

Keep Looking Up

Psalm 123
I Thessalonians 5:1-11

The Apostle Paul wrote the letter we call I Thessalonians to a church he had visited in the Greek city of Thessaloniki. More accurately, he had visited a synagogue. According to the Book of Acts, he preached three sabbaths there and convinced some of his fellow Jews that Jesus was the prophet-promised Messiah. But many of the Jews did not accept this teaching. They told the Roman authorities Paul was causing disorder. Disorder was a capital offense under Roman law. To save his life, the Jewish Christians smuggled Paul out of town under the cover of night. Months later, Paul sent Timothy back to encourage and to check up on the Thessalonian Christians. Timothy returned with a glowing report. Paul wrote this letter to express his thanksgiving, and being Paul, to instruct them on a few doctrinal matters.

One of those matters appears just before our passage, at the end of chapter four. The topic was the resurrection—Christ's, **and** Christians'. Building on Jesus' teaching as it now appears in Matthew 24, Paul asserts that all who are "in Christ", whether dead or alive on the Day of the Lord, **will** rise with him. Furthermore, when that day of God's final judgment finally arrives, those who believe in Jesus will be protected from the doom awaiting those who do not.

At the start of our chapter Paul then turns to a closely related subject: how to

behave as we wait for the Day of the Lord. He starts by telling his readers they will never see it coming. It will come as “travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.” Yet the Day will not surprise those in Christ, because they are to live each day as though it were the last. The Last. They are children of the light and of the day, not of darkness and of the night. They stay sober. They stay awake. Using the Prophet Isaiah's imagery, Paul tells his readers that those in Christ arm themselves with “the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation.” Their following of the ethical teachings of Christ means they will be ready whenever he comes.

“For God has not destined us for wrath,” Paul continues. We are not meant to be found among the condemned on the Day of the Lord. This incredible blessing comes to us not because of our merit, our having lived in the light and stayed sober and believed in Jesus and all that. These things keep us ready for him but do not earn the hope we have in him. No, we “...obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ***who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him.***” On the Day of the Lord, whether we walk the face of the earth or lie dead beneath its surface, we will live with Christ.

I spoke this week with a young woman who grew up in this church but now lives away. She asked how I as a pastor interpret 2020. She mentioned how the hurricane season has seemed to last all year, we had rioting in the streets all summer, the presidential election from Hades, and of course, the piece de resistance, COVID19.

She asked whether I see these things as adding up to the “signs of the times” and, “Isn't there a red dragon somewhere in the Bible that's supposed to come at the end and would any of what we're seeing be, you know, like that dragon?” My answer was, “No.” While a red dragon—symbolic of Satan—does appear in Revelation, I refer back to Jesus' and Paul's statements that we will not see the Day of the Lord coming. People will say, “Look, there (a pandemic on top of racial unrest on top of hurricanes)!” But when it does come, Jesus promised we will be looking the other way.

Instead of trying to connect the dots like conspiracy theorists, instead of trying to spot the Day of the Lord before it hits us, we ought instead to focus on taking Paul's advice in I Thessalonians. As we wait for whatever God's future holds in store, act like followers of Christ. In chapter five alone we find admonitions to do so by keeping awake, staying sober, growing in faith, love and hope. These we have already mentioned. But Paul adds one more critical calling at the very end of our verses. As we wait, “...encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”

These words definitely do not lack for practical application in 2020. We start with the most obvious. We have now entered the ninth month of virus-related shutdowns. This has exhausted us emotionally and spiritually. It has made us terribly vulnerable to a phrase that would have been meaningless a year ago: COVID Fatigue. We see neighbors holding gatherings of tens and dozens. We forget to wash our hands after pulling open the door to that business. We get testy with people who do not do what we think they ought to be—or not be—doing.

Another member of this church, an elder, has rightly and repeatedly stated that instead of shaming others who choose to react to the pandemic differently, we ought to focus on building one another up in the church. For one thing, shaming seldom does anything more than cause conflict. Last month I had reason to enter a Subway sandwich shop in Syracuse, Indiana. The sign at the door said, "We require masks be worn by all customers and employees." First in the long line stood what I took to be a father and son. They looked like stereotyped characters from the movie Deliverance. The father wore a tank top three sizes too small and camo pants. The teen aged son wore a t-shirt with a smutty saying on it and baggy shorts. Neither wore a mask. I could not make out what the employee said, but I got the gist of the conversation from what the father was saying. The employee said something.

"NO I WON'T WEAR A MASK!" the father almost shouted. The employee tried again. The father said, "DO YOU HAVE A HEARING PROBLEM?!? I WON'T WEAR A *(&#\$^# MASK!" The employee took their order and got them out of the door in record speed. We in the line shared looks over our masks. The next guy got as far as the veggies part of the assembly line before the father came back in the door. I swear I looked to see whether he was carrying a gun. He was not. Of course, he still was not wearing a mask, either. He stopped just inside and said, "Hey man, I'm really sorry about that. I know you're just doing your job." The employee waved in reply. The father left. The guy in front of me, a Latino wearing the uniform of a regional utility company, said, "Well that turned from a downer to an upper!"

It occurs to me that as we wait for the end—the end of the pandemic and The End—part of our job as Christians is to seek to turn our little parts of the world from downers to uppers. I do not refer to some kind of superficial, Hallmark Card kind of cheerfulness, but to that peace and even joy that we can radiate. We can reflect these gifts of the Spirit. When we behave in Christlike ways we show him to sorrowful, stressed people. We draw from the well and offer them that water their parched souls crave. And we can do this for one another in the fellowship of the church, as well. In fact, we may not be able to persist in doing good works without supporting one another. “Therefore,” Paul wrote, “encourage one another and build one another up, ***just as you are doing.***”

Deacons, each of you has a flock, a group of church households assigned to you. You are to check in with them from time to time. I know, because as a pastor my “flock” has a somewhat larger membership, that these contacts can become a bit rote. Occasionally they are awkward. Some folks convey to us they'd just as soon you did not worry about them. But in these of all days there may be no more important ministry conducted through the work of this congregation. I encourage you: keep at it.

Elders, God has charged you with the responsibility of governing this church. Though our meetings can sometimes feel unspiritual, I believe there is in fact no moment in any of our meetings that lacks the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. During our meeting last Wednesday night, as we conducted a long and intense discussion of whether to suspend in-person worship, I felt the Spirit leading us. One of

you as said as much in an email to me; another, in a phone conversation. Here's the thing: the Spirit does not always make us feel all warm and fuzzy and safe. As C.S. Lewis wrote of his Christ figure in the Chronicles of Narnia, Aslan the lion, "He's **not** a **tame** lion." I perceived the Spirit Wednesday night in the earnest, thoughtful, respectful way we conducted an exceedingly difficult conversation. I perceived the Spirit's leading in the change of direction our debate took somewhere in its middle. I encourage you: keep on leading this church by following the Spirit who gives us the power to treat one another with such maturity and even, **love**.

And church, I want to encourage all of us with the observation that our leaders have stepped up to sustain our ministry throughout these long eight months. I remain confident they will keep it up for however many more months God has determined the pandemic will last. For example, people thank me all the time for all the work that has gone into delivering our worship services digitally. I hope I have never missed the chance to reply that I have had to do precious little work. People have volunteered to do it. I cannot recall having to make a single ask, having to recruit even one person to fill any of the several new roles we need to make this happen. I receive tremendous encouragement from this. Praise God!

In conclusion, I encourage us all to keep looking up. Keep up your spirits in the power of the Holy Spirit. We will not see Jesus coming no matter how intently we stare at the sky. But we will find the peace and joy we need to keep following him as we wait. Fellow followers of Jesus: keep looking up!