

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 “Feel the Fear”

So last week, we looked at a parable in Matthew’s gospel about missing out on being included in God’s Kingdom and how some people use those kind of passages to *scare* folks into being better Christians. And so we looked at it from a different angle, and I think we did a pretty fair job at discovering the redemptive value of the text. But then here we are again this week with another potentially scary apocalyptic text and another provocatively chilling sermon title. “What’s with these sermon titles Jesse?” Oh, you just wait until you see next week’s!

Okay, so let’s just jump right into this one. This book, 1st Thessalonians, is one of the earliest books in the New Testament. “Wait, what? It’s halfway through the New Testament!” True. But the New Testament isn’t written in chronological order as far as the date each book was written. But it makes more sense to have the Gospels and Acts *first* so we can get the story of Jesus and how the early church was formed, *then* we can get into these letters that Paul wrote to the churches. Most of these letters were either letters of reprimand to churches that *weren’t* getting it right, or they were letters of encouragement to churches who *were* getting it right but struggling. First Thessalonians is a letter of encouragement. Most of these churches were held together by the hope and anticipation that Christ was coming again *soon*. Like, “In our lifetime soon.” But folks in the church were dying. Some were dying of old age, and some were dying because Rome thought they were troublemakers and they starting dealing with them in the way that Rome dealt with *anyone* who got in their way. So people were dying *before* Christ returned which upset them to no end because they didn’t think this was the way it was all supposed to go down. Jesus was supposed to come and *rescue* them from dying. So now what? So Paul wrote this letter to encourage these early Christians to hang in there and build each other up no matter how unpredictable things became. This church in Thessalonica was scared because they were facing an unknown future.

The “fear of an unknown future” issue that’s facing *us* right now is that Pastor Katy’s time as Associate Minister here at First Christian Church is coming to an end in January. Even though we’ve all known at some level that we weren’t going to have Katy forever, this is hard news. For some this is sad news. It’s sad for me too, but ... it’s also scary.

Last week, a friend who doesn’t do church asked, “What’s the hardest part of your job?” And I had to think about that one for a moment, because there are actually two things that tie for first place and they’re related. I said, “I think it’s knowing that I’ll never finish everything that needs to get done. I start out writing down what I *have* to get done during the week knowing full-well that I will not get it all done.” It’s just not possible. Ministry often seems like an exercise in spreading neglect. There’s always something you *should* have done that you *didn’t* get done because you simply *couldn’t*. And the thing you didn’t get done will inevitably bite you in the butt sometime down the road. So you’ve got to decide, “How soon and how hard do I want to get bit?”

The other difficulty is that ministry, especially now in post-modern times, isn’t all about being a pastor. Pastors now-a-days have to be sort of like a CEO of a company that’s run by volunteers. And because so many churches have declined over the last few decades, there are fewer volunteers to do a lot of the day-to-day non-ministerial responsibilities that used to be taken care of by lay-people. So a pastor has to be a jack of all trades to make things work. The days of “just” being a pastor are gone. And with that comes this constant tug-of-war of, “Do I prioritize pastoral care, or do I prioritize outreach?” Because if my major focus is pastoral care, the church will end up becoming a hospice care facility and die quickly. But if I focus on outreach, I’m in danger of overlooking and alienating people who are already in the church and I risk losing them and their support. And if I try to split it 50/50, *nothing* gets done except a whole lot of running around.

So when Katy came on board, all of a sudden I had another person helping me shoulder all of these things. I didn’t have to worry about

everything anymore. I could let go of some things because I knew she had it covered. Or better yet, we could combine the best of our talents, share the responsibility and get a lot more things done on that never-ending list that no *one person* could ever get done. At the end of January when Katy's time with us is finished, I lose all of that. And I thought, "Oh my God, what am I going to do? How am I going to maintain the level and quality of ministry that we've had over the past four years all by myself? I'm going to be running around like one of those circus performers who tries to keep a bunch of plates spinning on the poles. And I've known this since early August! It wasn't easy keeping that one under my hat. And you know what? At a higher level of logical thinking, I know that things will probably work out. But my lizard brain is dress rehearsing for tragedy. See how quickly fear creeps into our thinking and messes things up? And those are just *my* fears! I'm sure some of you might have entirely different fears that I haven't even thought of yet! This is where 1st Thessalonians comes in to play.

Again, the fear that's eating away at the Thessalonian church is, "Following Christ is getting hard. Jesus hasn't returned. Things aren't going down like we thought. Now what?" Take it away Paul. Now here's something that not everyone gets when it comes to understanding the structure of the early church. Paul was *not* the *pastor* of *any* of these churches. Paul is a church planter. A missionary. His call to ministry is to travel around the Empire, spread the good news of Jesus, then establish self-sustaining churches that can carry out Jesus' ministry. You want to talk about someone who's spinning plates, that's what Paul is doing. He's got churches spread all over this huge geographical area, and he's doing his best to help them through their fears and doubts. In fact, sometimes he can't even visit some of these churches because he's in jail for preaching a message that challenges the laws and values of the Roman Empire. In fact, the books of Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon were written while he was in jail! So yeah, I have no business complaining about not having an associate minister next year! Everyone else in every other vocation has that list that never gets done and feels pulled in different directions. Everyone else in every other

vocation feels that tug of war when it comes to prioritizing. It could be worse! I could be in jail like Paul, but I'm not! Yet.

A lot preachers want to use our text today as a "rapture text." "The Lord will come like a thief in the night!" "Destruction will come upon them!" "There will be no escape!" They sort of skip over the, "God has destined us not for wrath but salvation" part though. I believe this text is actually a word of encouragement from Paul. This is his way of saying, "I know it *seems* like everything has changed, but it really hasn't." Keep loving God. Keep loving your neighbor. Keep building each other up. Find ways to live like Jesus. Yes, there are traumatic things going on right now in the life of the church. Yes, we're all asking, 'Why hasn't Jesus returned like we expected?' But don't forget that our purpose and our call and our *way* is defined by Jesus Christ. That hasn't changed.

This is a letter about peace and security to a people who don't feel very secure or peaceful. They're worried about all the people who have died before Jesus came back. They're told by their culture that "the pax Romana" or "the peace of Rome" is the way to security. The Emperor is the only one who can bring peace and security. Not this "Christ" that you all seem to think is going to save you. And Paul says, "Sorry folks, that's fake news." The peace of Rome is darkness. Something else is coming. Something that shines *light* in the darkness. And you all are *children of the light*. Those false promises of peace and security? That's *not* the way because *they* are built on the *wrong* things. If you build your peace and security on the things of Rome it's all going to crumble. It's temporary.

I want to point out something that often gets overlooked in this passage. In verses 6-8, Paul talks about the "drunks" who get drunk at night. Well Thessalonica's patron god was Dionysus ... who is the Roman god of ... wine. And the Thessalonians were pretty darn proud of this because they partied *hard*. They held their notoriously debaucherous Dionysus worship parties in the community temple *at night*. See where Paul is going with this? The church in Thessalonica was called *out* of

worshipping false gods in the night into worshipping the God of light in the day. That's why Paul says, "Don't be drunk at night. We belong to the day. Don't be naked, clothe yourself in the armor of God." Instead of worshipping Dionysus in the dark, we're going to worship God in the day even though that's dangerous considering how much the Roman authorities disliked the Christians. But here's what's great ... the church's worship was a party too, but instead of being a "drunken feast," theirs was a love feast. It was all about bringing people together and feasting on the body of Christ and sharing the cup of forgiveness. The church's way was a much different way. And that way was getting more difficult. So Paul encouraged them to keep on building each other up. You're all suffering. It's getting difficult to remain a follower of Christ. Society makes it difficult. Our own expectations have made it difficult. We all thought Jesus would have returned by now. So now what? What should we do? Well ... we hold on strong. We have faith that it's going to be okay. God is still with us. In the meantime, support each other. Be the church together. Don't worry about how long you have to do it ... if we do it together we'll be fine. Instead of worrying about when Jesus will return, let's just carry on as if he's here right now.