

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Paul really cared for the congregation at Thessalonica. He had been the primary human founder of this congregation in this city of the Roman Empire. It was in Asia Minor, it's in modern day Greece, it was a trading city up there along the coast. The congregation itself was made up of both Jewish believers and Gentile converts. But evidence of Paul's affection for this congregation runs throughout the letter to the Thessalonians. We didn't hear it tonight, but chapter one starts off . . . "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1:2,3)

Now these three guys, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (don't worry there's no test), but Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, they were the three missionaries that went to Thessalonica. During their time that they spent there it was a little different from what we would imagine of our pastors or missionaries today. They had support themselves financially. They had their own full-time jobs, and then after they had put in a full days work, that is when they began to preach and teach as they had the spare time. The congregation didn't support them, financially, at least not while they were there. Later in his career the congregation from Thessalonica was the ONLY congregation from whom Paul accepted any kind of personal financial support. But when he was there initially setting up the congregation he didn't receive any kind of financial aid from them. He had his own business, we're pretty sure he was a tent maker. But as we did hear in our lesson tonight from chapter three, Paul wrote "You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked hard night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed the gospel of God." (2:9) They didn't pester the congregation for financial aid. They were able to come up with their own. But of course it also meant that they weren't able to come to them at every single opportunity. But working full-time didn't necessarily leave a great deal of time for extra curricular activities, but they did find a way because bringing the gospel message to the people of Thessalonica was very important to them both personally and because they had grown to love and care for these folks.

Now, as in any new organization this congregation experienced growing pains. There were those that felt that Gentiles shouldn't be converted or if they WERE converted that they should be following the laws of Moses. Paul apparently felt though that when he had left things were fairly well under control, but then he began receiving messages that these divisions had begun to happen, and so he sent Timothy back to check out things and straighten them out and report back to Paul. Which is exactly what Timothy does apparently that seems to be the general overall message of this letter that we call the 1 letter to the Thessalonians. Timothy reports back to Paul, who in turn writes to the congregation. (If you want to get the whole story, read the letter. It's only three pages typewritten in twelve font - you're going to read Christmas letters that will take longer to read than the entire letter of 1 Thessalonians. It's a quick read.) But Paul, while chastising the congregation, he also

expresses to them over and over again his desire to see them. His desire to be with them physically. As he says later on in chapter two ¹⁷As for us, brothers and sisters, we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. 2:17.

Now it might be rather difficult in this age of instant communication by email or telephone, by being able to see things happening half way across the world in television, how many of us carry a cell phone around with us. Paul lives in an age when if you wanted to get somewhere, you walked. Now the average person could manage in a days travel you could walk about 20 miles. Think of how far you traveled last weekend for Thanksgiving in whatever gathering you were at. Or, how far did you travel tonight just to get HERE? How long did that travel take? Imagine WALKING that distance instead of driving, imagine having to communicate with any one outside of your immediate area by letter rather than telephone or email. If you can put yourself in that frame of mind, THEN you can maybe begin to understand Paul s anticipation. His desire to see these people for whom he loves and cares and who wants to be with them to that face to face meeting, but he knows that a LONG time will pass before he can realize that goal.

And that's where we are with the season of Advent. Now Advent might be one of those church seasons that we stumble on. Most of us, it's Christmas season, right? You know isn't that what our sale papers are telling us? You go to the mall and that is what the music we hear playing or we have the banner across Market Street saying, okay the banner on Market Street says Season s Greetings but it means the celebration of CHRISTMAS. So what s the deal about Advent?

Advent is, by our church understanding, a time of preparation, a time of anticipation. We prepare for; we are anticipating, Christ, both as the newborn child, but also as the returning Messiah. Now Christmas is about more than just the baby in the manger and Advent is more about just getting ready to sing Happy Birthday to Jesus. It's about being ready for Jesus when he comes back. It s in 1 Thessalonians as a matter of fact that we get one of those more famous verses who are often quoted by those who call themselves evangelicals: In chapter 5: ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (5:2) Paul goes on to say a few verses later: ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. (5:4-6)

Be ready Paul is saying, anticipate the coming Messiah. We don t know when exactly it s going to happen, but we Be Ready because he is coming. Paul reminds the Thessalonians, first how much he loves and misses them, but again and again to be ready, to be prepared. Advent is like the letter to the Thessalonians. Reminding us how much God loves us and cares for us and longs for that face to face meeting. Additionally, **be ready** because Christ is coming. It might be tonight, it might be tomorrow, it might be some time next year. It could happen long after we've all been turned into food for worms. But the **when** it happens isn't important. The **be ready** is what's important. The **be ready** is where we're suppose to be so that as we spend these next few weeks getting ready to meet family or gather together with friends, maybe go out and purchase gifts, or make wonderful meals, write cards, or decorate our homes. We need to remember be ready, Christ is coming. Amen.

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