

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

Close to Home: Homesick (Hope)

November 28, 2021 ~ First Sunday of Advent ~ Holy Communion

Communion Meditation

Introduction to Scripture Lesson:

You may not have realized that the first scripture lesson we just heard Tracy read on this first Sunday of Advent, from the First Letter to the Thessalonians, is the first and earliest of Paul's letters. 1 Thessalonians is the very first and oldest book in the entire New Testament. It was written in 51 C.E. Less than twenty years after Jesus' resurrection.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Distinguished Professor of the New Testament, has suggested that the reading of this first letter to the Thessalonians out loud during worship, is likely what began the church's permanent relationship with this text. And it grew from there. The practice of reading these letters in worship of led to the process of collecting letters and gospel texts that would become the New Testament.¹ I find it fascinating to look back and trace the Holy Spirit thread, from one seemingly small decision that led to another. And another. And here we are today, in 2021, reading this letter, 1,970 years later on our First Sunday of Advent worship in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

Another thread that runs from Paul's letter right into our Gospel text, is the coexistence of joy in the midst of distress and persecution. Abounding love and hope within and between people who are suffering. Paul and Timothy are writing while in deep distress. And now we are about to open the gospel of Luke that was written in 80 – 95 CE, almost 30 years after Thessalonians was written. That means it was written *after* the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E and the city of Jerusalem. Therefore, for the original audience of Luke, what you hear Jesus predicting, in some ways, has already happened. The persecution of the Jews and Jewish Christians had already begun. Yes: Luke was written for folks already living in the middle of the devastation that Jesus describes. People discouraged and dismayed. Believers wondering how to stand up and raise their heads in the midst of all that was going on around them.

What about us? The world may seem pretty dark right now to most of us. And I don't just mean because it gets dark before 5:00 P.M. this time of the year. I am talking more about the darkness of so many people, young children, dancing Grannies being run over at a holiday parade themed, "Comfort and Joy" in Waukesha. And I'm talking about the darkness of the news this week just a day after Thanksgiving that a new COVID-19 variant, Omicron, has reared its ugly head, dimming hopes of taming the coronavirus. And fanning the embers of pandemic fears back into flames of fear.

Worries of this life are real and rampant. Let's be honest: Our hearts *are* weighed down. We may not feel ready for Christmas, but I believe we are more than ready for Advent. More than ready for the chance to restore whatever is lacking in our faith. Beginning with hope. Jesus has a word for us, too. Right here in the darkness, right now. I invite you to listen with Advent ears for the hope, let come what may, the hope that the coming of Christ can bring, right here, right now.

Meditation:

Homesick. A feeling we all know. But is harder to describe in words. The word "homesick" originated in 1765 from the German compound, *Heimweh*, meaning "home pain or woe." What is your first memory of homesickness? Maybe it was a sleepover that went bad, or a long summer camp. Or your first days away at college. One case of homesickness I remember vividly was my sophomore year in college. I was in Germany for the fall semester that ran until mid-December. And so, I was far, far away from home for the very first time on Thanksgiving. Some of the other American students and I put together some kind of meal, as I recall. But it wasn't home. And it didn't feel like Thanksgiving at all. At 19 years old, it began to dawn on me that I was growing up just a little. And that growing older meant leaving things behind. There would be more Thanksgivings, but they would never be the same.

It took me awhile longer to see how every day, every holiday, every year we are given to live on this earth, we are never complete or completed. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face." He uses a similar phrase in today's lesson, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith." No, our problems will never be completely resolved. Our hope and our dreams will never be completely realized. What we are given today, yesterday and tomorrow is the gift of presence. Face to face presence. The loving power of Christ, with us. Here we are together, face to face, thanks be to God.

Back in the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux, who was the founder of the Cistercian order of monks, said that the Christ comes to us in three different ways: firstly, in Bethlehem at Christmas; secondly at the end of the age, and thirdly in the lives of believers every single day.ⁱⁱ As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table this day, I invite you to see this Table, as home. This Table as the place where we can bring our longings, our hopes, and our homesickness and our fears. You may be feeling homesick for our "pre-pandemic" life. Like my childhood memories of Thanksgiving, we will never return to life before March of 2020. For better and for worse, Christ who was and is and is coming again, leads us forward into a future with hope. If we are not feeling the hope, perhaps our hearts are weighed down, maybe not with dissipation and drunkenness, but certainly with "worries of this life." Worries and work that may disable us from hearing Christ's call to be alert, to look up, and look for signs of the kingdom.

You may have heard of what has come to be known as "The Good Samaritan Study" at Princeton Seminary back in 1973. JM Darley and CE Batson conducted an experiment and published their findings in a paper titled, "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior." They set out to determine what makes a person more likely than not to stop and help another person in obvious distress. They set up a situation on the Princeton Seminary campus with a man doubled over in pain, in obvious need of help was on the path of several different people who were set up to walk by and be observed as to how they chose to respond. They were curious to see what factors in this set of people released a flow of compassion for the man in trouble. Here is what they learned: It wasn't a particular

belief system that made the difference. Nor was it a particular skill set. Or personality type. More than any other factor, it was whether or not the person was in a hurry that made the difference! Ironically, a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if he is on his way to preach a sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building!).ⁱⁱⁱ

We truly don't know when the Son of Man is coming in glory. The when is not the important question according to Jesus. We know that Christ is coming again. Here is the question for you and me today: If Christ was coming again in this very hour, how would you change your life? What would you do differently? Who might you forgive, reach out to, extend compassion or love in order to set your soul or their soul at rest? Advent calls us to do those things now, not later. And Advent calls us to let go of other things that keep us from looking for signs of the kingdom. Our preoccupations and busyness that keep us from being signs of Christ's kingdom on earth.

As a church this Advent, we have already taken steps to open up our schedule and hopefully our hearts, as well. We will not have a regular stated Session meeting in December. Several session committees are also choosing to take a break from their regular monthly meeting in Advent. As your pastor, I look forward to an Advent with more time for home communion, and for pastoral visits. You will experience a little more silence in our weekly liturgy. I also aspire to offer less cluttered worship. In that spirit I lopped off one page of my sermon today 😊.

Today is the first day of Advent. Today is our chance to choose: will we go faster or slower between now and December 25? We could try to cram more into our schedule, or we could find ways to open it up. Here's my take away for you: Embrace this chance for with this new season as an opportunity to go a little slower. That's right: not faster, but slower. Not a season to do more, but to schedule less. Leave more open time to look up, to restore what is lacking. Choose to walk instead of drive, when possible. When in your car, leave off your devices and open yourself to a few moments of silence instead. Give yourself and give to God, time to look up and see the one broken down on the Jericho Road and in need of your hand; your attention to help bring the kingdom near.

In honor of Stephen Sondheim, composer and lyricist who died on Friday at age 91, and his reverence for the power of rhyme, I will end with this: (it's *not* Sondheim, it's mine, but it will have to do): Slow and steady is the road to ready ourselves for Christ's coming.

ⁱ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.8.

ⁱⁱ Jill Weber, A Sabbath Prayer for Advent, *Lectio365*, November 28. 11.28

ⁱⁱⁱ Darley, J. M., and Batson, C.D., "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior". *JSPS*, 1973, 27, 100-108.