

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

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November 10, 2019, The 22nd Sunday After Pentecost/The 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 145: 1-5, 17-21, II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

GOD LOVES, CHOOSES, SAVES AND GUIDES YOU!

Lately I keep finding myself having the same conversation with different people. I'm wondering if it's because I'm a pastor, or maybe it's just a sign of the times. Lately I've had people say to me: "I'm beginning to wonder if we are living in the end times that the Bible talks about." Sometimes they've also named someone and asked if I think they are the anti-Christ, but I'm not getting into that today.

I'm wondering if you've also started this conversation, or had someone talk to you about how out of control the world feels. Throughout history people have often asked this question about the end times when life seems a bit too chaotic.

It is not a surprise to say that life feels out of control. A lot of us are aware of the chaos around us here in America and around the globe. And here in the States we haven't gotten into the thick of the next presidential election cycle, and we can only imagine what that is going to bring!

In the reading this morning from 2nd Thessalonians we hear a letter to people who are also worrying about the end times and the return of Jesus. They too feel like the world is chaotic and they aren't sure what is going on. In fact, in an experience that sounds very 21st century, they have been duped by fake news and Paul is writing to them to help them sort out their thinking.

The books of 1st and 2nd Thessalonians are the earliest writings we have in the New Testament. These letters were written to the church in Thessalonica even before the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written. Paul's letters give us insight into what was happening in the earliest Christian churches because they were written around 18-20 years after Jesus had ascended into heaven, written sometime around the early 50's A.D.

And guess what was happening in the Christian church in Thessalonica just a few years after the church got started? You may find this hard to believe, that this started so soon:

Rumors had come into the church! In fact, it was rumors started by fake news that had come to the church.

The rumor-mill had taken off and people were scared. Jesus had promised before he ascended into heaven that he would return one day. He had told people that they wouldn't know the time or the season. In the first letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians it is clear that Paul and those young Christian churches believed that the time of Jesus' return would be soon (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

But now someone was teaching something else, the people were scared that Jesus had already returned, and the End Times had begun, and they didn't know how to live their faith, or their lives, they didn't know what to believe, they were scared and confused about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

For this morning's New Testament lesson, I want to try to explain what is happening in the passage from II Thessalonians as I read it. So, I encourage you to follow along in your pew Bibles; you can find this passage on page 206 in the New Testament. When reading the New Testament letters, it often helps to both see the words and hear them. Paul and others who wrote these letters to young churches had so much to share and sometimes their wordiness can be a bit overwhelming for listeners. It usually helps to read these letters a line or two at a time so understand what is being talked about.

So, if you would like to, please follow along as we look at the 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians, reading from the second chapter, verses 1-5, and 13-17.

Listen to the first two verse of II Thessalonians 2: *1 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, (meaning Jesus' return to earth), and our being gathered together to him, (meaning our being taken to heaven with him) we beg you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word (someone's teaching) or by letter, as though from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.* (Meaning Paul suspects someone may have sent the church a letter and put his name on it). And you thought fake news was only a couple years old. Clearly its been going on for at least 2,000 years!

It is helpful when reading a letter like this to think about how news travelled in 1st century Palestine. News travelled slowly; letters took a long time to arrive.

And when a rumor started, no one could go to their computers and check "Snopes" to see if this rumor of Jesus' return was an urban legend, or the truth.

No one could Tweet "#Jesus' Return" to see what social media was saying. No one could check Facebook for the most up to the minute posts.

First the news had to travel to Paul where he was staying farther down the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. News that the Thessalonians were scared and confused.

Then he had to write his response,

and then that letter had to be carried back across the Mediterranean to the church in Thessalonica.

Paul had such a love the churches he started, and he had such a strong desire for people to truly understand the Good News of Jesus in their lives. And he didn't want them to be living in a false fear.

So, Paul works to set things right, and in the in the next 3 verses we hear the belief from that time in Christian history about what would happen before Jesus' return to earth. Paul writes: *3 Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day (the day of the Lord) will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.* (For concepts of that era, see the Rev. David Shearman, Midrash, Nov. 3, 2013, <http://www.johnshearmanlectionary.com/>)

This is one of the times that what is described in the Bible was understood by those who received this letter, but scholars today are uncertain. There are at least three different ideas about what this passage about the rebellion and the lawless one who declares himself to be God mean. What is clear is that someone has started rumors about this happening, and their false news has scared the Thessalonians into thinking that the End Times have already started.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 297

I think we hear a bit of Paul's humanity in verse 5. You can almost hear a pleading tone of voice as he writes: *5 Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?*

Paul wants these Christians to come back to the basic message of faith that he shared with them and so he tells them the good news again beginning in verse 13: *13 But we (meaning Paul and those who travelled with him) must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord,* Paul carefully chooses his words calling them "beloved of the Lord." First, he reminds

them of who they are, they are God's beloved people. They are loved by God. God chose them and gave them the gift of faith.

If anything can calm us down when we are confused or anxious about our faith it's the very basic good news: We are loved by God.

Paul says they give thanks to God, continuing in verse 13: *"because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth."*

Now there is an overwhelming sentence! So, let's take it a small piece at a time: God chose you as the *"first fruits for salvation"* means that God chose them from the very beginning for the life of salvation in Jesus; God chose us first.

"...through sanctification of the Holy Spirit," meaning they are sanctified, which means made holy by God's Holy Spirit through the gift of faith. We don't work to be holy; God makes us holy through the work of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives.

So read all together verse 13 says: **13** *But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.*

In this one sentence we see our God in the three persons of the Trinity.

God chose us and loved us first,
 God saves us in Jesus,
 and God lives in us through the Holy Spirit.

Paul keeps feeding them the basics.

God loves you.
 God chose you.
 God saves you.
 God guides you.

And then he adds in verse 14:

14 *For this purpose he (God) called you through our proclamation of the good news, (Through our telling you the Good News of Jesus) so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (so that you may be included in the life of Jesus here on earth and in the life to come.*

Paul is walking them from fear and confusion back to the basics:

God loves you.
 God chose you.
 God saves you.
 God guides you.

And then he says to them, now that we are back on the foundation of the basics here is what you do. Look at the final verses, 15-17: **15** *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth (meaning when we were with you) or by our letter (meaning the letter we know as 1st Thessalonians and that they knew for sure was from Paul..*

He's saying, don't trust the fake news, pay attention to what you actually heard from me.

Stand firm and hold fast to the basics:

God loves you.

God chose you.
 God saves you.
 God guides you.

And then he blesses them: **16** *Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.*

Blessed by God, comforted by God, strengthened by God
 they were called,
 and we are called
 to serve God with good works and good words.

Into a time of confusion and rumors then, and into our own times of confusion or uncertainty or fear of the future, or the End Times, these words from II Thessalonians are for us too.

Because even though we have the powerful insight of Snopes,
 and the many voices of Twitter and Facebook and the most recent forms of social media,

what we really need in those times when faith is uncertain,
 and rumors and speculation are filling our thoughts and conversations,
 is what we find in this letter written so long ago:

Stand firm and hold fast to the basics:

God loves you.
 God chose you.
 God saves you.
 God guides you.
 God blesses you.

Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit! Amen.

BENEDICTION AT END OF WORSHIP

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father,
 who loved us
 and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,
17 comfort your hearts
 and strengthen them in every good work and word.