

Sunday, June 23, 2024 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

“Death Now and Later”

It has been a season of loss for this congregation. We're being split up! Things will never be the same again. We have come to death, the third theme of spiritual formation this month.

We started with the fact that the Gospel comes to us in a particular set of circumstances, socially, economically, personally. This is the hard cold reality of where we start from. Our first theme is paying attention to our spiritual lives and cultivating our relationship God and others. The second theme was accepting grief and disappointment as the place where God meet us and teaches us to trust and love. Now, today, facing death.

When Jesus died, it was not just Judas who thought that something hopeful and wonderful had ended. Although Jesus had told the disciples about his coming death and resurrection, no one had understood. Friday night, Saturday and Sunday morning, they were stunned and broken.

Then the breathless arrival of the women from the tomb, the mad dash of Peter and others to confirm for themselves, and the appearances around Jerusalem of the Risen Lord over forty days. Jesus was taken up, and they waited ten days in a suspended animation, before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost reminded them of everything that Jesus had said. Their hearts and tongues loosened, they confidently told of Jesus, risen from the dead, coming back.

This morning we read the passionate words of Paul, perhaps 20 years after the Resurrection, to the Christians at Thessalonika. The believers had banded together, clung to one another, drew in their family and closest friends, told the Good News to their neighbors, and worshipped together in joy and faith, waiting for Christ to appear again. But as the years went on, perhaps half the time that Bud was here, the cycle of life continued and people died. Their closely knit band was breaking up. What happened to the people who died before Jesus came back? What will happen to us, now that believers have already died? Will we be separated in some way?

Paul writes that those who die in the Lord, and those who are still living, will not be separated into categories, like going through custom in the citizen and permanent resident line v. those entering by visa. We are all waiting for the return of the Lord. Paul says that the dead in Christ will rise first, and then those living will be caught up to join the Lord. As a child runs out to greet her father and is caught up in his arms as he rushes to meet her and bring her with him to the home, so Christ will catch us all up and return to earth with us, seen by every eye as Judge.

The Bible does not explain what happens to those who die until the coming of the Lord, except to say that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. (2 Cor 5:8-10)

Here are some of the things you may or may not find hard to believe.

Life will continue after death.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead, returned to Heaven and is still alive.

The Holy Spirit was sent to the believers after Christ's ascension and still is with all believers.

Jesus Christ will return to earth, whereupon there will be a massive final showdown between God and all the forces of evil, in which God will triumph.

These may seem very unlikely but these are the teaching of the New Testament. This is what this congregation teaches. This is what many of you believe. Again, these things may seem naïve, but other explanations of the world seem even less likely. They are the best explanation that I know of the world.

Paul writes here to people who know the Gospel story, and he says that they, and we, can be ignorant about the meaning of death. Paul writes that even Christians can grieve as if they did not have hope. Our hope is the resurrection of the dead, and the coming of Christ in glory. This coming will not be a secret only known by special people who have secret knowledge. The coming will be announced "with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God." (v.16)

Paul writes that those who die and those who are still living will return with Christ. All those we have lost will be with us again. We ourselves will die unless the Lord returns first.

So is this just how one particular group sees the world? The claim of the Bible is to eternal and universal truth. So Christ as the central figure of history for everyone. So Christ is the Savior and Judge of every human being and every society and every human organization. I believe and say to you that all these things are taught by the Bible, and I believe them. I also believe that a lot of cultural things that have nothing to do with Christ have gotten mixed up into what the Bible teaches.

English is not God's native language. Christ isn't blonde. The center of the church is not in Europe. Technology and earthly power are not the marks of holiness. The center of the church has shifted, from Jerusalem to Antioch to Edessa to Rome to northern Europe to North America to currently, Africa and South America.

What does death and the return of Christ mean to all the people in our lives who, as far as we know, never think of Christ? Here in Pennsylvania, in 2024, it is our work to let all assumptions about Christ needing cultural dominance fall away and think humbly and hopefully about death and the Second coming. How can this be a message of hope for all we know and love?