

Where Hope Lives

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

5:1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.

5:2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

5:3 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!

5:4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief;

5:5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

5:6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober;

5:7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.

5:8 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.

5:9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

I.

It is good to be back with you at Emmanuel Friedens, after a weekend away. This time last week, our family was completing the festivities around my son's wedding, an event we had been anticipating for a year and a half. It was a joyful event, full of parties, meals and a covenant ceremony between my son Luke and his beloved Andi that was simple, and meaningful. They read from The Mixed Up

Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler and the great poet Pablo Neruda. And when they looked into each other's eyes and committed their lives to each other, it was for real.

Lynn and I each of us independently remembered how it all began for us, with a birth that came three weeks early, in a hospital in Holyoke, Massachusetts. It seems like just yesterday. We weren't ready then, and I wasn't ready this time either, and for any parent, there is no getting ready, no matter how many hours we spend on the preparations. It sneaks up on you like a thief in the night, or like the man I heard speaking from behind me in the dark outside Lake Avenue Baptist Church one night when I was still new, "Hey man, wanna buy some..." Buy what? Something more and different than we expected.

Luke and Andi were so full of joy. I've never seen my son so happy. And there was this brief moment I glimpsed for just a second, as they arrived at the front of the room. He strode up long legged and grabbed her hand, and his shoulders came up anxiously and then sagged, and a look crossed his face that reminded me of the little boy, sort of a "Really, me, us?" look, almost painfully happy, as he looked into her eyes, and it began.

I came away from this past weekend with hope kindled in my soul by two people who have placed their lives in each other's hands: two people who have chosen the lives of school teachers because they care about their fellow creatures; two people willing to work and struggle and stand up for what is right, in ways that may never ever get noticed, just because of what they believe is right.

II.

Where does hope live, for you? And how does that sit with the thing we call Christian faith? We may have been taught that faith was all about our personal salvation and getting into heaven, a deeply personal and simple and spiritual hope. That wasn't how the early church talked about it though. Many of the first generation or two of Christians were expecting Jesus to come back any day, waiting with the expectation of a mother facing childbirth for the first time, full of anxiety and longing, fear and desire. They put their hope in a this-worldly return of Christ, a reign of peace and justice and love, on earth. "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done," was the prayer of Jesus they memorized. "On earth as it is in heaven."

The writing of Paul to the church at Thessalonika—the earliest written book in the New Testament, by the way, hints at that kind of hope, that kind of expectation. They figured it was coming any day now! The end of life as they knew it; the beginning of God's revolutionary new time. It isn't surprising they thought it wasn't going to be easy or peaceable. These were people who lived in a world where violence was the norm...and little people of their kind were usually on the receiving end of the wrath of the mighty. Yet they persisted in the conviction that the future that God was asking them to be a part of was a wondrous and beautiful thing, childbirth after the labor pains, a wedding feast, after all the anxious travail.

Paul wrote his words less than twenty years after Christ. Despite the fourteen videos some one is trying to sell you about the end times, after two thousand years, some of us can honestly say we don't have the same literal "any day now" expectation. Nor do we believe that the new world of God will come all in one day.

But we remember that for the earliest followers of Jesus, the deliverance they lived in hope of, were actively working and waiting for, was as much of this world as the next, as much of earth as of heaven, as much of redemption—liberation—for the suffering poor of humanity as personal soul salvation. And it was coming.

III.

Where our hope lives, for the future, shapes how we live right here in the present. If our dreams are selfish our actions become selfish; if our hopes are otherworldly and abstract, the way we live our daily lives becomes private and irrelevant. But if we kindle dreams for the wellbeing of our neighbors, if we find meaning in life together, not just private fulfilment, if we conceive that God holds the future of all of us in the same majestic loving hands, then just imagine...it starts to reshape our present priorities.

What does life look like for those who live in hope of God's day of deliverance? Rather than looking for peace and security through power and military force, Paul counseled those early Christians to "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." Rather than living in the dark, numbing themselves and getting caught up in a culture of consumption, he advised them to live lives that were awake: live as children of light—engage every day in love and sharing.

How we conceive the future shapes the present. What we hope for shapes what we live for...and who we are.

IV.

The prevailing cultural messages about what Jesus is all about, what hope is all about, have a grain of truth and a whole lot of distortion.

On one side, we have a version of the gospel that says this life is nothing but a test, and each of us is simply preparing for life after death. Well is life a test? Sure, often it is—but heaven is not just a matter of the spiritual afterlife. Heaven starts right here, friends. The New Creation is already arriving among us, wherever love breaks out, wherever small acts of courage confront injustice, and nonviolent faithful people refuse to give in to fear and savagery, bigotry and hate.

On another side, we have a prosperity gospel that says that if we give money to the blank blank blank group we will be blessed with happiness and riches. That's just plain crazy, the same old scam. Is it true that we should give to important causes, and support our faith communities? Sure. But it ain't necessarily gonna land us a BMW or a new job. Is it true that God wants poor people not to be poor any more? And is it true the God wants each of us to be happy, and wants the best for each one, each beloved child, both in this life and the next? Yes and yes. Absolutely...God loves each of us more than we can ever know! But faith isn't about me me me getting getting what I want want want. If we want to change economic inequity, we have to confront it, as one of our long time members is now confronting a corporation's cutting off health benefits to retirees. If we want folk to be happy we need to do the things required to bless one another.

Many of the messages of culture Christianity are the very kind of false hopes for false peace and security that Paul confronted with the Thessalonians.

You and I in this congregation live in a different kind of hope. We have different dreams.

We dare to hope in release for the captives, sight to the blind, amnesty for the political prisoner, literacy for every child, and reconciliation within families torn up by misunderstanding. We dare to place our hope in a Jesus who came right here into the midst of humankind, born in the worst of times in the most obscure of places, born in an occupied land. We dare to place our hope in a day when the kind of love he taught, the way of walking with simplicity and daring, love and courage, is learned by all people. We dare to place our hope in a God who does not want the human race divided into haves and have nots, jailers and prisoners, abused and abusers, masters and slaves.

Now we don't know—or claim to know, when the day will finally come. We won't speculate on seasons and times. And, like the Christians of long ago, we know from experience that there will be pain along the way. We know that we most likely won't live to see it ourselves. But that does not reduce our joy, or neutralize our hope. We can and will put on the armor of God: the same shield of truth, the same breastplate of the open heart—faith and love—the same still shining helmet of hope! And as we persist in our hope for God's future, it will shape our lives right here in the present yet again.

We will feed the hungry, in hope of a day when hunger is no more—in Schenectady or the world. We will teach children to read—in hope of a day when every child gets a fair crack at a decent education. We will protest war—with actions that demonstrate our commitment to a day when the whole world will see that war doesn't solve anything in the long run.

And this hope, this profound hope, will shape us up close and personal too—because the same faith and love will become the way we speak to each other in community and in our families. The same hope for redemption will influence and shape how we talk to and treat every child of God who crosses our path. Hope, the hope we live in, may be rooted in the future. But its branches are growing backward in time, and they are the grace-filled reality midst which we dwell.

There isn't enough hope in this world. And yet you and I are the custodians in this day of a living hope for all of creation, all of humanity. Yes, it is too big for us, too beautiful, too profound. But carry it we do, nonetheless. And it shapes our today, as it does tomorrow and tomorrow.