

NAVIGATING LIMINALITY

1 Thessalonians 2-3

A sermon given at First Covenant Church of Minneapolis

May 27, 2018

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(Read by Ryan Hollingsworth)

1 Thessalonians 2-3

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you should lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

Paul's Desire to Visit the Thessalonians Again

As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our

way. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain.

Timothy's Encouraging Report

But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Before we continue, let me just tell you that I'm humbled to share my wife's words with you this morning. For reasons that will soon become clear in the sermon itself, she cannot be here today. Other than changing a couple of words because it's not her reading it, this is all hers.

Andrea titled this sermon, "Navigating Liminality." Liminality isn't a word you usually hear in everyday conversation, so let me explain a bit.

Since the last century, anthropologists have used the word liminality to refer to moments and spaces that have an ambiguous, threshold-like quality to them. If you're in a liminal season, you're *between* this and that, you're *in the middle of* here and there, you're *flanked by* the present now and the promised not yet. Liminality is life on the precipice.

Andrea's dad knows liminality. Jerry entered hospice a little over a month ago. He's dying of a cruel neurodegenerative disease that's made him a prisoner in his own body. Until recently, he's been fully cognizant but unable to move much. His speech fades daily. Last week, he was still able to slur short phrases in the quietest of whispers. "My wonderful daughter." "How you been?" "That's right." "Love you." This weekend, the disease finally swallowed his words. Since Friday, Andrea and the rest of his family have gathered around him, keeping vigil with him while he endures this final liminality. In these, his last days, his life has become laced with suffering

and death. And yet the reverse is also true: the death that's creeping toward him is awash already in God's life.

We too, as a congregation, know liminality. We've made some decisions lately to step more fully into our calling to welcome, love, and minister to all people without reservation. The swift and excessive reaction by a few leaders in the local and national denomination has opened a host of invitations for us in our process of discerning our identity. Now (maybe more than ever?) we are on the precipice of something new, we know not exactly what, but there is *much* hope.

Folks in liminal spaces often have a guilelessness about them. Threshold moments make you bravely honest, like a child. Why? Because life on the ever-shifting edge is hard, and pretense is too darn much work in those circumstances. Also, because most people won't understand the paradoxes you indwell (equal parts grief and hope, for instance), you might as well just say it like it is and trust that someone will be there to help you make sense of it.

The Christian faith makes liminality its home. More specifically, Christ-followers are called to live continually between presence and absence. Our Beloved—our Way, our Truth, our very Life—is both here and not here. Through God's Spirit, the resurrected Christ lives in the communal body of all those who hunger and thirst after justice, wisdom, and above all, love. So Christ is not absent—of that we can be sure!

And yet.

Yet.

There's a hunger and thirst in our hearts for a redemption that *must be* just ahead. For a holy fullness that *must be* just around the corner. We use different phrases to talk about this Promise. Maybe you've heard some of them. "The second coming." "Last things." "The hope of glory." "The coming kingdom." "The new order." What do these words mean, though?

There are so many different ways to think about eschatology, which is just a fancy term for 'the study of last things.' Now isn't the time to delve into the debates about what exactly is meant by the dauntless liturgical proclamation: "Christ will come again." One thing is sure, though. Christian people are a waiting people. We're a people accustomed to an ever-present ache – a longing for a space and time when, as Paul said, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

But for now, we live "between worlds." We're citizens of grief's country, for our Beloved is yet to come in fullness, and there is sadness and evil and worry and death all around. But we're citizens of hope's country, too. We declare this citizenship each and every time we turn our eyes, brimming with tears, toward the unknown horizon where we dare to trust that those tears will one day be wiped away (Rev. 21:4).

And so here we are in the middle—between grief and hope, absence and presence. It's been this way from the beginning.

As Todd explained last week, Paul writes to the Christians at Thessalonica for several reasons, one of which is to ease the tremendous anxiety they feel because members of their community have died, and Christ has not yet returned.¹ The earliest Christians, you see, were expecting Jesus to come back *literally any day* to save them from the oppression that was their personal and political reality. The absence of Christ, and the reality of persecution and death, was all around. You can almost hear their cry: “How long, oh Lord, how long?” Paul reminds them that, although they wait, Christ is yet present among them - *in* their faithfulness, *in* their love, *in* their longing.

But it’s not just the presence and absence of Christ with which the Thessalonians are struggling. It’s the presence and absence of Paul, their spiritual parent to whom they are (clearly) quite strongly attached. Paul was with them just a few months before, so he’s there in their memories and hearts. As well, Paul is with them (in a way) through Timothy, who visited recently as Paul’s stand-in. The connective power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of prayerful thanksgiving also make Paul present – in a sense. Despite all this, though, there’s no denying that Paul is simply *not there* with them. Scholars believe Paul was stuck in Corinth when he wrote this letter. He wouldn’t return to this beloved community for another three or four years – after the founding of the church at Ephesus, the Jerusalem Council, and some hard knocks in prison.² This separation is hard on the community, but it’s also hard on Paul. He prays night and day “superabundantly” (*huperekperissou*) that he may see their face (1 Thess. 3:10; cp. 3:6), that the way would be made straight to them (3:11). He seems grief-stricken that “Satan” has blocked his way to get to them (2:18).

Oh the sweet and bitter taste of longing for the presence of the Beloved! This feeling, which is shot through this intimate New Testament letter, is so close to what it means to be alive, isn’t it? If you’ve ever known unrequited love, or have been forced to suffer a significant separation from the one you love, then you know something of the odd combination of devastation and vivacity that Paul and the Thessalonians felt as they pined both for Christ’s return and for their own reunification.

Isn’t it true that passion requires distance? Isn’t it true that the dream delayed births the proverbial burn in the belly? Consider these lines from the Pulitzer prize winning poet Edna St. Vincent Millay:

*I drank at every vine / The last was like the first. / I came upon no wine / So wonderful as
thirst. / I gnawed at every root / I ate every plant / I came upon no fruit so wonderful as
want. / Feed the grape and bean / To the vinter and the monger: / I will lie down lean /
With my thirst and my hunger.*³

That’s the paradoxical thing about this liminality in(to) which we’re called to live: It’s both profoundly anxiety-producing and profoundly life-giving. If you are on the precipice, between any kind of significant presence and absence, you know well this life-giving frustration. It’s the

¹ Here I draw on Timothy Milinovich, “Memory and Hope in the Midst of Chaos: Reconsidering the Structure of 1 Thessalonians,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (Jul 2014): 498-518.

² http://www.paulonpaul.org/annex/paul_thess_2_90.htm

³ Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Feast” in *Collected Poems*.

heartbeat of eschatology. It's the lifeblood of prayer. It's the reason why the fifteenth-century theologian and mystic Nicholas of Cusa can lament that God is ungraspable and unattainable and unnameable – a mystery dwelling in the “cloud of impossibility”⁴—and yet, in the same treatise, rejoice over God's faithful gaze that “so lovingly holds me,” and that “abandons no one.”⁵

Even from the perspective of developmental psychology it's true that liminality brings equal parts anxiety and transformation. UCLA developmental neuropsychologist Allan Schore has written extensively about how young brains grow and mature through rhythms of relational “rupture and repair.”⁶ Step one: parent becomes temporarily absent or unavailable. Child experiences a profound meltdown. Step two: parent reappears and reattunes to child. Child experiences a profound recovery. Over time, this pattern shapes the child's autonomic nervous system and prefrontal cortex in such a way that they learn how to trust, how to regulate their emotions, how to live well in a world that's full of ambiguity – especially in the realm of relationships. Rupture and repair are both needed. Too much presence and the child never has a chance to *face* the terror of abandonment; too much absence and the child never has a chance to *escape* the terror of abandonment. We grow and mature in the oscillations between loss and love.

Getting back to the Thessalonians. It's interesting to note that, despite the anxiety that's there over Christ's tarrying and Paul's unavailability, their faith has only grown more robust. In fact, Timothy has just returned to Paul from Thessalonica, and has brought word that this congregation is holding onto a tenacious trust in God even in the face of persecution (3:6-9). Their love for one another is also stronger than ever (4:13-14), which is evidence of Christ's powerful presence within their midst. All of this fills Paul and Timothy with thanksgiving (1:2-3) and deep joy (3:9). It seems that life in the ambiguous middle is making these people into a living embodiment of the One who proclaimed a kingdom that's already come (Luke 17:21) *and* that's yet to come (Matt. 16:28).

So how do we endure the between? How do we thrive on the precipice? How do we keep on “hoping against hope” when we're not sure when, how, or sometimes even *if* the promise of God's “all in all” presence will be fulfilled?

In other words, how do we navigate the liminal?

The French philosopher, activist, and mystic Simone Weil has written extensively on the beautiful paradoxes of the Christian faith. One of her favorite lines of thought is that God is both intimately present in creation, *and* absolutely beyond it. On the cross Jesus grieved God's *absence* (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46)); and yet, somehow, this was the moment of God's utmost *nearness* to humanity.⁷ Weil believed God's closeness and God's distance intensify together. In other words, when God seems farthest from us—for instance, in situations of deep pain—God is actually most near. For Weil,

⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei (On the Vision of God)*, IX. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.11.

⁶ Allan Schore, *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003); Allan Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

⁷ New York: Harper Collins, 1951.

contradictions like this are doorways to truth. The doors don't open easily, though. And so we have to "knock, and keep on... knocking, in a spirit of insistent, humble expectancy."⁸

"We are like flies caught inside a bottle," she writes, "attracted to the light and unable to go towards it." She continues:

*Nevertheless, it is better to remain stuck inside the bottle throughout the whole of time than to turn away from the light for a single moment. Will you have pity, O Light, and break the glass, at the end of this perpetual duration? Even if not—one must stay pressed against the glass.*⁹

What a piercing vision of what the spiritual quest can look like when it somehow perseveres in the face of doubt and struggle. When it's stuck against a barrier that keeps it from the full freedom and redemption for which it so longs.

I want to close by telling you about Civil Rights veteran and public theologian Ruby Sales. In a 2015 interview, Sales recalled her first experience as a young Black woman participating in a protest march. The year was 1965, and she was just 16 or 17 years old. Sales was raised in the black folk religious tradition, where perseverant hope in God's justice-bringing power was nurtured in song and story. So she came to the demonstration with the sense that, while African Americans were (to borrow Weil's imagery) "caught inside a bottle"—a bottle of segregationist oppression—she and the other marchers were nevertheless pressing hard toward the light of God's freedom.

But they did not break through to the light that day. Let's listen briefly to Sales as she talks about feeling God's absence and presence at that demonstration and throughout the rest of her journey as an activist theologian. <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt-aug2017/> [play from: 11:08 – 14:03]

But I — when I first went on my first demonstration, I was really kind of naïve, unsophisticated, a peasant who had been bred on black folk religion and who really believed — I was a part of the Pepsi generation who really believed that right was right, and it would win out. So I went on my first demonstration, and I'm embarrassed to say this, but we were surrounded by horses and state troopers who wouldn't let us go to the bathroom, and I kept looking up at the sky, waiting for the Exodus story to happen to me. [laughs] And it didn't happen. I expected God to appear and some chariot to open up in the sky, because I couldn't imagine that we were so right, and God would be so wrong. In my 17-year-old mind, I couldn't imagine that. I mean my 16-year-old mind. And so I lost religion that day, and I slowly became a Marxist. I became a materialist. If it wasn't economics, if it wasn't race, then it didn't exist. I had no space in my life for — and I thought black folks were religious fanatics. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: Well, so tell us, how did you eventually circle back to the place, or circle to the place, maybe it's not back, where you went to divinity school, where you started to be a public theologian. And what did that mean?

MS. SALES: Well, I think the paradox is that even when we think we've left home, we never really go anywhere. And so I think that although I thought that I was not religious, the truth of the matter is, I was,

⁸ *First and Last Notebooks* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 270.

⁹ *The First and Last Notebooks* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 292.

and I went to church all the time, and that was the Sweet Honey concerts, and Bernice Johnson Reagon kept us in church. And all of the songs that she sang, and all of the music and the God talk that she would do from the stage, she became the preacher for a generation of African-American young people.

She herself was the daughter of a preacher who thought that we had left the church, but black folk religion was so deeply ingrained in us that we never really left it. So I carried with me the songs. I carried with me the testimonies. I carried with me the whole notion of right relations. That was the cornerstone of how I imagined justice.

MS. TIPPETT: Even when you didn't feel religious.

MS. SALES: Right, I really never left.

Perduring at the core of Sales' being—so deeply rooted it remained beyond her own awareness for decades—was the tenacious “liminal” faith that the Thessalonians were learning to live out, and of which Weil spoke. Sales was a light chaser who, despite the persistence and proliferation of race-based hatred and dehumanization, refused “to turn away... for a single moment” from the freedom and justice promised in her faith tradition.

When you show up expecting God to come, expecting truth and justice to win out, but you're crudely met with the same old lies, hatreds, wrongs, disappointments, and hurts – will your heart keep singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?” When the pain of God's absence threatens to overwhelm your aching heart, will you find the courage to keep praying “thy kingdom come”? When you can see the light on the other side of the bottle, but can't seem to move a millimeter towards it – will you keep on pressing in?

If even a small part of you can say “yes,” you can be sure that the light is already reaching you and transforming you – that the coming kingdom is already, somehow, within.

Let's pray.

Prayer: God you are the fullness and freedom for which we long. And yet, the pain of life and the brokenness of our world so often keep us from you. Fill us with the kind of love that doggedly expects and keeps on expecting the arrival of your salvation, despite all pointers to the contrary.

Benediction: May you be given the courage, faith, and wisdom you need to build your heart's dwelling on the threshold of God's coming. Amen.