvation through, and life with, Christ (vv. 9-10).

With the image of “the day of the Lord” in mind, Paul goes on to address a more immediate napping problem. Since we don’t know when that resurrection day is coming and how it will find us, we are not to be drowsily careening through life unaware of what’s happening around us. Instead, we are to be awake and alert to the signs of Christ’s in-breaking kingdom which will come with the stealth and suddenness of a “thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). The deep sleep of physical death is unavoidable, but being asleep at the wheel of our spiritual lives is not. In light of the resurrection wake-up call on the horizon, Paul urges the Thessalonians, and us, to stop dozing in the darkness of this world and, instead,

become heads-up and eyes-open to the work of Christ, the resurrection life that he seeks to work in us and through us in the present.

There can be a condition of utter cluelessness that overtakes us when we believe there's nothing wrong with our current condition or with the world around us. Spiritual sleepers can view sin in their lives as being a mere character fault rather than a willful act of disobedience to God. We can sometimes look at the problems of injustice and violence in the world around us, swipe left, and move on to the next screen. Spiritual sleepiness can characterize believers as well as unbelievers, making us comfortable with the status quo and content to leave our inner lives unexamined and unimproved.

This kind of sleepiness ultimately leads to a crash of character and crumbling under crisis. Paul calls the Thessalonians to snap out of it — to “keep awake” to the most important purpose of our lives: a *transformed and grounded relationship with God through Jesus*.

There may be churches that are populated by spiritually sleepy people. What we need is a way to stay awake and in verse 8 Paul provides one. Rather than wallow in snoozy sinfulness, Paul urges the Thessalonians to instead equip themselves with the kinds of spiritual devices that are always aimed at keeping people focused and faithful. Switching to military metaphors, Paul talks about putting on the “breastplate of faith and love” and the “helmet” of “the hope of salvation” (v. 8). These articles of clothing are to be always active in the life of the believer, energizing each of us with the example of Christ, “who died for us, so that whether we are awake [in the present] or asleep [in death] we may live with him” (v. 10). Death and darkness should be of little concern for those who are fully awake in the light cast upon us by the saving work of Christ.

The promise of the Second Coming or our own personal end is not a fearful thing for those who now live by faith. Most of the people one hears talking about the Second Coming of Jesus are Christians who are fearful and apprehensive about it, and yet Paul says, “God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us.” (v. 9) The Second Coming for us is a day of completion and fulfillment. It is a day of judgment and punishment to those who have refused to accept the gift, but for those who have walked in the light of God's grace, it is the completion of a long journey, not a fearful, destructive moment.

At our end, when we stand before the judgement seat of God, Jesus will *not* say, “Well, I see that you have on your finest clothes, and you have combed your hair. The house looks good, too. There are no dirty dishes in the sink or piles of paper on the desk.”

Instead, Jesus will ask, “Have you given food to those who were hungry? Have you led the thirsty to my living water? Have you welcomed strangers and

clothed the naked? Have you cared for the sick and lonely? Have you visited the prisoners?"

What will your answer be? "Well, Lord, I really meant to get around to it. But there were so many other things going on in my life. There were so many people in need and so little time. Two thousand years is really not a long enough time, but if I have another chance, I can get right on it, and you check back later."

The children of light will not be surprised when the day of the Lord suddenly comes. In the end times and all throughout our spiritual journey, we are not supposed to hide in a bunker. That's a defensive posture, one that is usually adopted by people motivated by fear and misplaced priorities. Instead, we are to take the offense, bravely going out into the world to show active faith, hope and love.

The end result of living in the light of truth, embracing your armor and resting in salvation is a people that "encourage[s] each other and build[s] each other up." (v. 11) We ended at verse 11 today, but Paul goes on in verses 12-21 to encourage us to "Respect [others] Be at peace admonish ... encourage ... help ... be patient Rejoice ... pray ... give thanks hold fast to what is good."

It's an old song now, but "Try a Little Kindness" by Glen Cambell and others might just be an extension of Paul's encouragement to walk in the light of Jesus and shine the light of Jesus.

If you see your brother standing by the road
With a heavy load from the seeds he's sowed
And if you see your sister falling by the way
Just stop and say, you're going the wrong way.

*You got to try a little kindness,
Yes show a little kindness,
Just shine your light for everyone to see
And if you try a little kindness,
Then you'll overlook the blindness,
Of narrow-minded people on the narrow-minded streets.*

Don't walk around the down and out,
Lend a helping hand, instead of doubt.
And the kindness that you show every day
Will help someone along their way.

--From "Try a Little Kindness," Glen Campbell