

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 8, 2020, The 23rd Sunday of Pentecost / The 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 123, I Thessalonians 5:1-11

DRESSED TO LIVE IN THE LIGHT!

INTRODUCTION TO READING FROM 1 THESSALONIANS

This morning's New Testament Lesson needs a bit of introduction, because we are entering Paul's letter to the Thessalonians in the middle of one of his discussions. First, it's helpful to know that this is the earliest writing we have in the New Testament. I Thessalonians was written around 51 A.D., before any of the Gospel stories of Jesus' life were written down.

Paul was writing to people who had been Gentiles, meaning they were not Jewish, before the converted to being people of "The Way" as Christians were known in those early years. They had probably worshipped a variety of gods living in the town of Thessalonica. It was a main seaport city in Greece, at the intersection of two of the main Roman roads used for travel throughout the region. In Thessalonica people worshipped gods from many different cultures: Greek, Roman, Egyptian and others.

The people that Paul was writing to had gone from worshipping many gods to following the one true God who had sent his Son Jesus to earth. They believed that Jesus had died on the cross, been raised three days later and ascended to heaven, promising that one day he would return.

It was now 20 years after Jesus went into Heaven and the people of the Way are wondering when Jesus would return as he said he would. They are fearful about whether or not they will be ready for his return. Paul writes to them, to remind them that they will not know the day or time of Jesus' return, but they can know that they are children of God, children of the Light.

Listen now to Paul's writings beginning in I Thessalonians 5:1

Gaventa, Beverly Roberts, *Interpretation Series: First and Second Thessalonians*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998, p. 3-5.

About 10 years I had an ankle problem that put me into a walking boot for several months. This meant that in the summer when I went to a conference at the Ghost Ranch Retreat Center in New Mexico, I had to use one of their golf carts to get around the conference center. All went well until the night that my friend Jenn and I stayed late at the art building to work on our paintings. We came out of the building into the dark night, got into the golf cart, and that's when I learned that the lights on the golf cart weren't working.

If you've ever been in the high desert of New Mexico at night, or any place where there are no street lights and no nearby towns, then you know that when it gets dark at night, it gets really dark.

So, we figured if we just went slow enough, we would be able to tell that we were on the road back to our room. Which lasted for less than a minute until I almost drove the golf cart into the doors of the second entrance into the art building.

Next, we tried using Jenn's very small flashlight from inside the golf cart to light the road, and almost drove off the edge of the road into the burro's field. And yes, in case you are wondering there was a lot of laughter, that we had to keep stifling because by 10 p.m. most people on the ranch are in bed!

So Jenn, using her small flashlight, holding onto the frame of the golf cart, walked beside the golf cart as I drove it, slowly guiding us back to our room.

You may know about the kind of darkness I'm talking about! Once you've been out in a night that dark, you know that it really is true that you can't see your hand in front of your face, or the art building in front of your golf cart.

If you've been out in this kind of darkness, then you can understand the image that Paul was using with the Thessalonians. He was telling people who experienced the true dark of night, every night, that they didn't have to live in the fearfulness of a dark night, not knowing what was going to happen when Jesus returned.

Paul reminds them, and us, that no one knows the day or time of Jesus' return, but what we do know is that we belong to Jesus and we are held in God's love.

We don't talk about Jesus' return to earth very often do we? Maybe it's because we are Presbyterians and Presbyterians often focus less on Jesus' return than on how to live as Jesus' disciples in the here and now.

Maybe we don't talk about this much because it has been nearly 2,000 years since Jesus returned to heaven, promising one day to return to us. Jesus' return to earth often seems like something we probably won't experience in our lifetime, even though it is a part of our beliefs.

I've heard the question of Jesus' return discussed most often when people are near the end of their lives, or when world events seem so overwhelming that people wonder if Jesus will be returning to earth soon. So, you can rest assured that I have had many conversations, and overheard many conversations, with people wondering if 2020 is the year that really will bring Jesus' return. Between an excessive number of hurricanes and wild fires, and our own derecho, our nations' great political unrest and divisions, and the necessary unrest around racism, plus a world pandemic that is growing exponentially, people are once again wondering if this is the beginning of the end.

So maybe it's a good thing that we come to this passage when Paul was writing to the first generation of believers, when they believed that Jesus could return any day. Jesus' return to earth was something they talked about often.

And so Paul wrote to them to offer them comfort and direction for how to live.

First, he says to them, and to us, that they never will know when Jesus will return. That day will be like a thief in the night, or a woman having labor pains, when it happens there will be no stopping it. We cannot plan for when Jesus returns, we cannot try to read the signs of the time and make predictions.

It's helpful to remember passages like this one in I Thessalonians when someone is trying to tell you they know all about when Jesus will return. The Bible is clear that none of us know.

Speculating about that time in history is not how we are supposed to be living our lives.

It's like Paul is saying that if we focus on when Jesus will return it will be like trying to drive a golf cart without headlights in the dark of night.

Paul says to them, and to all who worry if they will be ready for Jesus' return, you are not children of the darkness living in fear, unable to see where you are going, but you are children of the light and of the day.

Paul tells them that now that they are disciples of Jesus it is daytime all the time.

The darkness of the dead of night is no longer the way they live.

We don't need to stumble in the dark trying to find our way with a tiny flashlight. We live in the light of the Good News that Jesus' love is for us and we belong to God whether Jesus returns to earth

in our lifetime or in generations to come. We who follow Jesus are held in the Light and Love of God all the time.

As Paul says, we are “children of the day.”

Then Paul tells us what it looks like when we live as children of the Light and of the day. First, he talks about what we are wearing. As followers of Jesus we are wearing an outfit God has given to us. We haven’t chosen it; it has been given to us! He uses images of soldier’s armor that would have been familiar to those Thessalonians under Roman rule,

As followers of Jesus we are wearing the breastplate of faith and love,
and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. (v. 8)

God has dressed us in faith, love and hope.

These “clothes”, these pieces of armor, are a gift from God for all of us who are children of the Light and of the day.

Our hearts are protected by the gifts of God’s faith and love,

Our heads are protected with the hope we have in our salvation given to us in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

See Gaventa, p. 72 for NRSV mistranslation. We don’t choose the breastplate and helmet, they are given to us by God.

Then Paul says that as children of the Light and of the day, dressed by God in faith, love and hope we need to stay awake—awake to live the life of faith.

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian of last century, said that “Christians are... those who have been woken up and are now awake.”

This awakening describes not only the first moment of conversion (to the faith) but the entire life of discipleship,”

Barth says Christians ‘need continually to be reawakened.’”

This is how we live the life of faith.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011, p.305.1.5)

Our God who has clothed us in faith, love and the hope of our salvation, is in Barth’s words, the God who has awakened us and set our lives in motion.

Barth writes that

“The coming of God is the dawn of a new day
that awakens and energizes,

...it is God’s movement towards Christians that sets Christians in motion,
as we are continually reawakened to the life of faith.” (Bartlett, p. 306.1.4)

Now advertisers would you have you believe that staying awake takes 5-Hour Energy or Red Bull or Rockstar or Monster Energy Drinks to be really alive and really awake in this life.

The Bible says that God will give us the energy to be awake in this life of faith;
awakened again and again to the faith God has set in motion in us.

Maybe if Paul had been writing to the Quad Cities today, instead of Thessalonica nearly 2000 years ago, he would have said that Jesus is the only energy drink of Christians.

It’s Jesus living in us who keeps us awake,
reawakening us over and over again to living the life of faith.

As we are reawakened to faithful living, Paul says we are to “encourage one another and build up each other.”

And if you look at our life together you will see and experience many examples of the ways we awakened Christians at First Presbyterian are encouraging and building up each other.

While the ways we do this may be different than at any other time in our history, because of the world pandemic, I am honored to witness the ways you are encouraging each other and building each other up in the life of faith.

--I see this on Sunday mornings at our Sunday Gatherings on Zoom as you check in with each other about your lives and your family's lives.

--I hear your care for each other as joys and concerns are shared by Zoom, by email and by phone calls.

Many of you have shared with me what it means to you to know that your church family is praying for you, and for your loved ones.

--I hear the ways our Elders and Deacons have supported our congregation since our March shut down, by calling and checking in with the rest of our members.

--You support and encourage each other with cards and calls, and food dropped off, and errands run, and then I get to hear the wonderful stories about what those ways of caring have meant to you.

--I see you support and encourage each other in Zoom Commission Meetings and Session meetings, and at Confirmation and Youth Group.

--You support each other as you mask, and wash hands, and socially distance. Protecting each other's health is also a gift of encouragement and support

--I see your encouragement in prayer shawls knitted and crocheted, masks made, pen pal letters sent to our children, and cards that our Sunday School teachers have created for our children to send out, and then the children who color those cards so beautifully. Having received a couple cards from our children I can tell you that they were a definite encouragement!

Here is our good news this day:

We are Children of the Light and of the Day,

no longer driving our golf carts in the dark, looking for signs we won't be able to find.

We are dressed in faith, love and hope.

The God who has awakened us to faith,

with reawaken us day by day, all the days of our lives,

calling us to support and encourage each other on this journey...

This is our Good News!

So, let us STAY AWAKE,

because we have been dressed to live in the Light!