

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Preparation

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

November 15th, 2020

### Preparing for the Future that Awaits

Last week, our theme was listening. We looked at active listening and how active listening builds value and respect for each other, leading to trust, and strengthening our empathy for one another. We looked to Psalm 78 for guidance and instruction as the Psalmist asked us to remember our ancestors and all the trials they had faced and overcome. We pledged to seek goodness in trying and confusing times. This week our focus shifts to preparation as we look at 1 Thessalonians for guidance and wisdom.

During my freshman year of high school, I was already well on my way to discerning my calling. As Wesley would say, my heart was strangely warmed as I was baptized in Holston River in my hometown of Surgoinsville, Tennessee at the age of twelve. In the three years following this transformation in my life, I began to understand my faith, seek questions, and discern my place in the world around me. I remember a conversation with my pastor at the time, Rev. Scott Layer, that I still ponder on today. Rev. Layer was formational to my faith in many ways. He taught me how to play guitar and encouraged me to play music with him on Sundays. He let me preach my first sermon and offered me words of encouragement when older members fell asleep during that sermon. He said, "Don't worry. Ed falls asleep every Sunday and James never looks you in the eyes like he hates everything you're saying." We fed the elderly, we sang Christmas carols, and most importantly to my life, he was a role model for a boy who desperately needed a male figure to teach him something other than anger, hatred, and isolation of one's self.

Pastor Layer and I were driving one day from some ministry event I do not recall. Out of the blue, I asked him, "Pastor, what do you think hell is like?" He paused and waited a moment clearly deciding what to say next knowing I would cling to every word of his reply. He said, "It is all the beauty in the world taken from us. All the colors, all the love, all the goodness we choose to see even in our pain and anger. It is a place that some experience here on earth. We must choose to let the

gospel transform us into what we are to be. We must go into the world and help serve others to assure them they are not in hell now. The world needs each of us and we need the world." This story reminds me of the many lessons and wisdom folks all around me from different experiences, perspectives, and cultures passed on to me throughout my life as they prepared me for my calling and ministry.

In our scripture lesson today, we look to the Letter to the Church of Thessalonica. We have talked about this church before by pointing it out as one of Paul's most beloved congregations, as Paul speaks of their congregation in an intimate, congenial way throughout the letter. They had developed a friendship and pleasant relationship after a rocky beginning to their church's formation. This section of the letter has a couple different pieces that we will unpack together.

The first section is about the coming of the Lord. For those of you who attended the Book of Hebrews Bible study, you will recall that we talked about Paul's fascination with the return of Christ. The return of Christ was important to a lot of Christians during this time period. They saw Jesus' death as only temporary due to his resurrection and promise to return. This was also not simply a concept only Gentiles, like the congregation Paul is speaking to in Thessalonica, have conceived. It was a Jewish tradition since the time of Elijah to wait on the Messiah and prepare for the Messiah's arrival. We see this language all throughout the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, where a Messiah is to redeem all the people of Israel to bring about wonderful things into the world, which is similar to the concept of Exodus where God delivers the Israelites from their pain as they cry out. In verses 1-4, Paul speaks about this reminding us the time will be unknown just like a pregnant mother does not know the exact moment when her labor will begin.

In verses 5-8, Paul uses the analogy of light and darkness, which is once again a common theme throughout this time period. The Gnostics, who largely influenced sections of scriptures and the Gnostic gospels, believed the truth was within someone, like a shining light. This light guides us and acts as a moral compass in our ethical decision making. I want to offer something a little different than what Paul does, because I believe darkness is important to our faith and does not have to be seen in a negative light.

Darkness, in terms of the seasons, is celebrated in the winter. From what I am told, the winters here in Montana are darker and gloomier than most, but I believe in the darkness we are able to prepare ourselves. Our Advent season is a testament to this. In our winter months, we celebrate the birth of our Savior,

Jesus Christ, as we wait patiently in anticipation of the Christ child. In this darkness, we reflect on who we are, where we are, and where we are going. Winter is a time of anticipation for the rebirth spring brings us and prepares us for the upcoming year. Darkness is a time to prepare us for what is to be.

In the closing half of verse eight and all the way through verse eleven, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to embrace this process of salvation and spread it to one another. He says let us wear our faithfulness and love like a piece of armor and our hope as a helmet of salvation. These images paint an image of war and battle, which may be a little much for some. However, let us not forget, Love is always attempting to drive out hate and hate is always attempting to diffuse Love's power. Hopelessness is always attempting to convince us that hope is a mere fiction of our imagination, as Hope is always trying to restore faith in the lost. Our faithfulness to these principles and values are what keep us faithful, and the lack of these fruits is what drives us to absolute cynicism and fear. We live in a day and age where it certainly feels as if putting on a breastplate of justice, a belt of truth, a shield of faith, a sword of spirit, a helmet of salvation, and shoes spreading the good news of peace are needed (Ephesians 6:14-17).

The darkness in our lives and the trials which we face should never dissuade us from abandoning the teachings of Jesus. As we spoke about last week, we must learn to see the goodness in our lives and seek out goodness in our communities. There will always be pain, anger, fear, and hatred in this world. There will always be greed, pursuits of power, bigotry, and phobias of all kinds, but it is our calling as Christians to come together through our fellowship of love and invite all those who are weary and outcast to the table of grace. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians reminds them of this and reminds us today that it is up to our preparedness to pave the way for the Kingdom of God as we are led by the Holy Spirit to spread the good news and the fruits of the Gospel into the world.

Right now, it is easy for us to give into our fears and let evils of the world consume us, but friends, I implore us to dream for a different way of being and seeing in the world. We can learn to value each other through mutual respect of the fruits, strengths, and gifts each of us brings. We will learn to trust each other through love and grace as we each show mercy and compassion to one another. In doing these things, we will learn to empathize with one another and build the Kingdom of God.

As we await the birth of Jesus, let us not forget we must prepare our hearts and minds for the message of the gospel. The gospel prepares us for the

much-needed work ahead. It gives us strength and wisdom to live into our calling as Christians. It reminds us we are all valuable and necessary to the work of the Gospel. Let us leave this place with hope in our hearts and openness to difference. May the Divine bless you and keep you in the days to come. Amen.