

Pentecost 24, Year A

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 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. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Prayer: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN

Sermon:

Around 50 CE, St. Paul of Tarsus, wrote several letters
to the newly founded church in Thessalonica. ⁱ

Today's Epistle is the 1st of those letters.ⁱⁱ

Timothy helped Paul launch the (then) tiny church in Thessalonica.

Tim must have stayed behind, with the Thessalonians.

So, Tim wrote letters to Paul,

with updates on how things were going.

And how was that?

There was bad news and there was good news.

The *bad news* was that the Jewish leaders (and maybe others)
were persecuting the early Christians in Thessalonicaⁱⁱⁱ.

The *good news* was that those Christians were standing fast
in their new faith.

Back then, people thought Jesus would come back any moment.

The Thessalonians were wondering when Jesus would return.

When he didn't, they got worried.

Paul wrote this letter 20 to 30 years after Christ's earthly ministry.
By then people who were young, had grown old.
Some had died.

The Thessalonian's wondered what would happen
to the Christian's who died before the 2nd Coming.
Would they miss out?
Would they be left behind?
Would they still get to be with Jesus in the heavens?

In his letters, Paul tried to answer those questions.
He explained that everyone –
both those alive and those who had already died –
would share in the joy of Christ's return. ^{iv}

Jesus did seem to promise he'd be back soon.
New Jewish Christians^v, including St. Paul,
envisioned Jesus' return as a form of Jewish apocalypse.

A big fight. A big battle between Good and Evil. Armageddon.
Many Christians still tend to see it that way.

Almost everyone in the 1st century BCE agreed that they
didn't know exactly WHEN Jesus would come back.
But they all agreed it would be soon. *Really soon.*
Turns out they were wrong.

The early Christians thought that Armageddon was imminent.

Paul thought so, too. ^{vi} *Stuff like that makes people nervous.*^{vii}

Timothy (apparently) told Paul that the Thessalonians,
like everyone else, were eager for Jesus to come back. ^{viii}

They all wanted the good stuff, in heaven, NOW,
without all the hard work down here.

Once there was a Dad who worried about paying his daughter's
college tuition.

He asked her, "*What are you going to do with the rest of your life?*"

"Well, Dad", she said, "I've thought about that a lot.

I know how hard you and Mom have worked,
to put a little something away.

I know that you guys are always worried about taxes
and medical bills and who's going to be President,
and all that.

I know it's really hard on you guys."

"So, I think, after college ...

I'm just going to get married, and retire."

She couldn't see any reason to work and to wait for the good stuff!

Neither could the Thessalonians.^{ix}

They wanted Jesus and they wanted Jesus now.

Paul thought that Jesus' return was imminent. ^x

Within his lifetime, for sure.

Lots of people back thought that so, back then.

But that isn't how it worked out.

People have been *impatiently* waiting for 2000 years.

And they are still waiting.

"Any time" they think! But Jesus hasn't come back,
and we really don't know when he will.^{xi}

So... *What is God's plan? When will Jesus return?*

We really haven't a clue. Or maybe all that we have is a clue.

Jesus' spent his last week on earth, in Jerusalem.

When he and his disciples were at the Temple, ^{xiii} he said:

"Do you see all these things?...

I tell you not one stone here will be left on another;

Every one will be thrown down".

That was scary stuff. Who would destroy the Temple?

Later Jesus and his disciples were kicking back^{xiii} , they asked:

“When will this happen?”

“What will be the sign of your return, and the end of the age?”^{xiv}

But Jesus told them: *“... nobody here knows, not even me.”^{xv}*

“Nobody but God knows when.”

Remember, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

It'll catch us all by surprise.

Do you remember last Sunday's parable about the wedding party,
and the oil lamps running low?

That story was Jesus' way of reminding us to be ready.

Be Ready? Yes! Panicky? No!

The Disciples had work to do. So do we.

Our work, here and now,

is not to make the way for the Lord easier.

It is not to feather our beds,

or to stock up on food, ammo and water.^{xvi}

Our work here is to be patient and loving and alert.

Not to hunker down,

Instead we must be active, in the Kingdom. Right here.

We are called to strive.

We are called to overcome the Powers that Be,
which harm God's Kingdom, and all that dwell upon it.

We are called to recognize God's hand in our daily lives,
and to allow God to re-organize our lives,
so that we can serve our community.

We are called protect and to preserve the finite resources
of this fragile earth – our island home.^{xvii}

We are called to engage the world, however we can,
and to live actively ... doing whatever
God calls each of us to do.

And we are called to remember...
God never calls us to do more than we can ...
when we all work together.

We don't need to wait for Jesus to return.
Because Jesus is right here. *God is with us.*^{xviii}

-AMEN

ⁱ In Northern Greece.

ⁱⁱ We think!

ⁱⁱⁱ Those who opposed Paul and his converts seem to have suggested that Paul was somehow deceptive in his efforts to make converts:

^{iv} How did Paul know that? The traditional Christian response, since there is minimal evidence, is that Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The theological understanding of “inspiration”, merged with the ancient habit of referring to the scriptures as The Words, or The Word, resulted in the contemporary idea that the Bible is God’s Word, i.e., literally dictated by God to the ears of the human authors. It is easy to confuse rhetoric with reality. It is, I think, an error to mystify the scriptures, which almost all agree are sacred, in order to resolve some of their incoherencies or politically unsatisfying claims.

^v In Thessalonica and elsewhere.

^{vi} the new Christians had to figure out what they were supposed to do. We are still trying to figure that out today because Jesus still hasn’t come back.

^{vii} Think of the 1960’s “Daisy Girl Commercial” political commercial.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riDypP1KfOU> Makes Y2K seem tame.

^{viii} When Jesus didn’t come back, and the decades rolled on, some people got old and died. What’s going to happen to them in the new Kingdom, folks wondered? Back then, some folks thought Paul was wrong about Jesus’ return. They might have thought that if Paul was wrong on that, he could be wrong on other things, too.

^{ix} They were being persecuted by both the Jews and the non-believers. Why wait here? Take me away, Jesus!

^x “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.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (NRSV)

^{xi} One of the key challenges for those who read the Bible as if it were a forecasting tool, is that the Bible was not written with that intent. Most of the NT scriptures are unclear as the author’s intention (cg St. Luke’s Gospel). None seem to say, without implied qualification, that their intent was to predict when Jesus would return. We do get details, for various NT Books and Gospels, of *what* Jesus 2nd coming, (as e might call it) could look like, (as imagined or understood by Ancient Near East peoples), but not *when*. It is OK, I think, to pull various books together, in the macro sense of searching for themes, but I hesitate to build a detailed prediction based on obscure clues buried in those books. Paul’s letters were written, quit plainly, to support the fledgling churches that he began as part of his wide ranging but brief ministry.

Little there would seem to be written with the intention of supplying clues to us, more than 2,000 years later.

But what if Jesus has come back, but not as most people expected? What if Jesus returned in the form of the Church, and its people, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to continue to do the work that Jesus began here, so long ago?

^{xii} See, Matt. 24:2. It wasn't really Herod's Temple as it was the 2nd Temple, massively rebuilt and expanded, at enormous expense, under Herod's orders. The 1st Temple, aka, Solomon's Temple was built circa 832 BCE by the then United Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II, following the Siege of Jerusalem, in 587 BCE. This is the beautiful Temple often referred to in the Old Testament.

Cyrus the Great, of the early Greek era, allowed the Hebrews to return to their home territory, to re-establish Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple (see, Ezra 1:1-4, and 5:6-6:15 2 Chronicles 36:22-23), on the site of Solomon's Temple. Notably, many Hebrews declined and stayed where they were. I suppose that decision was as much practical and human as it was theological. What do you think?

Over the centuries, control over the land and the Temple changed hands; the structure declined. Its reconstruction began under Herod, circa, 20-19 BCE through 11-10 BCE, while services there continued without little or no abatement. In some part the costs were borne by those who sacrificed the Temple, through the use of the then contemporary so-called Sanctuary Shekel (see, Exodus 30:13). This form of tax was paid by those who, for examples, wanted to pay for a proper certified animal for sacrifice. It would be sold at a highly marked up price, and bought with temple shekels, traded for cash, at a very punitive rate.

^{xiii} On the Mount of Olives.

^{xiv} Matt. 24:3.

^{xv} "... about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father". See Matt.24, particularly Matt. 24:26. Do note that Jesus also described a sequence of events that were perhaps more symbolic than predictive, and which seem aligned with OT imagery of what people now refer to as the "End Times".

^{xvi} As I did, plus scouting out safe places to stay with my family, for Y2K.

^{xvii} in a Universe that is, but for the presence of God, vast and cold.

^{xviii} Τοῦτο ἐστὶ τὸ σῶμά μου. Translated as "This is my body (physical being of me)."