

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 27A  
Sermon 11.12.23

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 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. 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. 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. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

### **Matthew 25:1-13**

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup> but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." <sup>7</sup> Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." <sup>9</sup> But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." <sup>10</sup> And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." <sup>12</sup> But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." <sup>13</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (384)

The earliest book from the New Testament, this first letter to the Thessalonians is a glimpse into their thinking. The earliest Christians: they had a lot to work through.

A man had lived among them who'd had such a charisma! He gathered crowds. People listened to him.

But the power he began to exercise among the people provoked the authorities. The religious authorities envied and were frightened of his charismatic power. The imperial authorities would have heeded the concerns of the religious authorities, not wanting a local skirmish to infect the whole region, the whole empire.

So, conspiring, they'd crucified him, something the empire did not infrequently.

But then some among his followers claimed they'd seen him alive—and in the strangest places. On a road outside the city. On a beach beside the lake. He would speak to them. He would eat, as if fully alive in bodily form.

But his coming alive again didn't attend with talk of revenge. His living again didn't mean he was here to get even. He was back, but not to punish the people who did this. He was just alive, as if he'd never even been killed, as if no wrong had ever been done to him. No hard feelings.

Which had his followers following still. You'd have thought the death of the teacher would disperse all the disciples. But it didn't. On the contrary, their numbers grew. And they started gathering schools in cities throughout the region, in assemblies. They would do this to get together to recall stories about him and to sing hymns and to break bread just as he'd told them to do.

They did this as a sort of replacing. He had said that they should take bread as his body, that they should drink wine as his blood, that whenever they did this most common thing—eat bread, drink wine—they should do it as a remembrance of him, they should take this most commonplace thing as an act of re-membering, reconnecting with him. Opposite of dis-membering, this re-membering was to be an action of reconstitution, reconstituting the one who had died now back to life, back to that activity of living.

But this is different from so many other ceremonies around death. So many rehearse the death, endow it evermore with terrible power. So goes the admonishment, "Never forget," which follows so many acts of spectacular death. Such ceremonies can even stoke the people most affected by the death, move them to some darker sort of action. In some, these amount to a reanimating of the one died so the surviving can finish his business. In others, survivors are moved to seek revenge. Ceremonies in the wake of death can keep going the dynamics that made for the death in the first place. It's not for nothing, Achilles dragging the body of Hector around.

This is a very effective way to form a community, by the way—to stoke resentment against the one who did this, to urge vengeance of us against them. That's a very effective way to make an "us."

But this one, this ceremony in the wake of a death, this one that would have the people eat bread as a substitute and drink wine as a substitute: this would generate a different dynamic, it would indeed be an altogether new generation. Weirdly bloodless, it could make way simply for life.

All of which points to a different understanding of God. If God was once thought to use death as a mechanism for punishment or social control, if God was once thought to endorse violence for making God's way in the world, then that could not be claimed anymore. The resurrection of this charismatic man who never did anyone harm, who indeed undid harm, healed suffering, and who therefore seemed to think you don't need to accept your sorry lot in life, you

don't need to trust that everything happens for a reason and if you're born into a caste whose lot is suffering, then you just go ahead and suffer: the resurrection of this man who effected transformation, an ushering in of an altogether new realm in which comfort and joy, thanks and praise, gratitude and awe are the fruits of abundant life: the resurrection of this man amounts to an underscoring of God's true intent and action. In resurrecting this one as the first born of the dead, God was saying, "This is the way, the truth, the life." Non-violent resistance, radical forgiveness, seeking wellness and wholeness and kindness for the whole world: this is the godly way, this and none other.

Whether Jesus was taken as the Anointed One of God in his life, the Messiah, the Christ, while he went about his living; whether this was ever thought or known about him, that he was the Son of God: one thing following the resurrection was now clear, to those with eyes to see. He was the Anointed One of God, he was the Messiah, the Christ: and he is.

And for this, that God resurrected someone who'd been killed, *crucified*, someone who'd never accomplished all that much in life, neither to have children which is how you attain on-going life, nor to become learned and literate and a scholar of the scriptures, nor to become glorious in war or even among the slave class; that God resurrected a childless, illiterate, crucified Jew, and that in this it is revealed that such a One is the Anointed One, the Christ of God: this presses upon the human mind something utterly differently true about God, about the eternal and how that eternal would be made real and known in the world.

God, the eternal Being by whom all being comes to be: this is One from now on to be made known in the creation's simply being, simply being-in-love: in the people of the creation simply gathering together to break bread and to drink of the cup and to tell stories and to sing songs. It's as simple as that.

But then

But then, he was gone again. The resurrection sightings stopped. Even for Paul, the writer of this first letter, this earliest entry into what would come to be called the New Testament: even for him, who'd had pressed upon him a most radical resurrection sighting. They stopped.

They stopped.

But they wouldn't stay stopped, right? He would come again, just he had come and then had come again. He would come again again, and he would take those who'd gathered in his name and his spirit to him, with him, right? That just stands to reason, right? I mean this new sort of reason, right, in which everything is similar but also utterly different?

He would come again again.

Right?

Thessalonica was in Greece; Thessaloniki is in Greece. As such, the members of the church Paul gathered there would have been as Hellenistic as they were Jewish, as Greek in their thinking as they were Jew, each of these two coming with their own understanding of what happens to people after they die.

There are lots of ways to imagine this, lots of images and stories to come to some terms with the mystery and persistence of death, that pressing, irrefutable sense that a living body is different from a dead body. Even one infirmed or nearing death, an even barely living body is different from a dead body. The animating spirit, the breath, the personality: it was here, and now it's gone, leaving a thing very similar but also qualitatively different. But where did it go, this personality? What was it in the first place, and what is it now? And where? And for what length of time, if time indeed has any relevance when it comes to that substantive yet ethereal thing, the spirit, the breath, the *person*, so different and distinct from every other person. We are each, alive, so very similar to, and yet also distinct from, one another. Every single one of us!

The Greek understanding of what happens to someone after they die is that they'd now be permanently separated from those still alive. One biblical scholar explains: "For many ancient Greeks, the dead were thought of as doomed to separation from the living in the underworld. They were shades of their former selves without thoughts or feelings. This separation from the living was not a punishment, but it was permanent. Though Greek myth contained stories of people who attempted to cheat this fate (for example Orpheus and Eurydice, Sisyphus), the conclusion of all of the stories was that it could not be avoided." Even the mightiest would become shadows, without subjectivity. Even the most worthless would now be without suffering. Really, the only suffering here comes in anticipation of such a shadowy fate. As in, how could even *I* become just a shadow, never mind the fact that once a shadow I won't much care. But how could even *I* not much care about my own eventual shadowy non-being?

Jesus' resurrection had suggested something utterly different. His death was almost as if it had not happened, his living after death means either he didn't really die or there was some new possibility after death or some new revelation of an enduring truth: that there is no death, that the beingness of things continues to be even when it seems to have ceased.

That there is no such dimming forgetting when it comes to what has lived. That there is no swallowing of subjectivity and distinct personal humanity when it comes to what has lived. The long, individual but enmeshed story of anyone who has lived continues in its living significance.

Members of the church in Thessalonica seem to have taken this to heart. They seem to have thought, and maybe under Paul's guidance, that this new dispensation was a new, and moreover true, way to escape death. Having become Christians, they would be people for whom Jesus would come again again so to gather them to himself, so to bring them with him to the, though living, other side of death.

But some of these had begun to die, really, to die. The years since Jesus lived and then lived again among them had mounted and passed. People were growing older, and some had died. And that unmistakable advent of their Lord hadn't happened. They were dying. Just like regular old Thessalonians. Just like regular old Greeks. They'd lived in this new promise, this newly revealed possibility, but now they were dying just like people had done since time immemorial.

What gives?

The delayed Parousia, this is called. The delayed return of the ever-living one whose return was to be soon, very soon. What gives?

We laugh at this, some of us do. The once-called cultured despisers of this faith will laugh at this, the folly of past people stuck in their own present not able to see and know what we in the future do. Silly fools! We'll never be like that!

They didn't know the advent of their Lord was to happen on a different time scale. Not even Paul knew, though the writer of the gospel of Matthew, fifty years later, was beginning to sense—which hence the parable we just heard, that there would be more time to pass for our waiting in faith, for our staying prepared and keeping our wicks trimmed.

But as for Paul, you can almost hear him working through this latest shock as he writes the explanation he means to offer, perhaps not least to himself: "...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. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died." See, somehow, somehow, the resurrection of all who live in Christ will reach even into shadowy hades, and will make real and living again those whose memory have faded to gray, those whose breath has reduced to a haunting murmur.

Well, I doubt any of this comes close to your concerns. When it comes to the faith we declare because of the resurrection of Jesus, and the anxiety we feel because of life in this world

where destruction feels both far from us but close enough anyway for us to know it might come, our awareness of all that's off-kilter like a haunting, a shadowy realm of dreadful non-being: when it comes to our faith and our fears, our hopes and our foolishness, I doubt Paul's working it out for those early Thessalonians has much to say to us. We've become used to this time scale. We've become altogether too used to it. Really, my guess is none of us ends any given day with the once-again worry that Jesus hasn't come today and that brings us one day closer to dying and therefore missing the promised occurrence. We probably don't even imagine Jesus coming again again at all, or at least not today. Otherwise, I wouldn't have scheduled that meeting for this afternoon. Ours is simply to make do with what we've been given.

That said, we are still waiting. Ours is a faith that would have us yet waiting. There is something yet unfulfilled about this world. There is something yet unfinished in God's creating and perfecting, work to which we might lend our hands. Really, there is much about history, the whole human story, that awaits an ending by which it all might make sense, by which there will even be a throughgoing redemption—every injustice brought to justice, every apparently dead end brought into a living way, everyone seeming lost to hopelessness or despair folded back into the chorus of thanks and praise: "Alleluia! Alleluia!" Somehow, somehow.

The way the earliest Christians might have imagined this, the specifics of their expectation, might strike as off the mark—too limited, too literal, too determined by their current circumstances and social world and political realities. But you've got to admire their willingness to rethink *everything*, and to try to come to some understanding of what they had seen. Really, that they expected the story of this man who lived and lives again not to be finished, that there wouldn't instead (and much more to popular expectation) be a quiet fading away whereupon life would get back to normal, is still the way of this faith today. For those for whom the resurrection of the crucified one has become real, there's no going back to normal. There's no going back. There is only going ahead, following in the way of the one who has gone ahead, the first born of the dead, that one who has passed through that labor we call death into new life.

We look to the future in hope.

We lean into its coming in active faith, making real now what of it we can: hope for the poor, justice for the oppressed, healing for the sick, mercy for the suffering, rest for the weary and the warring and the enraged, peace for those hunted by history, entangled in historic resentments that seem they'll never let loose, while also good purpose for the powerful and things of true worth

for the wealthy. There's something here for everyone. This is about the whole weary world which God yet works toward perfection and fulfillment, a consummation of joy.

We are coming to the end of the church year. Three more weeks until we start anew. Two more weeks until we're at the end, that ending that would give sense and intelligibility to it all. And the season by which we begin again is a season all about waiting, active waiting.

We know now what the Thessalonians didn't know: that the time scale amidst which we wait is long. But that just makes the task more urgent, the possibility that any given moment might be both, the world as it is given to us and the inbreaking of God as a moment to fulfill what is coming. The church year begins as such because it is ever as such.

I tell you all this because I do not want you to be as those who have no hope.

And as for those who have no hope, let's maybe invite them in for next time.

Thanks be to God.