

## **Counting Down the Days**

**November 19, 2023**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

**Psalm 90**

**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church UCC**

**Grand Rapids MI**

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Those words written by Paul echoes the belief that we will not know the day nor the hour of Jesus’ return. As we learned last week. This letter to the Thessalonians is our oldest writing of the New Testament so it gives us a glimpse into the thinking of the early church and of Paul relatively early in his own missionary work in Asia Minor and the Roman Empire.

This letter, for its original audience, was written to encourage them to hold fast to the faith as they faced persecution and death. Some struggled with the question, “are we saved if we die before Jesus returns?” This letter is Paul’s response trying to answer that question and calm their fears. Last week we read how he assured them, that if you die believing you too will be saved and rise again with Christ. Paul was seeking to encourage them to stay strong, build up their faith and offer them a word of hope through some dark times in their lives. It was a belief that was strengthened by the belief that Jesus would return within their lifetime. But here we are some two thousand years later still wondering when Jesus will return. So, we need to ask ourselves what part of this is still true for us today and how do we apply it to our world today?

This language of Jesus being a thief in the night is a little different from “you will not know the day or hour of Jesus’ return” we find in the Gospels. This warning that Jesus will come like a thief in the night reminds me of the frailty of life. Just as we believe that Jesus’ return can be sudden and unexpected, so is death. When tragedy hits it can often feel like a thief breaking into our otherwise normal lives and flipping everything upside down. Whether it’s a health diagnosis, an accident that leaves one broken and in hospital, or anything out of our control, we feel robbed, disrupted and a loss of our anticipated future life.

We suddenly feel out of control, as if we had control in the first place. But it also awakens us to what is ultimately important to us and helps us turn to the one we believe is ultimately in control. We hear this in our reading from Psalms today,

“Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

As the Psalmist is writing and reflecting on the brevity of life, he concludes his poem by asking God to “teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” Sometimes in the midst of tragedy we begin to ask God to help us become wise in the face of such danger.

I remember when 9/11 happened. The churches and other religious gatherings filled up with people around the country. People praying not only for those killed and for our country, but many were seeking to strengthen their faith in God again. I recall many people promising to re-prioritize their families, work - life balance, and break the desire to chase after the almighty dollar. They wanted to have a more meaningful and moral life.

Repentance and changing one's life were very important messages in the pulpit too. Now twenty years plus years later, how many of us are still living up to the vows we made in the weeks following 9/11? Or have we reverted to our slumbering daily routines once again.

We can hear the refrain, "teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." Is that our prayer still today? Should it be?

Paul, as he is writing, says "let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober." He is reminding the church to remain vigilant against the temptation of getting caught up in the day to day that we forget what is really important, our life in Christ. He encourages us to put on faith, hope and love once again like armor to protect us. He reminds us to come together as the body of Christ in support of one another. Our reading ends with this last line of encouragement: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

This for us is a word that still applies today. The community of faith should be a place where we encourage one another in faith and build one another up. This word encourage is the Greek is Para-kaleo is a verb to mean to call another alongside. If you need encouragement, call someone to come along side.

Really it is a shame that today's reading ends at verse 11. Because the next several verses expand on this concept of how the church can come along side one another and be an encouragement.

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at

peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

These are good words for us, whether Jesus is coming tomorrow, or we will still be waiting another hundred years from now. Let us build up one another in faith, hope and love. Let us speak words of encouragement not words that causes discouragement. Let us do good not evil. For our days are numbered by God. Let us once again ask for wisdom of God to make the most of our days until Christ comes again or comes to call us home.