

## “The Hope of the Gospel”

Many of you know that I was away this past week on study leave, working on worship preparation for the upcoming Advent season. I spent the time in Isle of Palms, outside of Charleston, inspired by God's peaceful creation and the Atlantic Ocean. The unusually warm weather made thinking about December a little of a stretch but the Holy Spirit and I worked it out.

God's sovereignty was all around me, as was the assurance of the plan that God has for all of us, for each of us and for all of God's creation. Even with the saddening news of the terrible violence in Texas last Sunday, I felt a pervading sense of hope as I enjoyed the natural beauty and peace of my surroundings.

Then I consulted the lectionary to see what the suggestions for today's message were and knew that the Holy Spirit was working overtime. On a day when we have just celebrated the resurrection of one of our most beloved members, John Ritzo, what a blessing to see the words of reassurance from the Apostle Paul that we just heard. This passage is one of the most hopeful in all of Scripture.

And just as I was thinking about hope, I looked out to see a patient soul, standing in the surf of the Atlantic with his fishing line out! I have never really understood fishing. I tried it growing up but in all honesty, it was just so I could spend time with my grandfathers, both of whom were avid fisherman and surely must do a lot of it in Heaven. But it just never floated my boat, to use a terrible pun. Yet, as I thought about the hope

that we have as Christians, I realized that fishing is a very hopeful sport. In fact, I think we all could learn a thing or two about Christian hope from fishermen.

*In his book Pavlov's Trout, Paul Quinnett writes: It is better to fish hopefully than to catch fish. Fishing is hope experienced. To be optimistic in a slow bite is to thrive on hope alone. When asked, "How can you fish all day without a hit?" the true fisherman replies, "Hold it! I think I felt something." If the line goes slack, he says, "He'll be back!" When it comes to the human spirit, hope is all. Without hope, there is no yearning, no desire for a better tomorrow, and no belief that the next cast will bring the big strike.*

Hope is one of the strongholds of Christian faith. Hope in a better life, in a better world, in a place where all is healed and whole, where death, age, and suffering are obliterated. This a hopeful thing for anyone who is experiencing grief of any kind. And after the week that we have experienced as a church family and as a nation, I thought our spirits could be lifted by thinking of the hope of the resurrection.

One of the proofs of God's amazing grace and the constant hope that we are given is in the timeless messages that are found in our Holy Scripture. Because even though the Thessalonians certainly lived in a different world than we do, they were experiencing the same emotions that we still battle today – fear, uncertainty, doubt and grief. And Paul's words to them are still a source of comfort to us today.

In order to understand Paul's letter more fully let's look at the background that leads up to his words here. We are told in the book of Acts that Paul spent only three weeks in Thessalonica on his missionary journeys. Yet, he must have made a profound impression with his preaching because the church there was very strong. In fact, the

problem seemed to lie in the fact that they had listened TOO CLOSELY to Paul's sermons – a problem that few of us preachers have to contend with.

I will never forget the time I was giving the Children's Sermon at my home church. The group included my son Carter, who was about 4 at the time. Our Senior minister was on vacation and the point of my sermon was SUPPOSED to be that God NEVER goes on vacation. I had all kinds of vacation props – sunglasses, suntan lotion, a beach towel – you get the picture. All the children seemed very intent on what I was saying as I went on with my GREAT message about how God is always available.

Just as I was thinking – this is a really good one, they are really with me – my own son raised his hand. Assuming that he would have something very deep to contribute, I actually held the microphone to his sweet little lips, only to hear him say, “Hey Mom. What are we having for lunch today?” Obviously I did not capture my congregation the way Paul did the Thessalonians.

But Paul really believed in his heart that Christ was going to return soon and preached this with so much conviction that everyone there believed it too. So much so that many of them had quit their jobs, stopped living and were literally sitting around waiting on Jesus' return. And while they were waiting they had too much time on their hands and did nothing but think. But the questions that came to them are very relevant to us today.

First of all, the folks there were grieving, apparently over the loss of loved ones, which of course all of us have been able to relate to at some time in our lives. Some people would think that Paul as saying that it is not good to grieve but of course, this is not true. Grief is necessary and often a helpful emotion. It also brings us much growth.

When you lose someone you love, it is like losing a part of yourself and it is natural and necessary to miss them and grieve in the way that helps you the most. No, what Paul prohibits is not grief but HOPELESS grief. He does not say that we should not mourn rather that we should not mourn *like those who have no hope*. So what kind of hope do we encounter in his words?

Paul begins by reminding us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He lets us know this when he says, “We believe that Jesus died.” Now some of you may not think this is a hopeful statement but it reminds me that we worship a God who loves us so much that He is willing to experience every trial and tribulation that we must experience – even death. Other religions are known by symbols of beauty and light – the six-pointed star, the lotus, the crescent moon. Christianity’s symbol is a symbol of death – the cross. The place where criminals were hanged and died. Yet, this symbol reminds us that God can truly sympathize with us on every turn.

African American poet and fellow Erskine graduate, Glenis Redmond, wrote a poem after so many black churches were burned in the south. It is entitled, “Our Spirit Stands” and has always touched my heart. One line says: “We stand steadfast in the midst of these fires. It will not burn the crucifix in our eyes.” Although there must be such grief in watching your beloved church perish, Glenis says that the fire cannot erase the cross because the cross, NOT THE BUILDING, is the center of her church. And grief over death will not remove the steadfast belief that we worship a God who would go to such lengths to call us brothers and sisters. This reinforces to us the knowledge that we are never separated from Him.

But Paul goes a step further and gives us the creed of our faith. He says, “We believe that Jesus died and rose again!” THERE is the real hope for us all. God not only died for us but God conquered death for us too. This addresses the second question that the Thessalonians had about their loved ones who had died and one that, in my call as a pastor, I encounter often. They were uncertain as to where their loved ones who had died were and what their fate would be until the second coming.

I wish I could tell you how many people – in that very first moment that someone has died – have asked me where their mother, their husband, their child is at that time. I always rely on this Scripture to reassure those who are grieving that, while death remains a mystery, this passage reminds us that those who die in the faith are somehow in the presence of our loving and merciful God. And that the power of God's love is stronger than any earthly power that any of us will ever contend with. And friends, I actually rely on this passage to reassure myself – because helping a family or congregation live faithfully during a time of death is also a time of grieving for the pastor.

The Psalmist also reinforces Paul's messages as he writes of the hope that we have in God's power to redeem. In the Old Testament, there were actually three kinds of laws by which the people thought they could experience redemption. There were the Ten Commandments, or moral laws, which we are still called to live by today. There were the civil laws, which were some really good ideas for practical living within the Hebrew Community and there was the ceremonial law.

This law called the Jews to bring animals offerings to the altar and give their blood to God as atonement. However, WE know that when Jesus died, he TOTALLY erased the need for ceremonial laws. So you and I don't need to bring little animals to

church to try to make up for all the bad we have done this week. Because the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ died on our behalf, fought and bled and conquered death and sin for us and then took his OWN blood to God in Heaven and God said, “Finally, an offering that is acceptable!”

This is where we find our hope for our loved ones who have died. In fact, the word that Paul uses for died literally means “asleep in Jesus” in Greek. By Paul’s words that Jesus died and rose again, we are assured that his offering was acceptable and allows them to be in Heaven with God. To sleep in Jesus until it is time to rise again with him.

But like us, the Thessalonians were not totally unselfish. They were worried about their own fate too! So Paul reassures us all that, at the Second Coming of Christ, *we* will all be taken to Heaven with Jesus. Paul paints a beautiful picture of Jesus coming triumphantly, giving the command and the trumpet sounding as we are all finally joined up together and taken into a cloud of Paradise that we really cannot comprehend. This is a hope that sustains those of us who are living. We are reassured that neither the Christian dead nor the Christian alive will be left out of the kingdom.

Lastly, Paul reminds us that we cannot just sit around waiting for Christ to come again. So he says, “Encourage one another with these words.” Friends, we are called, not just to wait for this glorious event but to encourage others to hear and believe and live the Good News of salvation and redemption. And we are called, not just to examine our own hearts but to live in ways that help others to do the same. Because it is by this that we share our hope with others who may be feeling hopeless.

I have talked a lot about saints these last couple of weeks. And as I have studied, I remembered learning in Seminary that the phrase "the Communion of Saints" was a late

addition to our Apostles' Creed. But I am so glad it made the cut. Because it truly is one of the strongholds of our faith. In Greek, the Communion that is spoken of is from the word "koinonia", meaning the community. This was such an important part of the early church, as those who were persecuted for their faith really had to rely on the strength found in numbers.

So, to say that we believe in the communion of saints means that we believe there exists an intimate connection between all true believers in Jesus. Whether we know them, like them or not, all who have died and gone before us in the faith are a part of our communion. What hope that gives us for those whom we love that are asleep in Jesus even now. So may we as a community continue to find hope, to believe in hope and to live the hope that the gospel proclaims.

And may we go from this place filled with hope, comforting those who need it. Living for Christ as he lives for us and encouraging each other to dwell, not on the uncertainties of tomorrow, but on the hope of the gospel that we share today. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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