

Today we continue in our worship series, “The Good News About Death.” Last week, there was a call to make earth – and especially the church -- more like the vision of the kingdom of God. It was about living a life that reflects our calling to be like Christ in this world. This week, the worry expressed by the believers in Thessalonica is about the process of getting into heaven. The start of ch 4 in Paul’s letter to them is all about living to please God.

Today’s Old Testament text comes from Joshua 24: Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. ³ But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau.... ¹⁴ “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Joshua reminded the Israelites of their beginnings as a people of God, a people of faith. He told them they had a choice to make, whether or to serve God or the gods of the people into whose land they have just settled. This is also our choice, every day:

Will we “fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness?” And what does holy living have to do with heaven, or with our grief over the death of those we love?

As always, let’s begin with prayer: Lord God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, for you are our rock and our salvation, Amen.

The one sure reality of life is that death comes to us all. It has no respect for vocation, wealth, social status, cultural heritage, skin color, body type, gender identification, religion, or lack of religion. It is the great equalizer. We leave this world with little more than how we entered it, life and love experiences the only real additions.

We all have experienced the loss of people we have loved, or if we haven’t yet, we will. I could list a few: grandparents, parents, cousins, dear friends, mentors, even pets. All of these influenced who I am today, all of these in some way or another shaped my faith. Some of the losses were felt deeply and the pain lasts at times even now. Some carry fond and funny memories, all left me with invaluable lessons on how to love.

Whether we want it to or not, the death of someone close to us brings to our attention our own mortality. It wasn’t until a high school classmate died that most of my fellow teens and I realized began to understand the impermanence of life on earth. Faith became real. It was important to most of us to know that Tommy believed in God.

Serious illness, our own or someone else's can bring this reality to awareness also.

How do we react then?

When Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, he was aware that they had questions. Pastor John posed these questions last week:

For those who die before Jesus' return, what happens to their souls?

If Christ has the final victory over death, why does it still sting?

This concern for the state of the soul was not exclusive to early Christianity. The Greeks and the Egyptians were among many cultures that believed that the soul went on to some kind of afterlife. Some of the Jews even believed in a resurrection of the dead when the Messiah came in final victory. In almost all of these cultures and religions, the destiny of one's soul was connected to the life lived here on earth. The idea of a "good" person going to a "good" place in the afterlife was common. The idea of a balance scale or of a weighing out of one's good deeds versus one's misdeeds is not new to our world.

Paul spends a lot of time in his letter calling the believers to test what they hear, before they receive it as truth. There is much in the world and in the church that is good to the ear, but not necessarily good news. This may be particularly true when it comes to death. For example, we hear about loved ones becoming angels, but is there anything in scripture that specifically says we become angels when we die? If there is, I haven't seen it, so while the thought may be comforting for a time, it doesn't seem complete and I find myself unsatisfied. There are descriptions both in Elijah in the Old Testament and in Revelation of what it is like in God's presence, but there are also references to a

place called Sheol, and a state that is like sleeping until the Christ comes. It is a bit confusing, yet I am inexplicably comforted by the words spoken at funerals about the life after this life, and about the everlasting love of God. If God's love is forever, then aren't we destined for forever too?

Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 4. Paul doesn't seem to make light of this confusion. He actually calls it out in verse 13: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." He seems to be saying, "let's accept that death happens, because it does." There's no avoiding it, we suffer loss. God did too! Who knows better the harsh reality of living to die, than Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-With-Us?

In the notes I used to prepare for today was a story about Nancy and her son Tripp. Tripp suffered from cystic fibrosis. In his final days, Nancy asked him if she could read from the Bible to comfort him. She wasn't sure what to read, and sensing that he told her to turn to page 1649. His two favorite numbers, 16 was Joe Montana's jersey number, and he played for the 49ers. Nancy flipped through her Bible, but there was no page 1649. The Old Testament ended at 1334, and the New Testament started over with page 1. She did the math in her head, $1649 - 1334 = 315$, and turned to page 315 of the New Testament. Here is what she read:

1 Thessalonians 4:13: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sister, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

Tripp turned to his mother with his failing lungs and he said, “Mommy, those are the sweetest verses.”

What makes the words so sweet? The echo of Jesus’ promise, which comes in the next 2 verses. “For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.

Paul grounds this teaching in the “*word of the Lord.*” He offers hope to the Thessalonians by sharing the teachings of Christ concerning the time when he will return. Verses 15 and 16 detail how it will unfold in the end. Paul states that the dead will not be forgotten nor will those who are alive precede those who have died. With a cry from the Lord and the archangel’s calls, the trumpet will sound, announcing the coming of the Lord. There will be no mistake about what is happening. Then the Lord will descend from heaven and “*the dead will rise first in Christ.*” All of the faithful will rise up from death, experiencing the bodily resurrection promised in the scriptures, such as these words of Jesus:

Mark 9:1 And He said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.

Matthew 24:31 “And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”

For Paul, the faithful who lived and died in Christ will remain in Christ even in death.

This relationship does not change in death. For the one who is loved by Christ and who loves Christ, there is a relationship that nothing – not even death – can break.

Continuing on, Paul turns to what is commonly known as the “rapture.” In verse 17 Paul speaks of what will happen to the faithful that are alive at the time of Jesus’ return. Here he states, *“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”* If Jesus were to return today, in this moment, then the faithful would be raised up to meet Jesus and those who have experienced the resurrection of the dead. But it will not be all people. It may not even be all people who consider themselves Christians. This goes back to who is actually living a holy and faithful life.

So -- We live in the shadow of death, but we wait for the dawn. And as we wait, how do we live in hope? How do we, as a faith community, show that we are people of hope?

The lectionary Gospel reading this week is a good example of the difference between living in hope, and living to exist.

[Read Matthew 25:1-13] "Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten bridesmaids^[a] who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ The five who were foolish didn't take enough olive oil for their lamps, ⁴ but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil. ⁵ When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

⁶ "At midnight they were roused by the shout, 'Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!'

⁷ "All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. ⁸ Then the five foolish ones asked the others, 'Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.'

⁹ "But the others replied, 'We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.'

¹⁰ "But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came. Then those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked. ¹¹ Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, 'Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!'

¹² "But he called back, 'Believe me, I don't know you!'

¹³ "So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return.

Some scholars speculate that the oil represents the Holy Spirit or maybe faith. In this understanding, the extra oil is what allowed them to get them through the long night, and to be ready when the bridegroom came.

We often read this parable as a lesson in being prepared, which it is. But in our context today, we can see which young women were living in hope, and which were simply there. Half of the bridesmaids brought enough oil for a few hours, apparently all they really wanted to wait for was a glimpse of the glory of the bridegroom. Half of the bridesmaids expected they would see the bridegroom, (for us, Jesus the Savior) that

very night, and believed they would see him no matter how long they had to wait. That is living in hope.

What is your story of living in hope? Let's have a couple of minutes to share with someone near you a story of how someone you know – maybe even you! – was brought through trials by living in hope.

We do not know the day or the hour that the Lord will come. If we wait until that hour to live out our faith, we will be too late! Living in hope means we trust the Lord's promises today, and tomorrow, and all the tomorrows to come. It means we prepare by staying connected to God through prayer, worship, and study of the Bible. It means we live and love and we live IN love and in the light of the peace that only abiding in God can bring. This is how others will see light in us, this is how others may be drawn to learn about this God for themselves.

Hope also comes from trusting the longer epic of faith. Remember the Joshua text I read earlier? It began by listing the fathers of the Hebrew faithful, starting even before Abraham, with Terah Abraham's father. And God said, "I took Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and gave him the land. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Esau and Jacob." That was the beginning and the Bible itself is a history of descendants of God's people, a history of people of faith. And you know that history isn't complete even now! Last week we remembered saints past and present. Who are the predecessors in your story of faith? They may be biological family, or they might not. But others carried the

light of their faith in such a line that came, eventually, to you. Think of one person right now who shaped how you believe.

Now think of the person that shaped how your mentor believed.

And the one before that. And the one before, and the one before....

There is an epic of faith. There is an epic of hope.

Now I want you to pay attention to Joshua's next words: "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the old gods and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the old gods, or the gods of the people in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

What is your choice? If you choose to serve the Lord, what will your legacy be, how will the epic continue?

If you are living in a time of grief now, how do you translate that grief into hope?

As I pondered that question this week, it occurred to me that there is a part of me that experiences grief daily. Not the kind of pressing grief that I lived with when a dear friend or parent died, although there are days when I miss them terribly, and some of you live with fresh grief, and some with the grief of loving a spouse who is living but is not who they once were due to dementia or other hurts. I see you, and God sees you and loves you. The other grief I'm talking about lingers with knowing wars are raging and terrorizing innocent lives, that people are suffering persecution in our beautiful land of

plenty and of freedom, that diseases and mental illnesses attack sweet souls. My heart cries out, and I wonder, where is there hope?

But I do know hope. It is the hope of a loving Creator who suffers all these things with us, and desires us to know and abide in Love. I believe our souls are safe with this God, because Jesus Christ does have the final victory. Death stings, because we get lonely for the ones we love. Hope means we will all be brought up together with Christ.

The final word here is that we are still called to tell the story of faith. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 "Therefore encourage one another with these words."

Be that saint, be that rock of faith for those to come. Go and encourage others with the hope that we find in the Lord and Savior of all, Jesus Christ. Alleluia and amen.