

Children of the Light

November 15, 2020

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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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.

The Church year is drawing toward its end and next Sunday we will be celebrating the Reign of Christ, also known as Christ the King Sunday, and considering the end of all time when Christ will usher in the Kingdom in its fullness. On these Sundays we are to be pondering our destiny, the end of this present world order and the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness, though truth be told, we would rather not! The future scares us and we would be happier to look in other directions. In just a few weeks we will begin again the Church year with the seasons of Advent and Christmas. These seasons do give us hope and joy as we love to delight in new beginnings. How odd that once this new beginning of the coming of Christ gets under way and then nears its completion, we begin to lose that hope!

The future scares us, and this is not an experience unique to our age. How wonderful and appropriate that our Epistle lesson deals not only with the Day of the Lord, the great event of Christ's return and day of judgment, but also with our fears in facing this time. Paul offers much comfort and wisdom, so before we complete this liturgical

year and race ahead to the new beginnings of Advent, let us take a hard look at our hope, and the fears that go with it.

Paul makes it no secret that the Day of the Lord is cause for hope and joy, as well as a few fears. When he speaks of the seasons and times, he is referring to the return of our Lord to judge the living and the dead. *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.* In Old Testament times the Day of the Lord was seen as a day for God to take vengeance upon the Gentiles, especially those that the Jews found troublesome. The prophets seized upon this teaching and added to it the more chilling thought that God would also judge the Jews. It would be a sobering day for all and one must not be smug about this coming day of reckoning. The New Testament affirmed this fuller Old Testament understanding and added to it the glad triumph of Christ and the rescue of His people. We will stand before God on that day with humble confidence knowing that unworthy as we are of God's love, the grace of God in Christ has counted us worthy to enter God's presence. The Day of the Lord will be the beginning of the great new order of things. Christ shall rule and we shall live in peace and gladness.

The Thessalonians had an intense interest in this great day. For some reason they focused upon this promise of God more than most other congregations, and their interest became an obsession. They had many questions for Paul regarding this hope. One concern was the promise of resurrection for those who had already died. They looked forward to Christ gathering His flock on the great day, but what about those who had already died? Would they miss out on that great day? The Apostle assured them that the dead in Christ will rise first. It is in the Thessalonian letters that we also find Paul's stern exhortation that those who do not work will not eat, and this was related to a problem of their over-anticipating the Day of the Lord. Some were so convinced that Christ's coming was just days away that they quit their jobs. They needed no more teachings about that day, but they did need a little instruction on the matter of waiting and preparing.

While I may be critical of the Church for not focusing more upon our glorious destiny, I must also confess that many of our fears of that time's approach are not without merit. *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!* A day of destruction is promised. Peter's second letter mentions a great burning of the earth, and the book of Revelation offers numerous visions of destruction. If one is not at least a little frightened one is not paying attention! There is the matter of surprise and suddenness as we are told that the day will come like a thief in the night. A burglary is an unsettling experience. I have never had my house broken into but I am told that it is a jarring kind of experience. One feels violated and invaded. I once had a car of mine stolen, and that was unsettling enough. Paul adds to all this

that the turmoil of the end times is an unavoidable experience, just as labor pains will inevitably come to every pregnant woman.

While there are many scriptures that address the end of time it is still a very mysterious matter and these prophecies are difficult to interpret. Some passages speak of people living in comfort and then the end suddenly coming. Others tell of a lengthy period of turmoil and suffering. The future is scary enough as it is without adding these fears! I suppose that Paul should be commended for his candor in addressing the matter. It seems that Paul is telling us that yes, the future does offer us many fearful challenges, but these are not matters that should cause us panic. The future does have scary elements, but let us not be afraid!

Paul now turns to reasons for the believer's confidence and they are many! To a people who feared the thought of a thief invading in the dark of night, he offers comfort by turning the metaphor on its ear! *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.* Here we find a very simple solution to our problem of a thief in the night. Walk in the light of day! The thief need not have the last word. While thieves are frightening and unnerving, they are also easily frightened. They will not invade a home when the lights are on and the inhabitants are up and about. Here we find Paul repeating Jesus' teachings on the matter as he is echoing the Lord's instruction regarding that great day. Watch! Be aware and alert. Walk in the light.

Paul uses a number of similar metaphors about light and day. We are to be a people of the light and of the day, and not a people of darkness and night. So, let us be avid in worship, prayer, fellowship and the Spirit. We are to be awake and not asleep. God certainly wants us to get our rest, but in a spiritual manner we must always be alert and aware of what is going on around us. This does not mean that we must be able to discern great conspiracy theories and interpret all the Bible's prophecies. It simply means paying attention to all the ways that we can be strong in our walk of faith, and of all the temptations that are also coming our way. We are also to be sober and not drunk. Stated simply, be serious about your walk with God and don't do stupid things which you know lead only to trouble.

Let us live wisely, for then we will be prepared for that Day of Judgment. A great day of judgment came in 70 A.D. and believers were ready. That was the year of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans, and Jesus had warned believers in his Olivet Discourse of their need to flee the city when they see the surrounding armies coming. Christians did this and many were spared death or harm. Jesus' warnings seem to echo the warnings of Jeremiah who told those in the holy city to leave and turn themselves over to the Babylonians, for then they would be spared death or great misery. This year of 2020 will be remembered, among other things, as a year of riots

in our cities. Did any of us fear being harmed in these riots? No. Not at all. We know well enough to stay away from riots or events that look as though they could become a riot. I say all this not to imply that wise Christians will always be able to avoid all trouble and harm, nor to imply that those who experience troubles are to blame for their difficulties, but walking wisely and walking in the light are much to our advantage.

Along with walking in the light, Paul also wants us to make preparations for the great day. I like to think of it as stocking our preparedness kit. There are many out there who carefully keep supplies of water, preserved food and electrical generators on hand for whatever day of trouble might come. Paul offers no opinion on such preparations, but he does direct us to stock a spiritual preparedness kit. First, we are to pack that kit with the cardinal virtues. *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.* The breastplate is an essential piece of armor as it protects our bodies from arrows and swords. Faith is like this breastplate as it overcomes the doubts, fears and worries which the world constantly throws at us. As troubles come, keep on believing! I am sure that you have been making good use of your breastplate in these days as the world is presently overstocked with discouragements and fears. I have heard it called COVID depression, and it has attacked most everybody. Keep your armor on! We are to stay well supplied with love. Remember to love. All the fears and inconveniences of COVID can make us surly rather than kind and caring. Go out of your way to love. Smile and wave at the flagman as you drive by, even though he or she just held you up for ten minutes and you are now running late. This world needs all the love it can get, and we must keep our love supply well stocked. Let us also keep our hope. A helmet is indispensable for a severe blow to the head can be lethal. So it is with our hope. Let us dream confidently of our destiny and stand firmly by our claim upon the coming Kingdom.

The preparedness kit must also have some good maps and a set of strong binoculars so that we can see what is ahead of us on the road and that we can keep our direction toward the New Jerusalem. *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.* We are a people of destiny, a people with a destination! This is a word which we need to reclaim and a thought which receives too little attention. Paul makes it clear. We are not destined to wrath, but to the very opposite. Yes, we pass through troubles, but these are only temporary and the glory that awaits is eternal. So, let us not become overly interested in the troubles and possible hardships which may await us. These will pass away, but life with our Savior in the Father's House is forever.

Finally, we are instructed to stock the kit with plenty of vitamin E—or at least that's what I call it. Be sure to carry plenty of encouragement. *Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.* You may remember back in

the '70s when vitamin E suddenly emerged as the health supplement which was going to cure every ailment and solve every problem. Folks started buying huge quantities and taking large doses in great hopes of a better life. It didn't turn out to be as great a cure-all as was first predicted, but I know a vitamin E which can truly do wonders. Encouragement is so needed in our world, and it can change lives. I can tell you with confidence that most of the people you will meet this day are in real need of encouragement, and you are the one to give it! This is not trivial matter and the enemy is taking great delight in wearing down believers with a steady stream of discouragement. Encourage one another every way that you know. It is a team effort, and Paul tells us that the Thessalonians were good at it.

The future is not our forte. But it should be! Through Christ the future is ours. Yes, there will be battles ahead, and that is scary, but there is an eternal victory ahead of that, and that is truly worth it! Let us walk gladly in the light.