

Hold on Tight!
A Sermon for November 6, 2016
2 Thess 2:1-5, 13-17
Lansdowne UMC

Do you ever feel like your life is a roller coaster? That's the image that comes to mind when I think about America's election season coming to a close. We sat down and got strapped into this roller coaster well over a year ago. Then we were sent off. There were some early dips and turns that showed us this wasn't the average roller coaster. They left us excited, but also a little afraid, of what is to come. But now, in these last few days before the election, there is a certain... anxious calm. This is the part where the roller coaster ratchets itself up to the highest hill. We realize that whatever has come before is only the beginning. In just a short time, all of the energy that has built up will be released, as together we topple over the cliff, plummeting toward-- a safe outcome-- we hope. We *hope* we'll be ok, but... we're not really sure. And so with white knuckles, we hold on and pray.

That's roughly the situation that Paul is addressing as he writes to the Thessalonians. Let me step back and try to explain.

In his first letter, Paul praises the Christians there. He tells them that the people around them are reporting to Paul "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming."

"The wrath that is coming...." We'll come back to that in a moment.

The Thessalonians lived in a culture where worshiping idols was not only expected, but it was part of the fabric of society. Jews and Christians, who worshiped an invisible God, conspicuously refused to honor the other gods. And so, because they didn't believe in the gods that everyone else worshipped-- get this-- they were called "atheists". So as awareness of this exclusive "atheistic" movement grew, resentment and hostility from the Christians neighbors also grew.¹ Their counter-cultural practices seems to have put them in a position where they are facing suffering and persecution for their faith.

Understandably, then, they leaned on the great Christian hope on the second coming of Christ, also called "the day of the Lord." And so, as Paul says in his first letter to them, they wait for Jesus to come from heaven. But there is a problem: people are saying that the "day of the Lord" has come already. And the Thessalonians are quite upset and frightened that they've missed out. [They feel like those first hearers of Orson Welles *War of the Worlds*, convinced that what they are hearing is a real-life story of the end of the world unfolding before their eyes]

And so Paul urges them in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed." Yes, indeed, things are not looking good. But you Thessalonians, he says in verse 15, must "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that [we taught you]." You're on a roller coaster, so the best thing you can do is to hold on.

"Besides," Paul says, the necessary things haven't happened yet. Unfortunately, in his efforts to comfort the Thessalonians by telling

¹ See David Arthur deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 542.

them about the things that will happen in the time surrounding Christ's return, Paul has provided what many have taken to be a roadmap for the endtimes. And so throughout Christian history, but especially in the last 150 years or so, people have looked proclaimed that the day of the Lord has come, or that it is coming soon. In America, it seems that part of the election season pastime for some Christians is to start declaring that these signs are being fulfilled.

Now, certain Christian circles have a serious fascination with the end times. I confess, I stopped listening to preachers on Christian radio a long time ago because seemed to only ever preach on the books of the Bible that talk about these things: especially Daniel, 2 Thessalonians, and Revelation.

But predicting the end is never Paul's goal. In this passage, he is reminding the Thessalonians of the reality that Christ will return, and they won't be left wondering if it's happened or not. Essentially, Paul says, You're not going to need a letter from me to tell you that the day of the Lord has come. But hold on to what I've taught you.

Despite the unhealthy fascination that some have concerning Christ's second coming and the particular events surrounding it, belief that Christ will come again is not a fringe belief. The Apostles Creed-- one of the most basic confessions of the Christian faith-- says that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. This is a statement that has lots of New Testament weight behind it, including 2 Timothy 4:1, which refers to Christ as one "who is to judge the living and the dead."

But what is this about? Alright, I know, talking about judgment is not the type of thing that brings in the droves on Sunday morning. But if

we're to be people who are able to hold on to Paul's teaching, no matter what comes our way today, tomorrow, election day, and beyond, we need to know what Paul and the rest of Scripture teaches. And the reality is that if we don't talk about it here, then we'll be no better off than the Thessalonians, who were at the mercy of whatever rumors were going around the Christian and non-Christian communities of the time. In other words, we're going to learn about it from somewhere, so we might as well try to get it right here.

So first I want to talk about the biblical concept of the final judgment. Part of the reason we don't like talking about it is because the broader culture frequently accuses us of being judgmental. The problem, of course, is that we know that they have a point. Even though Christ teaches us not to judge others, and even though we say that it is *Christ* who will come again to judge, it seems that as soon as we start talking about the judgment, we have a real difficulty not putting ourselves in the judge's seat. Teaching about judgment can quickly deteriorate into us condemning others and vindicating ourselves.

But let's step back from all that for a second.

We look around at the world, or perhaps even at our own lives, and we see injustice. It's not right that children are abused. It's not justice that people in Syria face the choice of leaving home or getting bombed. It's not right that slavery still exists in the world-- even here in Baltimore-- as human beings are bought and sold for labor and for sex. It's not right!

So put yourselves in the shoes of the victims of these injustices. We want to press charges in a law court before God. We want to say, "God,

people have broken your law, and I've been harmed by it!" But even though we've pressed charges, it seems like the judge has not yet issued the final verdict.

But one day, Christ will at last come and vindicate the victims. And so scripture is excited about God coming to judge. Psalm 98 says:

Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming
to judge the earth.

The judge is at last coming to set things right.

And here is the reality. When Christ comes to judge, he doesn't simply impose a fine on evil. He doesn't give evil a slap on the wrist, saying, "don't do that again." In the part of the 2 Thessalonians chapter we skipped over, Paul speaks of the lawless one, who is essentially Evil personified. Paul says, "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, *annihilating* him by the manifestation of his coming."

The point is not for us to get hung up on *who* this person will be, but to say that the time will come when all of the evil in the world will be focused together in at one point, and at that time, Christ will come and destroy evil itself.

The power of God that destroys evil is called God's wrath. That's another term we get hung up with. When we hear it, we think about Zeus throwing lightning bolts from heaven. Or maybe it's more like the old

farside cartoon. A gray-bearded god sits at his divine computer with an image of a man on the sidewalk walking under a piano dangling by a rope. God's finger hovers over a particular key, which simply reads "smite."

But this impulsive, unpredictable view of God's wrath is exactly the opposite of what the Bible teaches. The concept of the wrath of God is a testimony to the reality that a Good God will not ultimately allow evil to continue in the world. There will come a time where at last, God will say, "that's enough." That this has not happened already is, I believe, a testimony to the mercy of God, who scripture tells us "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." God's justice will come like a wave, washing away all of the debris of evil that has accumulated.

So when scripture speaks of fleeing the coming wrath, it's saying make sure you don't find yourself caught up in evil when God's tidal wave of justice comes.

Paul has said, essentially, "yes, Christ will come again to try, convict, and sentence evil. No, that has not happened yet."

Paul continues, "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."

Paul gives thanks to God that the Thessalonians won't be caught up in God's condemnation of evil and injustice. That is because the Holy

Spirit has made them holy; the holy spirit has sanctified them. Christ breaks the shackles that keep us caught up in evil. This is not merely a metaphor for God giving us a pat on the back and saying “that’s ok little one; try to do better next time.” It’s literally God saving us from the power that evil and sin have over us.

And so Paul encourages the Thessalonians to gain strength from God, and to go about doing the good works that God has prepared for them to do.

So on the one hand, God is in control. We wait for Christ to come and take care of evil. On the other hand, we continually seek resolve and energy from God to endure whatever hardships we’re going through.

We are on a roller coaster. Don’t get swept away by wacky teachings. Hold on. Put your hope in the future that God has prepared for us. A future where Christ will defeat evil and even death itself. A future where we hope to be joined together with *all* the saints-- all those who have gone before us in the faith. A future where people won’t have to fear tomorrow, because God will be all in all.