

Gathered Together With Jesus

11/8/20

SJN

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle reading where we hear these words once more from St. Paul: "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) This is the Word of the Lord.

I'd like to begin this morning with a bit of context. After just three weeks of Paul's preaching in the synagogue in Thessalonica, many Greeks and even some Jews had come to faith! The gospel... was working! But this sparked jealousy among the majority of Jews and they started a riot in the city shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also... saying that there is another king... Jesus." (Acts 17:6-7).

With the intense rioting and city officials getting involved... before he even had a chance to proclaim the full gospel of God... Paul was driven out of the city. But... the gospel continued to do its work. Despite the intense persecution, the Christian church in Thessalonica continued to grow and spread the gospel even beyond its walls!

And so Paul writes a letter, thanking God for their faith. And... continuing what he hoped to share with them when he was with them face to face... Paul supplies what was still lacking in their faith.

And one such item concerned the resurrection of the dead. It is, of course, a natural thing for people to be concerned about. Perhaps even more so under the intense persecution that the Thessalonians were facing – special concern for those who had been martyred for their faith.

And that same concern is not lost on us today. Although we know about the resurrection from the dead... we are still affected by the human emotions God has given us... such that even today, we need to hear these words again and again. St. Paul's message reads a lot like an Easter text... He rose.. to raise the dead.. and to gather believers.

Where or where, beloved... does one find comfort, if not in the resurrection of the dead? Some cling to fond memories of their departed loved one. Others seek comfort in conducting a grand funeral with beautiful arrangements and an expensive casket.... but these often only offer empty comfort.

So where does one find true comfort? Paul tells the Thessalonians, “we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thes 4:13). Paul refers to those who have died as “those who are asleep.” This is not a euphemism – Paul trying to downplay death – he is describing what death really is for the believer!

Let me ask you.... are you afraid to go to sleep at night? Probably not. When you lay your head on your pillow... you’re pretty confident that you’ll wake up in the morning, right? In this same way... death for a believer... is just like sleep... a sleep in which a person is completely unaware of anything around him... but from which he awakens to use all his abilities and senses again. Just like sleep, friends... a believer knows that he will wake up again.

Regarding grieving... notice that Paul isn’t saying that a person should not grieve. He says that a person should not grieve... like those who have no hope. A Christian’s grief is different because it is a grief that knows there will be a return... a resurrection. It’s just like someone that goes away on a trip... they will be missed. And so it is for the believer who misses those who have died. But this grief is not without the hope of a joyous return. This grief is one of missing, and longing to be with a lost loved one. And the believer knows that there will - one day - be a joyous reunion.

St. Paul connects this hope with something the Thessalonians already know and believe.... “We believe that Jesus died and rose again” (1 Thes 4:14). This was the first thing that Paul told the Thessalonians before he was driven out by a riot. They knew and believed this fact. Their entire faith - and ours - is based on this fact.

For Jesus proved that he has complete power over death by rising from its clutches. Not only that, but he also raised the dead on several occasions during his earthly ministry. So now Paul builds on this, “For we believe that God will bring with him (that is, Jesus) those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Thes 4:14). This point goes hand in hand with Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus himself said, “Because I live, you also will live” (Jn 14:19). You can see how Jesus’ resurrection is so crucial to the faith. St. Paul also says in Scripture, “if Christ has not been raised... your faith... is futile” (1 Cor 15:17).

In other words... if Christ was not raised... then what possible hope... do we really have? If he was not raised... then his sacrifice for sin was not enough to justify all people. If he was not raised and his sacrifice was not enough... then he was not really God – because with God... all things are possible. You could just see the pillars of faith toppling over... one after another, if this was true.

But, brothers and sisters.... He is risen!!!.... (He is risen, indeed!).... Alleluia! His sacrifice for sin was more than enough. He holds the victory over death... and because of all this, you too will one day rise! Your loved ones... those saints who have gone before you... and after you... will one day rise! And you WILL be reunited! This is the Communion of Saints that Pastor Marcis spoke about last week on All Saints Day... all the saints... gathered together... with Jesus... forever... and even now!

But... the believer still grieves. Death was not originally a part of God's "very good" creation... but ever since sin entered the world... this unnatural thing has become a common reality. When going through a particularly difficult time... put yourself in Mary's position. Mary found the one person that could give her true meaning in life and true hope. But in one tragic event... she suddenly lost him. She went to his grave early that first Easter morning and found it empty... someone had desecrated the grave by stealing the body. She wept bitterly, already hopeless from having lost him.... But just then... she heard the words which changed everything... "Why... are you weeping?" (Jn 20:15).

Once Mary recognized that it was Jesus, she was overjoyed! Gone was her reason for grief... her savior was alive! Gone is the reason for any grief at the death of a believer – sin and death have been vanquished! "Because I live, you also will live!" With this in mind, friends... whenever you grieve for a loved one who has died in the faith... remember Jesus' words, "Why are you weeping?" You do not need to grieve like those who have no hope.

It's an Easter message that we can relive again and again. The reason he rose was to raise the dead.. that believers would have an assured, certain hope. But... Christians still grieve, longing to see their loved ones again. And so Paul continues with the gospel... a gospel which sees into the things to come.

It seems that the Thessalonians knew that on the last day believers would be gathered to be with God... but there was some doubt about those who had already died. Some of Paul's letters show great anticipation for the last day. Imagine listening to Paul... hearing him talk about the Last Day..... Be prepared for his coming! Be prepared for the day when Jesus will return to take all believers to a home prepared for them in heaven! The day is coming! It is very near! It is at hand!

One could easily walk away from one of Paul's sermons fully expecting that day... to be the very next day! An attitude, brothers and sisters... which would do us well to share – always... be prepared! But you could also imagine that a young church like that in Thessalonica would start to worry. The Lord has not yet returned... and some believers have already fallen asleep! What will become of them?

Paul reassures them, “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Thes 4:15). When the Lord comes, he will personally gather all believers... living and dead. And this time, when he comes... there will be no mistaking it or missing it. “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God...” (1 Thes 4:16).

His second coming will not be a Silent Night – No... it will be with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God! You will not find him hidden Away in a Manger – he will come down from heaven in all his glory and power! There will be no missing him on that day. Not only all believers... but all people will see him coming! Oh, what a glorious day that will be! On that day, he will not simply lean in and ask, “Why are you weeping?” Rather... “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more... neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore... for the former things have passed away.” (Rev 21:4).

“And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then... we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...”(1 Thes 4:16-17). Paul assures the Thessalonians that the dead will not be left for a later time... they will be raised first – before anything else happens! Then... together with those who are still alive... they will all be caught up together! Just imagine that! You... will be reunited... with those who have died... those you have missed for such a long time. It will be the great reunion of the family of all believers!

Yet even greater than that moment... will be a moment even greater than Mary experienced at the tomb when she turned and saw Jesus face to face. Because meeting Jesus on this day will not be like meeting him here on earth. Have you ever thought about that? What it would be like to meet Jesus here on earth?

On the last day, he will come in power, with all authority, full of glory!.... The face of glory that Moses trembled to look at... the power that shook the earth and caused trained Roman soldiers to shake and become like dead men... you and I... we will gaze upon this glory, and rise in the presence of this power to meet the Lord. And from that day on... we - and all the dead in Christ - will be reunited. And we will be with the Lord... forever.

Paul ends with these words, “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thes 4:18). Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to share the complete gospel - the sure hope of a glorious reunion - with all those who were troubled by death... and with such intense persecution, death was a very real thing for them.

And death is just as real for us today. I’m pretty sure that every one of you knows someone close who has lost a loved one... or perhaps, you yourself have lost someone close. In these situations, don’t merely comfort a person with words like, “I’m sorry for your loss” or “it must be hard.” Instead... speak the only words that give any true comfort. Speak the words of the gospel... that Christ died and rose to take away the sins of the world. That one day the dead will be raised... and people from all nations will be gathered up together... with Jesus... forever.

Tell this truly good news again and again... because as Christians... we do not grieve like those of the world... who have no hope. For we will be raised from the dead, beloved - all believers will - and we will dwell... in the presence of the Lord.... forever. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.