

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost
November 12, 2017

Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Theme: “Encouraging Words in Discouraging Times”

It's discouraging when stuff doesn't work. The more stuff we have the more potential for being discouraged. There is that big technology bug-a-boo. It's great when it works. But then just when you need it, discouragement. There is no cell service. You have an important document and the printer decides this would be a great time not to print. Your GPS lands you in a place that would much rather not be. You can be a little discouraged or a lot discouraged.

If we look back to earlier times we see there was a lot less stuff not to work. Most of what you used on a daily basis you could probably repair yourself. If the handle on your plow broke you could cobble something together. If your garment was torn you could patch it. If there was a hole in the bucket all you had to do was turn to Liza for advice. But that was not always the case. Your draft animal could die and now there was not another one to pull the plow. Your house burned down and there were no supplies, no money, and no time to rebuild. Maybe you just dropped your favorite dish and it broke. You carried it 1500 miles in a covered wagon and it made it unscratched, but just one time of butter fingers and it's in piece.

Yes, discouraging times, some routine occasions of discouraging are always around, like death. Death is routine, sadly, tragically, in this fallen creation. Death comes to all. The fate of the bodies of those who had died among the believers in Thessalonica was a big concern. Death is always a concern. Our bodies of flesh are somewhat like this dish. They are certainly subject to wear and damage. With stress and worries and accidents and

disease, or just years there are scratches, and marks, and chips, maybe some quite sever. Life does bring its discouragements. Many of them are relationship related be that in the family, with coworkers, or neighbors or classmates. Then there is that big discouragement of temptation at hand. The most discouraging part is falling to temptation, doing that thing I ought not do or not doing that very thing I should be doing.

These can be discouraging days for the church in our culture. From outside are forces, winds, currents, social acceptable trends that are opposed to the teachings of the apostles and the prophets. And sadly there are voices from the inside that would erode teaching. Yes, this can be quite discouraging. It's discouraging on a personal level as it makes it a little uncomfortable to walk in the light as light. It makes it harder to pay the bills for the work of the congregation. But a bigger discouragement is the fear of the compromise of the gospel. The gospel compromised is no gospel at all. This would mean fewer believers, less light and salt in our culture, more frustrating living now and ultimately the teeth gnashing darkness of damnation. If we think of the church as a whole as a plate, what does it begin to look like? We remember Jesus' words in Luke 18, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8)

So to get out of our discouraging time let's go back a couple of thousand years and travel several thousand miles to Thessalonica and Corinth. Paul probably writes this letter to the Thessalonians from Corinth. So we make our journey and find discouragement. Paul was initially discouraged. This was due to the circumstances that led to his sudden departure from Thessalonica. He knew the opposition the believers there were still facing. He writes, "You, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judaea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews." (2:14) Paul longed to go back to see them, but when that wasn't working

out he sent Timothy. Timothy brought back encouraging words to Paul. “Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love.” (3:6) But Timothy probably also brought back discouraging news of their discouragement. It concerned what would happen at the Lord’s return.

Now Jesus’ return was not discouraging. They were looking for it with eager anticipation. His return would mean the ushering in of the new heavens and the new earth. His arrival would be a good, a great event. They were probably looking for it to happen sooner instead of later. But it had not yet happened. But, in the meantime, other events were happening. Some from among their number had fallen asleep. No, we are not speaking of what can happen during the sermon, the first pew seeming to be especially vulnerable to this, nor what would happen at Troas where Paul went on and on and a certain Eutychus fell asleep and fell down three stories from his perch (Acts 20:9). It’s the sleep like that of Lazarus which Jesus speaks of (John 11:11). Some from among their number had died.

They were dead and buried. Now they grieved, which is what we would expect. But part of their grieving centered in uncertainty. What would be their fate, particularly the fate of their bodies at the Lord’s return? Unlike prevailing Greek thought Paul preached a change that would be very physical, not merely soul based. Did you still have to be in your body at the Lord’s return for your body to be so changed? If you had already died was the fate of your body like that of a broken plate—just part of a heap of discarded shards? They were discouraged, grieving in this uncertainty.

Finally now, we have some encouraging words, encouraging to them and to us for the answer still applies. But Paul says he does not want them to be uninformed so they won’t be grieving like those who have not hope. Yes, we do grieve at the death of a

brother or sister fallen asleep but there is hope, great hope. For those Thessalonians, those who had turned from idols to the living and true God, there was little hope, really no hope before that turning. The afterlife one had to look forward to was that of the soul crossing over the River Styx. Was it to a better place? Maybe, but maybe it was a much worse place. No one had ever come back to talk about it.

Yes, those Thessalonians would grieve, but there was much solace, even rejoicing. Those loved ones who died in Christ had gone to be with Christ. They were away from the body and at home with the Lord. When He returned so would they. “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” (vs 14) And there was more encouraging news, which we will get to in a minute.

Before we go there, let’s go back to the state of the church in this world. Yes, we can get discouraged, but then we remember Jesus’ words. “On this rock I will build the church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) What does this mean? Is this a picture of the church storming the gates of hell? No, really the forces of hell have been conquered already, Jesus descent to there was proclamation of that. The gates of a city is a figure of its force and its strength. What we see in Scripture, especially Revelation is an unleashing of the forces of hell against the church. Satan knows his time is short, not happy about it, howls about it.

Yes, the forces are unleashed and then when it looks like it may be over for the church, it’s over for Satan and his forces. Out of the mouth of the dragon, and the beast, and the false prophet had come unclean spirits meant to deceive (Revelation 16:14). Now out of the mouth of the Rider on the White Horse, comes a sharp sword to defeat. This one is Lord of lords and King of kings (Revelation 19:15, 16). The Gospel will continue to go out until the end.

Now back to those sleeping bodies. Paul writes this: “We who are alive (still in our bodies), who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).” Get that, the dead in Christ will rise first, we who are still alive at His return will not have a leg (or an arm, or foot, or any body part) up on, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. Their bodies will be raised, taken up, then believers who are still awake taken up (raptured up, *a`rpa, zw, harpazo*). We will be with Jesus, always, always!

We learn more about those resurrection and changed from elsewhere, Philippians 3 and 1 Corinthians 15 more precisely. Our bodies will be changed like unto Christ’s glorious body. Perishable will be raised imperishable, the weak raised strong, the mortal will put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:42-53). There will be no more cracks, or chips, or scratches. There will no River Styx, but the river of life along which grows the tree of life (Revelation 22:1-2).

These are some encouraging words and there are encouraging events that point to the truth. “For since we believe Jesus died and rose again.” (vs 14) He died and rose just as He said He would. He definitely died. He died for us, the Righteous One for all our unrighteousness. He offered Himself up for us as the perfect sacrifice after living the perfect life. There is no doubt that He was crucified, dead and buried. Again we read, “For since we believe Jesus died and rose again, even so through, Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.” (vs 14) Yes, there is hope, living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. There is Someone who has been through death and back alive to tell and show He has conquered death. This is why the apostles

changed from runners and hiders to goers and proclaimers. Jesus was and is alive. Paul writes that Jesus was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead. (Romans 1:4)

God's Word is still God's Word. Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Luke 21:33) By His Word the heavens and the earth came to be and are preserved. God's Word still goes out and still does the work for which He intends it. Individuals are still brought from darkness to light, from death to life, from a life of futility to a life full of meaning and purpose even now. The church has grown from those 120 (Acts 1:15) to almost a third of the world's population (actually 31% in 2015). By 2060 some projections show that percentage growing to 32% (Pew Research Center in Lutheran Hour Ministry materials). This projection says the church is still growing. It is growing in Africa and South America and Asia.

We are encouraged by God's Word and we encourage one another. Life has plenty of scratches, and dings, and hurts (and also joys, pleasures, health), the promise is God works all things for the good of those who love Him. We are new creations in Christ. He puts before how to walk here below as we await His return. His commandments have not changed. As we walk in the light of His Word we are a light to those around us.

We are encouraged. We look forward to the day when we will be with Jesus—always. We rejoice that He is with us now in His Word. For His sake. Amen