

Good Hope

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17



“Don’t be shaken in mind or Spirit,” writes the author. Most say the first letter to the church in Thessalonica was written by Paul. It has all the trademark signs of his writing. And it is also deeply apocalyptic, proclaiming that Christ’s coming is imminent. The second letter, which in style and tone is quite different from the first, seems to have been necessary because the thing the first letter said was imminent had not yet happened. Years were going by, and still Christ had not come.

“Don’t be shaken in mind or Spirit,” he says. Remember the truth about things. Remember you are children of God, chosen to be a blessing. Do not give yourselves over to anxiety.

Someone told me the other day he was having trouble sleeping at night, because of the election. “If Hillary wins...I just think our country will be ruined for a generation. I’m thinking about moving to Canada.” When I laughed, he said, “I’m serious.” I responded, “You know they have single-payer health care there, right? It’s not a nation known for its conservatism.” “Yes,” he replied, “but they don’t have Hillary.”

And not long after, I had the mirror-image conversation with someone else, about Trump – not sleeping at night, would be devastating to the country, right down to moving to Canada. “Trump will be the destruction of our Republic,” he said, “the end of the American experiment.”

Both conversations put me in mind of a “story” in the satirical newspaper, “The Onion,” with the headline, “Man Who Threatened to Move to Canada Before Election Still Here.” “For weeks before the election, Ron Glick kept saying, ‘I swear if that clown wins, I’m moving to Canada.’” “Glick has threatened to renounce his citizenship every four years since 1980, when Reagan’s victory was supposed to precipitate his emigration to Spain.”

This long election season is almost over, and for many across the land it has produced the kind of fearfulness that is reserved for times of war. People are afraid to talk

with one another about it because tensions are riding high, families are divided, and church folk are known to drop their heads and walk the other way if the topic is even mentioned.

So, with all that said, here on this All Saint's Sunday of 2016 I am going to tell you who to vote for. My bags are packed, the car is running outside, my plane ticket to Canada bought, so here goes. On Tuesday, you, along with every Christian you know, should vote for Jesus. There, I said it.

“But,” you protest, “Jesus is not on the ballot.”

Yes, you are correct. You're going to have to write him in. But, let me be clear, you're going to have to write him in after you get out of the ballot box. Somebody besides Jesus will be elected, and some in here will have voted for the winner and some for the loser, but we will all, all of us who bear Christ's name in baptism, need to be about the business of writing him in, no matter who occupies 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

We are not the first generation of Christians to experience anxiety about the times. The earliest Christians, who always lived on the edge of persecution, were an anxious lot as well. You can tell by the tone of Paul's letters. He is constantly telling them not to worry. “Don't be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed,” he writes, and he could be writing those words today.

For the early Christians, the primary worry was that Jesus had not returned, time was passing away, and so were the apostles. The imminent return that the first letter to the church at Thessalonica had proclaimed was now being updated by a second letter with a new message – don't be alarmed, be patient.

It is a hard message to hear, and some in the early church were having none of it. They were ready to interpret the things going on around them as a sign that Jesus was returning in their lifetime. Paul may or may not be the author of the letter, scholars say, but it doesn't matter; the message is clear – don't fall for it, don't be shaken in mind or spirit by those who might say the end is near. They might say it under the spell of some prophetic vision (by spirit), or by reason and logic (by word), or by letter (maybe even a fake letter purporting to be from Paul himself). Don't fall for it.

Paul writes Jesus in. The people of Thessalonica are caught up in fear, and in their fearfulness they are prone to believing, falsely, that something other than God's grace in Jesus Christ can hold their ultimate loyalty. Paul names the anxiety they are feeling, then he reminds them of the teaching they have received, then reminds them they are God's

beloved children, that God has loved and saved them, then exhorts them to confidence, and prays for their growth. It is a powerful response to fear and alarm, then and now. Paul calls to mind Christ. He writes Jesus in.

What does it mean to write Jesus in? It seems to me it means to be grounded in grace, not lacking in hope, and motivated in all things by love. When we walk out of the voting booth, whoever wins, that is the moment the real work begins – when we have the chance to practice grace, to act in love, to not lose hope, especially when we are among those with whom we might not agree.

On this All Saints Sunday, let us be reminded that our own congregation has been here since 1811. We were here for the War of 1812, when a young Republic was threatened. We were here in 1861, when the bloodshed that was the Civil War visited our town in a momentous battle that cost over 6,000 lives, our then-sanctuary used as a makeshift hospital. We were here when World War I came along, the war to end all wars, followed in short order by a Great Depression that wiped out whole families in our church financially and then another war in which the fate of the world hung in the balance. We were here when our nation was attacked at Pearl Harbor, entering that war. How many of our own congregation lost children, grandchildren, fathers, in those wars? We were here when presidents were assassinated, when the Civil Rights of African Americans shone a spotlight on the South, and we were here when Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed just three hours down the road and the whole nation felt as if it was sitting on a powder keg. We were here September 11, 2001, when terror visited our shores.

I do not recite this litany to in any way diminish the times in which we live now, or the importance of the issues we face, but rather to remind us that we have practice in what it means for followers of Jesus Christ to write him in when times are uncertain.

In every period of our history, there were faithful saints who, in the midst of great fear, worshiped God, had their babies baptized, practiced grace, bestowed mercy, communed at the table, and in ways large and small refused to give in to fear, refused to become cynical or hopeless, continued to proclaim that the way of Christ provided a way through fearful times. We remember them on a day like today not to engage in sentimentality, but to draw strength from their witness, to remember that we are not alone.

In 1983 I wrote an editorial for our high school newspaper condemning the United States continuing involvement in Lebanon. A Marine barracks in Beirut had just been bombed, 220 Marines and 21 other service personnel were killed. I wrote a scathing

political editorial in which I blamed then-president Ronald Reagan. I was raised in a union family of yellow dog Democrats (they would vote for a yellow dog before they'd vote for a Republican), and so I wasted no time claiming my heritage and laying into Reagan and the Republicans with the fervor a high school Sophomore can muster, which is quite a bit.

I was getting lots of props for it, and somewhere along the line my grandmother had clipped it out and given it to my pastor. When I walked by his office on Sunday, he asked if I could come in and talk for a minute. He said he had gotten my well-written editorial, and he was proud that I, as a young person, cared enough to express myself.

“If you will allow me, though, I'd like to caution you.” It was one of his favorite words – “caution” – that and “grace.”

“Remember,” he said, “that all the things you are writing about are complicated, and the more complicated something is, the better you will need to be at listening to the people who don't agree with you. They will always have something to teach you, if you're willing to learn.”

I remember not appreciating his words at the time, thinking this was cautious pastor-speak, not wanting to ruffle any feathers. Now I know he was trying to help me write Jesus in.

I remember being on fire about some hot political issue and going in for my Greek class with Dr. Waddle. It was second year Greek and I was the only student. I was going off, named a couple of students with whom I disagreed strongly, and I called one of them a Neanderthal. Dr. Waddle looked up over his reading glasses and said, “I think you meant to say ‘fellow human being created in the image of God, sinner saved by grace, just like you, right? Could have sworn that was what you meant to say.’”

Writing Jesus in.

I'm so grateful for these two saints and so many more who, over the years, have helped me know what it looks like to write Jesus in. My prayer this day is our entire congregation will wake up on Wednesday, and every day, determined to not let fear and cynicism steal our good hope, but instead will write Jesus in, remembering the words of our text, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.” Amen.