

**SERMON**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA**  
**The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")**  
**October 16, 2011**

<p><b>The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost</b> <b>Proper 24A, Revised Common Lectionary</b> <b>1 Thessalonians 1:1-10</b></p>
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In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our first reading today begins with words that are so subtle and slight that they almost escape our notice: "Grace to you and peace."

Things seemed pretty grim for the Thessalonian Christians to whom Paul wrote: Thessalonica was a citadel of Roman political power, making it practically impossible for the Thessalonian Christians to shun the violent ways of the ancient world. Thessalonica was a center of commerce, wherein both swindlers and scoundrels carved out a living. And, last but certainly not least, Thessalonica was filled with Jews, who regarded the Gospel of Christ as blasphemy against the God of Abraham.

In today's lesson, St. Paul the Apostle slogs his way into this swamp of humanity, speaking words on behalf of the resurrected Christ: "Grace to you and peace."

Paul speaks words to which the raging furies of the world can make no response. Paul speaks words from which the armies of cupidity and egomania cannot not help but retreat. Paul speaks words that are so holy and so sacred that they have the power to transform everything about the world over which they are spoken: "Grace to you and peace."

Things were very grim for our Thessalonian ancestors, but we too live in difficult times:

They tell us that we are the most prosperous nation the world has ever known. Yet, we prove unable to find a bed or a meal for all of our citizens.

They tell us that we are waging a "War on Drugs," yet the *Roanoke Times* must still report on twenty-one-year old boys, who die in their beds, with heroin needles in their hands.<sup>1</sup>

They tell us that we are in a "double dip" recession. Billions of dollars have simply disappeared, and millions of jobs have been lost. All this, because certain corrupt individuals chose to manipulate *our* money for *their* own gain, leaving our economy to groan under the weight of worthless paper.

Yet, today, we hear again the words of the Apostle Paul, the same words that he spoke to our Thessalonian forebears: "Grace to you and peace."

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<sup>1</sup> "Local case shows fatal allure of heroin use," by Laurence Hammack. *The Roanoke Times*. October 14, 2011.

Over all the violence, sickness, and self-interest of our world, over all the secular faithlessness that surrounds us on every side, St. Paul invokes the sacred, powerful, and transforming love of God, from which the armies of evil cannot help but retreat: “Grace to you and peace.”

The letter from which this lesson is drawn is buried in the middle of the New Testament. However, scholars tell us that First Thessalonians is, in fact, the oldest complete book in the New Testament.

The New Testament, as we know it, is arranged thematically, not chronologically: The four Gospels come first, and then the Acts of the Apostles. The epistles and other writings follow, and we conclude finally with the Revelation to St. John the Divine.

Historically, however, the Gospels did not come first. Paul was dead and buried before the Gospel writers set about putting pen to paper. Each of Paul’s letters is older than each of the four Gospels, and First Thessalonians is first among Paul’s letters.<sup>2</sup>

What does this mean for us? This means that the first substantive words of the first letter of the first New Testament writer were: “Grace to you and peace.”

The Old Testament begins with God observing chaos and speaking over it a word of blessing. The New Testament begins with Paul doing the same. The New Testament begins with Paul looking at the tumult of the world and speaking over it words from God: “Grace to you and peace.”

The Apostle Paul will go on to say much about morality and doctrine. He will chastise roundly the ways of the world, and critique the conduct of his churches. He will issue some of the most challenging and controversial teachings in the whole corpus of Holy Scripture. But, St. Paul’s career as a teacher, a preacher, and a prophet begins with these words: “Grace to you and peace.”

Paul does not ask us to flee from hard conversations, but he does ask us to engage them with a mindset of holiness. In his writings, Paul looks sin, secularism, and false doctrine square in the face. He speaks difficult and countercultural truths, but he does so only after invoking God’s grace, only after invoking God’s peace.

What would our world be like if diplomatic negotiations were characterized by words of blessing?

What would our country be like if political debates were characterized by a word of blessing?

What would our homes be like – what would our hearts be like? – if we approached with a word of blessing every conversation that we have with the people we love?

Such a world may seem impossible, perhaps even beyond the pale of human imagination. But, this is just the sort of peaceful and grace-filled world that both Paul and Jesus envision when they speak of the Kingdom of God.

The possibilities are infinite: Kindness can overcome enmity, compassion can overcome violence, and mutual understanding can overcome rancor.

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Brown. *Introduction to the New Testament* (1997 Edition), pp. 422-437.

Jesus has begun this good Kingdom work in the world, but we have a role to play in bringing it to completion. We must be willing to live countercultural lives that are characterized by faithfulness, benevolence, and generosity. We must be willing to leverage our financial resources not for our own good, but for the good of the Church and for the good of humanity. We must be willing to speak words of blessing over the most contentious and divisive issues of our time, so that God's word may be heard, and so that God's will might be done.

Grace to you, my sisters and my brothers. Grace to you and peace.

Amen.