

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NRSV)

[13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

[14] For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

[15] For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.

[16] For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

[17] Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

[18] Therefore encourage one another with these words.

GRIEF AND HOPE

This past week we welcomed a new minister into our Presbytery. It's our custom to interview the minister and the Pulpit Nominating Committee that has called the new minister to a particular church.

In this case I noticed something curious about one of the members of the Committee. He seemed to be sobbing uncontrollably. What in the world was going on with this man? Our questions weren't that tough!

When it came time for him to speak, I discovered why he was crying. His wife had been the secretary of this declining church for many years. Last year she died and now this man was grieving, not only for his wife but also for his church.

I spoke with him after we accepted the new minister and he told me, "I'm sorry about being so emotional. A year ago I would have never been this way. Now I cry all the time. I'm still grieving the loss of my wife."

And yet, despite all those tears, he had hope. He said, "I'm also happy today. I think we've got the right minister for our church. I just wish my wife could be here to see it." I put my arm around his shoulder and gave him a hug. I said, "I'm happy for you. And my prayers are with you."

It seems to me that this man was an example of what Paul is talking about in our passage for today, something we might call "good grief." He was grieving the loss of his wife and the decline of his church. In fact his grief was very profound. But, he did not grieve as one who had no hope. Grief did not take away his ability to focus on the future in a positive way.

This was Paul's desire for the Christians at Thessalonica. He did not want grief to take away their ability to focus on the future. He wrote,

"And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word." 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (MsgB)

That's the key phrase. The grave does not have the last word. The story continues for us and for the loved one who has died.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GRIEVING

But, note that this passage does not say that we should not grieve. This is impossible and unhealthy.

On any given Sunday there are a considerable number of people in every congregation who are actively grieving. And many of us know all too well that life is dreadfully uncertain. One wrong turn, and the thing we fear the most can happen.

The Bible does not sugar coat the trauma of death. Remember the story of when Jesus' friend Lazarus died? Jesus himself wept at the scene of sorrow.

When Jesus faced death, it was not with an otherworldly calm. Instead, according to the book of Hebrews Jesus died with "loud cries and tears." (Hebrews 5:7)

Sometimes grieving people "beat themselves up" because they think that it is wrong to grieve; they naively think of Christians as those who are always happy. Often those who are around a grieving person often feel uncomfortable with their tears and cries of pain and so they say something like,

"Just have faith. The Lord won't put on you any more upon you than you can bear."

That's not a very good thing to say to a person who is grieving. In fact, when people ask me what to say to a person who is grieving I answer, "Don't say much if anything. Just listen very closely to what they have to say. When you allow a person to grieve in your presence, they will not feel so alone. Just be with them."

WORDS OF COMFORT

But, there will come a time when the grieving person wants you to say something. What words of comfort can we offer? The apostle Paul told those who grieved at Thessalonica,
“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.” 1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NRSV)

Now there is something very important that I want you to notice about this word of comfort. There is not the slightest hint that resurrection is a reward for Christian behavior. Our hope is based upon the action of God in Christ. Our hope is (as one of our confessions puts it) “in life and in death we belong to God.” Our hope is (as Paul writes in verse 17) “we will be with the Lord forever.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17b)

I like the sophisticated way one commentator put it. He wrote, “Our hope is based upon a theological conviction, not an anthropological assumption.” Eternal salvation is not based upon us and what we do. Eternal salvation is based upon God and what God has already done in Christ Jesus.

There were some in the church at Corinth who doubted that there could be a resurrection of the dead. Paul answered their doubts in this way. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ was not raised. And if Christ was not raised, then our faith doesn’t make any sense. We are telling lies about God and should be pitied by others.

But, that argument is based upon a false premise. Paul wrote, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” 1 Corinthians 15:20 (NRSV)

Christ is the first fruits of those who have died. In other words, as it happened with Christ, it will happen with those who die in Christ. This is indeed good news. This is a word of comfort.

What greater assurance can we have than this? The God who created heaven and earth, the God who created us and all that we know and love, and the God who raised Jesus from the dead, this same God has promised

resurrection to us as well. Our hope is not based on wishful thinking. Our hope is based upon what we know of Christ in the present.

NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US

In Romans 8 the apostle Paul tells us that “nothing separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” The whole story of the Bible could be summarized in this way. God wants to be with us. God wants to be near us and will go to almost any length to have us.

Think about it. The story of the Bible is always this, “God seeks his people in order to bring them redemption.” And, in the end, this redemption is not based upon the righteousness of God’s people. It is based upon the love of God.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, what was the first thing that he did after he was raised? He came back to his disciples. He came back to disciples who had betrayed and failed him. Nothing could separate him from the ones he loved, not even death and denial. And so it is with those who follow Jesus today. He still comes back to us. In life and in death he comes back to us. It doesn’t matter.

ALL SAINTS DAY

Last week, on the day after Halloween, there was an important date on the church calendar called “All Saints Day.” In some churches on All Saints Day it is the custom to read the names of those who had died in the past year.

I used to think that was a morbid custom. Why bring up all that pain again? I feel sad every year when I think of good friends that I have lost in the previous year.

But, there is another way to look at it. If we truly believe that in life and in death we belong to God. If we truly believe that even death cannot kill the

hope that is ours in Christ Jesus, then there is a connection between those of us who remain and those who have gone before us in death.

The connection is the risen and living Lord who is just as real to them as he is to us. We see only part of the picture. We see, as the apostle Paul put it, “through a glass darkly.” Our sight is an imperfect reflection of God’s reality. But, one day we will see “face to face.” 1 Corinthians 13:12.

This passage refers to the mirrors that were used in the ancient world. The image in those imperfectly polished mirrors was distorted, almost like a fun house mirror. They were good enough for some purposes, but everyone knew that they offered a distorted view of reality. Nothing was as good as being there in person, face to face.

In the same way, there is more to this world than we can imagine. On All Saints Day we embrace that mystery. We try to imagine all the saints, living and dead as they sing in unison, “Holy, holy, holy.” We try to imagine a great throng of believers praising God in the glory of eternal light.

A DRESS REHEARSAL FOR LIFE ETERNAL

In a way, each Sunday is a dress rehearsal for life eternal. That’s why music and poetry and art are so important to the life of faith. Good music, poetry, and art all point to a greater reality. There is an eternal inference that helps us see what we cannot see and hear what we cannot hear.

That’s what Paul is doing as he describes the glorious second coming of Christ. He wrote that it would all begin with a shout from God Himself and God’s archangel.

There will be the sound of a trumpet and an appearance in the sky. God will come again, bringing with Him all those who have died in Christ Jesus. As Jesus ascended into heaven, so he will descend to earth in glory.

One day God will bring a close to it all, but no one who trusts in Christ will miss out on the action. That was the fear of the church at Thessalonica. In a world that expected the Second Coming at any moment, the death of many Christians was a tragedy indeed. They were asking, “Will those who have died before us miss out on the Second Coming?”

The answer was no.

God Himself would bring them to that great, glorious resurrection morning.

It’s been so many years since Christ has come that many of us have lost our ability to even imagine a second coming.

We no longer strain to hear the sound of distant trumpets. We no longer search the skies for signs of things to come. When the choir sings we hear only notes. When the preacher preaches, we hear only words.

We need more than a good tune and a sanctified message on self improvement. In order to overcome the grief of this world, we need to have a hope that is out of this world. I want everything we do and say here to point to something greater. I want our message to be God’s message so that it can be a word of encouragement and not just another word among many.

I want us to live life on tiptoe. I want us approach each day with a sense of anticipation and joy because each day is filled with significance for those who believe in the hope of life eternal.

WAKE UP TO A NEW DAY COMING!

Later in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul wrote,
“So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” 1
Thessalonians 5:6-8

Paul said that many people live their life with blinders on.

It's as if they were asleep or intoxicated. They just go from one thing to the next with no sense of purpose except self gratification. As the philosopher put it, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die."

But, Christians have a different viewpoint. Christians believe that history, our own personal history and the history of the world in general, has a purpose and an end. There was a popular song when I was growing up that asked the question, "Is that all there is?" The Christians answer to that question is "no." There is more, much more than you or the world has dreamed of.

Christians are not overly optimistic about the world. We recognize the power of sin and death. We are not surprised that our greatest technological achievements can become our greatest curse. We are not surprised at "man's inhumanity to man," how we often use our advances to become more efficient killers.

But, that is not where our hope lies. Our hope lies not in our power and our life but in the creative power of God who called the world into being. God by his power raised Christ from the dead. And one day this same God who created it all and raised Jesus, will bring the dead to life once again. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This has some very profound implications for how we are to live today. We need to live today and every day with an eye toward God's tomorrow. We don't have all the answers when it comes to our personal history or history in general. Much of it remains a mystery.

But, this we do know, "... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:38-39

God in Christ has promised to never leave or forsake us. At the beginning, middle and end of our life, we are with the Lord. That's all we know, and

that's all we need to know. I think of the words to that great old hymn, "How Firm a Foundation."

It goes, "What more can be said than to you God hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled."

We know all that we need to know about the future. It is God's future. It is in the hands of the Creator who reveals himself as the compassionate Savior, Jesus Christ.

Paul says "encourage one another with these words."

A VISIT WITH A DYING MAN

Many years ago I went to visit a man who was dying of brain cancer. I liked this fellow. He was one of my father's old friends, and he was always ready to tease or tell a joke. But, now he was in the hospital; he didn't have long to live. I also knew that he hadn't been to church in a long time and that I needed to share the words of faith with him that day.

I shared with him some of the same promises that we have talked about today. I was a little uneasy about how he might respond. He was an old railroad man, and sometimes they took a rather dim view of religion.

But, he was not in a mood to spar that day. Instead he said, "I know God will care for me. I remember these promises from when I was a boy. I haven't done a lot of things like I should have, but I trust God now."

I talked with him a long while that day. Finally it was time to say a prayer and leave him in that crowded VA hospital.

I will never forget the look on his face as I left. We both knew that it was for the last time. But, it was not just a look of despair. There was something in that look that caused me to remember the promises in a new way, those promises that I had learned as a boy.

I was worried about ministering to this man, but in that moment I unexpectedly found myself on holy ground. In that moment I felt like we were both in the palm of God's hand. And, of course, we were. And we are ... even today.

Take courage friends.

The final trumpet will blow. One day we will all see clearly the promise that is ours in Christ Jesus. In life and in death ... we do belong to God.

Encourage one another with these words. Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN