

**Sermon Series: The Shorter Letters of Paul**

**Sermon Title: "It's the End of the World as We Know It"**

**Scripture Text: 2 Thessalonians 1-2:12**

**July 1, 2018**

**Scripture Reading:** 2 Thessalonians 1-2:12 (NRSV)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple

of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

**Sermon:** Yeah, take that lawless ones! Oh, you're gonna get it alright! You know who I'm talking about. Yeah... exactly. Can you believe these people, I mean, it's downright evil, there's no two ways of looking at it. Am I right? Can't wait for them to get what's coming to 'em. Yeah, you know exactly who I mean.

Wait, who are you talking about? I'm talking about *those* people, you know the ones. We are talking about the same people, right?

Okay, I feel like this whole thing is falling apart, I don't even know if your evil people are the same as my evil people! Now I'm confused. Somebody else might need to get up here and preach. (sigh)

And, welcome to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians! Today we continue in our series on the shorter letters of Paul, where eternal destruction and annihilation of the lawless one, whoever the heck that is, are just the beginning of the baffling and contextually cryptic passages that centuries of Christ followers have puzzled over and often mis-used to paint their perceived enemies as the children of Satan. (smile)

Seriously, there's a reason why the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary skip over this most of this text. Even Saint Augustine, upon reflecting on this passage in his book *The City of God* writes, "I frankly confess I do not know what he means."<sup>1</sup> Saint Augustine! If Augustine can plead ignorance, then friends, I'm off the hook! Turning now to communion...

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* 20.19.

I'm kidding. My point here is actually something that we've been trying to practice in all of our reflections on these complex ancient texts, and is perhaps the starting place for how it is that we approach our sacred scriptures, that being, *we begin with humility*. We confess that we don't know what we don't know. We don't know the author's exact intentions. We don't know all of the circumstances the original audience found themselves in. We don't know what all happened between the first letter and the second, or if there was additional correspondence that was never preserved, or how any of these variables might have influenced this particular writing. There's actually a lot here that we don't know.

What we can do is do our work. We can take the text seriously, on its own terms, and seek to do our best to understand the cultural, historical, contextual, linguistic, rhetorical, and theological nuances of the day that might aid us in understanding. And at the end of all that, we'll likely still confess with Augustine that "Frankly, (we) do not know what he means."

Then, once we've done our work with the text, we can turn our attention to our own cultural, historical, contextual, and theological concerns. We can open ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God in our day and our context. We won't always get it right, but then, our scriptures are filled those who didn't always get it right! In fact, many of them frequently got it wrong, but were regarded as *faithful* primarily because they remained open to God and *responded in faith*.

So, let's begin by opening ourselves to God's as we enter into today's text.

**Pray:** God we confess that we don't know what we don't know. And yet, we choose to believe that somehow you meet us in the unknowing as we open these scriptures. Open our ears, open our hearts, and stir in us today something that is of you. Amen.

Here in his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul tells what, at first glance, appears to me to be a very troubling story. He begins with the typical greetings and thanksgiving, but then launches into all of this talk about the end of the world and the coming of the Lord, of inflicting vengeance and eternal punishment, of deception and lawlessness. It's a little over the top and seems to make God out to be some angry or vengeful God, even a deceptive God "leading (people) to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned." I mean, this is a little hard to square with the picture of God we get in Jesus, the very

incarnation of God, and of whom the writer of Hebrews proclaims, “is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.”<sup>2</sup>

This is where it's helpful to understand genre. This section of 2 Thessalonians would be considered “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic writing, as one Bible Dictionary puts it, “emphasizes the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth and the revelation of God and (God's) plan for the world.”<sup>3</sup> It is often concerned with a coming reign of God, and in that sense, the end of the world as we know it. And in the context of 2 Thessalonians, it's essentially pointing to the eventual triumph of good over the forces of evil.

Now, Paul's language here is really harsh! It's full of a bunch of challenging and problematic images, things that make brow furl and neck crink as I read them. But that's the nature of apocalyptic writing. It is rich in imagery. It's mysterious, dark, even fantastical in its depiction of coming events. But it is through this rich imagery that apocalyptic writings paint in vivid color that which is often not quite as recognizable to the eye in the midst of suffering. It reveals and illuminates that which has been hidden. It names evil as evil, so that those who suffer under evil can also recognize it as such, and know that in the midst of suffering, a new day is dawning.

In this way, for those experiencing affliction, apocalypse is the language of hope in the midst of suffering. Apocalyptic imagery encourages those suffering on behalf of the good (the “gospel”), that God will indeed bring justice! That sin and oppression will suffer its own consequences, or as Pastor Dan likes to say, sin is its own punishment. It proclaims that lawlessness will give way to the “shalom” or peace and justice of God, where everything is in its right place.

So, to the Christ-followers in Thessalonica, this is good news! And while i'm not always sure what to do with all of the vengeance language, I can certainly appreciate the message that the current sufferings of those seeking to be faithful to this “Jesus way” will not last forever, and that a new day, and new world is on the horizon.

(Pause)

So, I was never a comic book fan. Too much reading. But I've noticed recently, like, in the last decade, that there seems to be a resurgence of superhero movies. Maybe

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 1:3 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/apocalyptic/>

they've been there all along and I just didn't pay much attention, but it's gotten my attention as of late. I normally wouldn't have given too much energy to these epic Good vs. Evil tales, as they often struck me as two-dimensional, as lacking complexity or nuance. The storyline always seems too easy, with the dividing line between the hero and the villain too clear cut, and with the helpless masses just waiting there for a savior figure to work through his (it was always a he) abandonment issues and self-doubt just in time to show up and make everything great again. Movies like these have always just felt a little too predictable, and not at all like my experience of the real world. So I've always just been dis-interested in superhero stuff.

Until recently. And what's interesting to me is that the things that caught my attention have not so much been the superhero movies themselves, but the reactions of marginalized communities to those superhero movies that seem to have broken the mold of the typical Good vs. Evil story that we are so used to seeing on the big screen, shattering both their commercial expectations and the genre itself while doing so.

I think here of Wonder Woman and Black Panther, both released in the last two years, and both of which broke box office records (WW grossing over \$800M worldwide and Black Panther over \$1.3B and counting). And beyond the obvious issue of representation, in having not only a female or a person of color starring as the lead, but in the director's chair as well, they seem to actually tell a different story than most of the other superhero movies I've ever seen. Instead of the typical tale of Good vs. Evil where the evil is usually some "rogue actor" and the good is an "unlikely hero", in these two stories, the heroes are not so much "unlikely" as they are "not alone," and the villains are not so much "rogue", as they are representative of some greater force of evil or destruction in the world.

But I think what struck me most about these stories is how they speak to our human connectedness. In both stories, the "heroes" have been deeply formed within community, and it is out of that communal context that they find strength. Yes, they are particularly gifted, but even more importantly, they know who they are and where they come from, and find their power in deep interdependence with others, such when confronted with the suffering of the greater world outside of their own tribe, they cannot help but offer themselves in solidarity for the greater good.

One of the most stunning things in Black Panther is that there's even an connection an interdependence between the hero, T'Challa, and the antagonist, Killmonger, such that T'Challa's compassion is stirred deeply by the trauma that Killmonger has endured in

his life, which fundamentally changes the way he then rules Wakanda. Don't worry, I won't spoil it, but if you haven't seen it, you should!

All that to say, it's fascinating to me to see how filmmakers from marginalized communities tell a different story of good triumphing over evil. There seems to be less energy given to the super-human with the cape, and more energy given toward telling a compassionate, nuanced, and hopeful story of humanity itself.

Speaking of hope, Carina Aleckson (our Leadership Team Chair) posted a quote to a page we both follow this week that struck me as particularly relevant to today's text:

**“Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.”**  
-Saint Augustine of Hippo

I wonder what it would look like to find an appropriate place for anger in the Christian life? We kind of think that anger is a bad thing. I've never actually connected anger with hope. So what would cultivating good anger look like? Perhaps it would first require that we name the evils in our world. I'm talking about things like pervasive greed, violence, or racism. If these aren't evil, or if we can't name them as such, then how can we possibly imagine a different world? How can we have hope that they'll someday pass away? Without naming things that cause unnecessary suffering as evil, and we not only let evil off the hook, but we fail to tap in to that prophetic imagination that tells us that things can and should change.

I feel like we have a hard time doing that in modern western culture, particularly those of us who live relatively free from suffering under injustice or persecution. Without a lived experience it is much easier to dismiss the suffering of others as “complicated” or merely “unfortunate”. Proximity is key.

I wonder what would happen if, when we heard the cries of those who suffer some form of oppression or face persecution of some kind, we leaned in, got close to the suffering, and allowed proximity help us cultivate the kind of anger that Augustine is talking about, and the courage to imagine and enact something different.

I want to know a hope that isn't satisfied with the world as it is, that would hear these words of Paul in 2 Thessalonians as “good news.” I want to believe that it is the end of the world “as we know it.” I want to have faith that our current struggles, the

present evils, the “world as we know it” *is* passing away, and that the call to be *faithful* is to stand in that liminal space with the courage to work toward a better world!

Last Sunday for me was a poignant reminder to me that I live between two worlds. I began the day celebrating in worship with you all, and finding deep encouragement from Pastor Judy Peterson and from this community which has journeyed so far together in courage and faith. That same morning, I woke to the news that Thurman Blevins, a 31year old father of three was shot to death by police on the north side of Minneapolis the night before. The mix of joy and grief that morning, from celebrating the liberation of our LGBTQIA loved ones on Pride Sunday, to attending the rally for Thurman Blevins as we grieved the constant refrain of violence that is waged upon black and brown bodies, holding that paradox was a reminder that we inhabit an in-between space.

And in this space, perhaps the message we can receive from today’s scripture is that the world as we know it, is coming to an end. We’re not quite there yet, but a new world is dawning!

The world where sexual harassment and assault goes unspoken or its perpetrators are not held accountable is coming to an end. We’re not quite there yet, but a new world is dawning!

The world where black and brown bodies are subjugated to violence to uphold white supremacy is coming to an end. We’re not there yet, but a new world is dawning!

A world where LGBTQIA youth account for more than 40% of youth homelessness, and are nearly 3 times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts is coming to an end. We’re not there yet, but a new world is dawning!

The world where property values are more important than people, where it feels impossible to house our most vulnerable among us, that world is coming to an end. We’re not there yet, but a new world is dawning!

The world where hatred or severe mental illness causes a person to walk into a public space and commit a mass shooting is coming to an end. We’re not there yet, but a new world is dawning!

Yes, a new world is dawning, so be encouraged! The forces of evil, of hate, of violence and despair will not have the last word! It’s the end of the world as we know it! God will

bring about justice and peace! And here's the best part, God's way of bringing justice, of making things new, includes us! And the model of participation in creating that new world looks like this table.

### **Turn toward communion table**

It looks like suffering, and death, and resurrection. This is not your typical tale of Good vs. Evil. Rather, this is a story of One who got close to the suffering, who faced all kinds of evil, who grieved, got angry at the way things were, and dared to dream of a new world. It's the story of One who loved at great cost. When we participate in this feast, we say yes to that story. We receive the way of Jesus as our way of navigating the space between two worlds.

### **Explain communion logistics**

#### **Words of institution:**

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

#### **Pray**

**Benediction:** As you go back out into this world that is coming to an end, may God fill you with deep and abiding hope that is accompanied by two beautiful daughters, anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain as they are. Go in peace!