**Sermon 8/18/19**

**1 Thessalonians 4:9-14 & 5:1-23**

You see them occasionally on the street corners of cities,

            or at airports.

They hold up hand-lettered signs.

They hand out flowers and happy smiles and printed papers explaining the end times.

“Jesus is coming soon!" they proclaim. "Prepare to meet your doom!”

Similar messages are scrawled on rocks, or on highway overpasses,

           or walls of empty buildings.

Every few years a new prophet comes along suggesting a new,

           revised date for the second coming of Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians reveals that almost 2,000 years ago,

         people were already awaiting Jesus' promised return to earth.

In fact, they were worried.

What about people who died before Jesus returned? they wondered.

Would they somehow miss out on life after death?

Would they be left behind?

They had become obsessed with Jesus' second coming

Paul gave them, and through his letter gives us, a direct and encouraging answer.

He assured them all people in Christ would have an afterlife with Jesus –

           not just those still alive when he returned.

The Thessalonians had good reason to concern themselves with the future.

They lived in constant danger of persecution by the authorities.

On any night a knock on the door, or the scrape of footsteps outside,

         could mean imprisonment or death.

Understandably, the young church looked to the second coming

           with longing and hope.

Paul assured them that hope in the future was well-founded,

        whether or not they lived to see Jesus return.

But he warned against an undue fixation on the future.

The Thessalonians were among the first in a long line of Christians,

        obsessed with future events.

Whole generations since have been caught up in frenzied speculations

         on the exact time, and place, of the second coming,

         only to watch their predictions misfire.

Paul shrugged off such speculation.

He presents the right way, and the wrong way, to prepare for Jesus' return.

"We do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death,

         so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.

For we believe Jesus died and rose again, and

        God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him."

The mild tone of his rebukes indicated his confidence in the Thessalonians.

"You yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia.

Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more."

History records that the first readers of this letter responded well.

In spite of lurking problems, the church in Thessalonica

          continued to show faith and health for many years.

They remained so faithful throughout persecutions,

         that their city became known as "The City of Orthodoxy."

Like the Thessalonians, we are on a journey

We have God's promise of the end of the journey.

The journey itself can be fun and exciting,

            and at times, it can be frustrating and difficult.

But God has a plan and He invites us to participate in his plan.

He wants each of us to be part of his plan.

Paul told them: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,

          just as in fact you are doing.

Live in peace with each other, encourage the disheartened,

         help the weak, be patient with everyone."

In one of the Peanuts comic strips,

           Lucy was giving Charlie Brown the classic riot act

          after the final loss, in a very long season of nothing but losses.

"This is the worst team that has ever existed, Charlie Brown.

            We never win.

           And you are the most horrible manager a team could have!"

Then Lucy turned away and stormed off.

Leaving Charlie Brown staring unhappily down at the ground.

In the last panel Charlie Brown calls after Lucy,

          “That’s not very encouraging!”

We all need some encouragement at times, but often it is in short supply.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to be kind to one another, not to judge one another,

          but to strengthen, and comfort one another with encouragement.

As they were waiting for those end times, he told them:

        Rejoice always.

        Pray continually, giving thanks in all circumstances.

        Do not quench the Spirit.

        Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

One day, not finding anything newsworthy enough,

          a TV reporter saw several stonemasons hard at work at a construction site.

He approached one and asked: "How do you like your job?"

The mason looked up at him and said: "I hate it.

            It is the most boring job in the world!"

The reported then walked around the building site

          and found another stonemason hard at work.

He asked the man the same question, "How do you like your job?"

"Oh, it's great!" the man answered.

          “I see myself building an architectural masterpiece.”

Same situation, two different people, two different perspectives.

There is a whole lot more peace, joy, enthusiasm, and contentment,

         in doing God's work than sitting around, being bored, anxious, and worried,

        waiting for the second coming of Jesus.

We are to be busy doing God's work, caring for our neighbors, helping one another.

But it is our choice.

Paul experienced so much trouble, pain, and frustration,

            yet he always knew the joy of God's love and presence with him.

He was able to thank God in all circumstances.

He saw every problem as an opportunity to advance God's kingdom.

When we live in faith, love, and hope,

         we are able to experience the same joy and peace.

We are called to be a people of great joy.

We are called to celebrate, to rejoice, and to share the message of joy in Jesus.

A pastor's daughter was three years old.

Each night as he tucked her into bed,

        he would ask her what she would like to pray about.

One night she declared: "Onions."

So together they prayed about onions.

The next morning he asked why she wanted to pray about onions.

She told him: "Because you said in your sermon

             that we should pray for things we don’t like."

We really ought to pray for things we don’t like, and also things we do like,

          and we should pray for things which disturb us,

         and we need to pray for God's help, and, well . . . .

         In fact, we should pray about everything!

That is how we begin to experience God's peace and joy.

AMEN