**Encourage One Another With These Words**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since late 2019 we have been hearing about the Coronavirus. It has been a dominant force in our lives since early March as COVID. And there is nobody here who has not had death touch their lives because of it – whether you are skeptical that it was COVID or not.

Now there are more and more cases in our area, and there are some who are absolutely terrified of it. I could proclaim that we are to be afraid of nothing, that we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things – including COVID – and I could say that to fear death because of it is to lack faith. But that would be an incredible oversimplification of things.

As I write this sermon, I do not know how the elections went. I am not sure that by the time I preach it on Wednesday – or even on Sunday – that we will truly know the results. Whichever way it went, there will be those who will claim to be terrified about the direction that our country will take in the next four years.

Again, I could say that such things is to fear something, or should I say, the power of someone, and that there is a lack of faith in God. Indeed, that would be absolutely true.

Some people consider these three weeks the “doom and gloom” Sundays of the church year – the last three Sundays of the church year deal with the end times. For example, in our Gospel Jesus talks about the “abomination of desolation,” the “great tribulation,” and “coming of the Son of Man,” basically the end times.

But is this seriously doom and gloom? I thought people were terrified of COVID? I thought people were concerned about what direction our nation is heading? If the things that are taking place now are so bad, then can Jesus’ return on the last day to bring an end to all things be a bad thing?

I know there are numerous people who take today’s Gospel lesson, other such comments by Jesus throughout the Gospels, and then the book of Revelation and say, “Pastor, don’t you think that we are living in the last days? This is just like it was described in the Bible! It must be going to happen soon.”

Wars and rumors of wars have been around since Old Testament times, nothing new.

Famine brought Joseph’s brothers to Egypt to get grain for the family, also in the Old Testament. It also brought Elijah to the widow’s home in Zarephath.

How many died of plague, or pandemics? More than 25 million lives were lost during the Justinian plage, 541 AD and following.

The “black death” between 1347-1351 claimed the lives of 75 up to 200 million people.

Luther talks about the many lives lost when the plague his Wittenberg in his time.

Plagues are nothing new.

Jesus speaks about these things that are happening all around them, even as He is speaking. The great tribulation is the life of Christians living in a world that is, and always has been, antithetical to the true God and those who confess and trust in Him.

But I thought it important today to talk about these things, because our text does. When we read this text from first Thessalonians, what is the last phrase? *Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

I know, talking about death, thinking about the end of all things can be a bit depressing. But is it truly? Seriously?

Dear friends, our Epistle is a beautiful text that gives us great comfort and expectant hope. Listen to it again:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Those who are asleep, are those who we would say have “died,” “passed on,” “kicked the bucket,” or some such. But, they are those who have fallen asleep, that is, they have died in Christ!

Is dying in Christ a bad thing? Jesus said to the repentant thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise.”

No, he was not going to become an angel.

No, he was not going to be watching over his loved ones.

No, he was not going to purgatory.

No, he was not going to listen to his loved ones who come and talk to him in visiting his graveside.

He was going to be with Jesus in paradise, while his body would go into the grave to await the resurrection of the flesh on the last day – it is “asleep.” Asleep is how those who die in the faith are always described When kings of the Old Testament died, they went to “sleep” with their fathers. Jesus speaks of all those whom He Jesus raises from the dead as having been asleep. Today we hear that same phrase in our Epistle lesson.

The reason so many people have a problem with someone dying, and the reason that the world has concocted erroneous ideas, is that too many humans are seriously in love with this world and the things of this world. So much in love with this world that they think of this world, and life in it, as the best part of life.

Either that, or people are afraid of dying – maybe because a body lying in a casket seem so final – and there is the appearance that what comes after is an unknown? But is it?

There are many who want to do “Celebration of life” ceremonies instead of what had previously been “funeral services” at the death of their loved one. This new approach focuses on a deceased persons past, as if their death is the final stroke, the last exclamation point. The desire for such a focus bears out those thoughts – that people are enamored with life in the world and refuse to believe what the Scriptures proclaim about what happens after death.

Both these thoughts are further born out in the response to the death of a young person. Most people would say that is a bad thing. Why is it so bad if a young person dies? I know what people say, “They didn’t get to live a full life!” OK, what part of this life is so great that they missed out on? Losing a job? Getting into a car accident? Having a loved one betray them? The aches and pains of getting old? Having to sweat out another election? Watching the Packers lose again – in such a disappointing manner?

Seriously, what is it that is so great in this life that it surpasses what believers will enjoy in paradise with Christ? There are no sorrows, no tears, no unhappiness with Christ. Why would anyone deny others the opportunity to enjoy that – at any age? If anything, I am saddened that someone younger than me died in the faith and was ushered to paradise before me – and I’m stuck here in this, the great tribulation! I have already had 2 surgeries to control things causing serious pain – and if I remain in this mortal coil I expect more.

The simple truth is that I deserve no good thing! “Why do bad things happen to good people?” is the wrong question. There are no good people – only sinners – you and I are sinners. Better questions are, “Why is God merciful to sinners?” “Why does God bless me in any way in this life?”

Believers, upon their deaths, are with Jesus in paradise. But to those of us left here, as it says in our text, they are asleep. The do not talk to us, they do not listen to us, they do not watch over us, they are not with us wherever we go, and they are not now angels. As I said, believers, upon their deaths, are with Jesus in paradise, enjoying perfect happiness and bliss with Christ, they have no more sorrows.

There is something else going on with those who have died in Christ. You hear about it every Sunday we have communion, it is part of our liturgy. As we prepare for communion, we hear about those who are gathered with Jesus in paradise – we hear of how they are gathered around Christ, just as we are gathered in Holy Communion around Christ. The pastor proclaims that we join them in the same song, with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven – all those who have died in Christ – are gathered around Christ.

Do you understand the implications of this truth? As we gather around Christ in Holy Communion, they also gather around Christ. No, we cannot see one another, but we are all gathered together around Christ. It as if we are together at the same table with Christ. What comfort it is to know that my mother doesn’t see my sinful failures, but that we are gathered together around the One who died for us both – we are at the same banquet feast of the Lamb.

Dear friends, our Epistle is a beautiful text that gives us great comfort and expectant hope.

The foundation of this is that Christ died to purchase your forgiveness. Baptized into Christ’s death, His becomes our death. His death frees us from eternal death, that is, separation from God for all eternity, the punishment we deserve for our sins. As you have heard before, and will hear again, you are united to Christ’s death, we are also united to His resurrection.

Yes, there will come a day when our mortal lives will end, unless Christ returns before that day comes. But as our text proclaims, on that day Christ returns, those who have died will be raised from the dead. The dead in Christ, those who died believing that He died to forgive them, will rise from the dead, and their bodies will be perfected.

Those who are alive, and in Christ on the last day, will also rise to join them, their bodies perfected. From that day on, we will be together with the Lord. We will enjoy all eternity in perfected, sinless, fleshly bodies, just as Christ has, so will we have.

Job spoke of this hope many centuries before Christ took on human flesh. He spoke of his resurrection hope with these words, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my own eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”

There are many unanswered questions about that last day. Where exactly is heaven? What will we be doing there? Someone asked me, “Will we be singing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? I hope not, I do not sing very well.” I explained, “But then you will be perfect!” “Oh yeah, good point!” was the reply as they walked away. But, it was a good question.

Heaven will be glorious. Biblical pictures are given in apocalyptic language, what we might call “vision” or “dream” language. Are they views of actual “things” taking place in heaven, or are they metaphorical views that depict the majesty and glory of heaven?

We cannot begin to imagine what the glory and beauty of heaven will be like, it is so far beyond our human experience and condition. Why? Because what we see and think of as beautiful and glorious in this present life is all tainted by sin.

I know dear friends that my Redeemer lives.

I know that He gave His life to purchase you, me, and all people from sin and death.

I know that He rose again the third day to proclaim that He has won the victory, and that all those who believe in Him will also rise.

I know that this body and life, with the aches, pains, sorrows, tribulations, will be made new on the last day and enjoy eternity with Christ in the heavenly kingdom that He is preparing for me and all believers.

I know that with my own fleshly eyes I will see Christ in His flesh, and all those loved ones who have died in faith before me. What a glorious reunion that will be!

As this passage from 1st Thessalonians ends, “Therefore encourage one another with these words,” I am therefore glad to live each day in this life, so that I can proclaim this good news to others. I pray that you also have hope for this life as we wait for the perfect life to come. Amen.