

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, January 14, 2024**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1-2 (selections)

Theme: People of the Light: Faithfulness Despite Opposition

[prayer]

We are now in the season after Epiphany – a brief season of light and illumination before we descend into the shadows of Lent. When Simeon held the infant Jesus in the Temple, his heart swelled with the wide scope of salvation God had prepared for humanity. Simeon described this salvation as “A light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). The Magi beheld that same light in Bethlehem and became the first Gentiles to kneel before Jesus. This inclusive and unifying salvation was summarized by Paul: “Now there is neither Jew nor Greek; slave nor free; male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Paul was Apostle to the Gentiles because of his passionate belief in this inclusive salvation. Anyone who has faith in Jesus and puts on Christ in baptism can call themselves a child of God (Gal 3:26-27). This radical message united the early church across geographical and cultural and sociopolitical divides. In the early church people of all sorts would gather around the eucharistic table to break bread together, sing psalms, pray, and study the Scriptures. Their fellowship was a foretaste of the beautiful diversity of the kingdom of God.

But this unique and radical fellowship was also a flashpoint for controversy and opposition. Today we begin a four-week series through Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians. In this letter Paul encourages the Thessalonian Christians to be “children (people) of light and children (people) of the day” (CEB). He begins his letter by praising the Thessalonians for their faithfulness to being people that reflect the light of the gospel despite opposition.

The Thessalonian Christians were some of the first Gentiles to convert to the gospel of Jesus. It was carried to them by the missionary team of Paul, Silas (also

called Silvanus), and Timothy. Thessalonica is a Greek port city on the northern Aegean Sea. At the time of this letter, it was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Paul wrote this letter around 41 CE. It is his oldest letter that still exists; there were probably others that have been lost. First Thessalonians is also the oldest book in the New Testament, pre-dating Mark's Gospel by about thirty years. For forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus the gospel was carried by missionaries like Paul around the Mediterranean through letters and word of mouth. Today we put great stock in the words of God that are recorded in the Bible, but we should also consider the words of God that Paul brought to the Thessalonians – words that are not recorded in the Bible. It was these words, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that turned the pagan Thessalonians to faith in Jesus (1 Thess 1:5-6).

Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonian Christians several months after being forced to leave the fledgling church. He and his missionary companions were driven out of Thessalonica by the Jewish community there. Some Jews opposed Paul's mission to the Gentiles. It was treasonous not to worship the Roman gods, which included the emperor. The conversion of Gentiles away from Rome's pantheon made the Jewish followers of Jesus suspect in the eyes of Rome. This suspicion put the whole Jewish community at risk, whether you were a Jew who followed Jesus or not. At the root of this persecution of the early church was the fear of punishment by the Roman authorities. Persecution of Christians was not just a matter of difference of belief about the Messiah, but a matter of survival. The sad consequence of this instinct for survival was the alienation of the Thessalonian Christians from both their Jewish and pagan neighbors.

Because Paul was unable to visit the Thessalonian church himself, he sent Timothy to check on it for him. Timothy returned with a positive report, which then prompted Paul to write this letter. Paul gives thanks to God for the exemplary faith of the Thessalonians. He praises their faithfulness in three ways:

- Their public witness. Paul is clear that being a Christian is not a private matter. Followers of Jesus are obligated to make a public witness of their faith. This is not a megaphone on a street corner kind of witness, or even a "Can I tell you about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?" kind of witness. The kind of witness that Paul celebrates is the humble witness of the gospel expressed in our daily lives. We witness to the truth of the gospel through

lives that are dedicated to love, sacrifice, and holiness. Let your actions lead your words.

Specifically, Paul praises the Thessalonians for turning away from pagan idols and making God and Christ the center of their lives. The transformation of their daily routines was so radical that word of their conversion spread beyond their immediate neighbors to the surrounding region of Macedonia and Achaia. Holiness is attractive! Like a moth attracted to a porchlight, the Thessalonians' transformed lives shown so brightly that their pagan neighbors had to take notice.

- Their imitation of their mentors in faith. The Thessalonians imitated Paul and his missionary companions, as well as the first Christians in Judea (Jerusalem), by living set-apart and holy lives. They also imitated them in their faithful response to adversity. Like holiness, faithfulness is also attractive! The Thessalonians' profound joy in Jesus despite the opposition they experienced was an encouragement to their fellow Christians and a compelling witness to their pagan neighbors. Paul says that their confession of faith echoed "in every place" (v. 9), so that they moved from being imitators of the faith to examples of the faith.
- Their endurance. John Wesley commented: "*Faith works, love labors, hope patiently suffers all things.*"<sup>1</sup> Christian endurance is remaining steadfast in our faith in Jesus despite the challenges and opposition we face. Both Paul and Wesley remind us that faith takes hard work! Like a muscle, faith requires regular resistance training to grow stronger. The Thessalonians' strength came from their conviction that their future was held securely in God's hands. This conviction fueled their zeal for leading lives worthy of the saving word they had received.

Paul saw Christian persecution as evidence that the eschaton – the end times – were near. The Greek word that he uses, *thlipsis*, refers to a particular upheaval that will come with the eschaton. Paul writes of the "coming wrath" (v. 10) – God's righteous anger that will pour out on those who oppose His kingdom. God is serious about the universal nature of the gospel, and He will hold accountable anyone who prevents the gospel from being heard and received. But for Paul and

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<sup>1</sup> *Notes on the New Testament*, 1 Thess 1:3.

the early Christians, their suffering (*thlipsis*) was not a reason to fear, but a reason to hope! The greater the suffering, the closer the *parousia* – the Second Coming of Christ – when God will raise the righteous dead to eternal life and permanently dwell with His people.

Obviously, the *parousia* was not as close as Paul and the Thessalonian church hoped. Two thousand years later, we are still waiting. Do we still have reason to hope in the Second Coming?

If we take Jesus at his word, then yes. Jesus promised his disciples that one day he would come back for them: “When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me” (John 14:3). And when Jesus ascended into heaven, the angels said to the gathered disciples, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Like the Thessalonians, the real question about the Second Coming that lies before us is this: How are we to live in the meantime? Paul says we are to look to the Thessalonians and live with faith, hope, and love (1 Thess 1:3). We have our own forms of opposition to the gospel today. Will we remain faithful?

As the slow trickle of disaffiliating churches from our denomination turned into a flood this past year, my sadness grew. It feels like the splintering of our beloved connection is a microcosm of the fissures within our communities and nation more broadly. My heart broke as the church where I was baptized left, and it broke again when a church I served in seminary did the same. Both churches contain people who nurtured my faith and call to ministry. Both churches contain people who believe they are being faithful to God’s calling. I/we believe that we are being faithful, too.

The window for disaffiliations officially closed on December 31. No more churches will leave unless the General Conference, which meets in April, creates another way for them to do so. I pray that the hemorrhaging has ended, and we can begin to turn toward the light of God’s future for us as United Methodists. Yes, we are smaller. Yes, we are poorer. But numbers are not the most important metric for fruitfulness. According to Paul, the modern measuring stick for church success misses the mark. Fruitfulness in faith is not primarily measured by attendance at

Sunday worship, the size of our building or staff or budget, or the programs we put on. Instead, fruitfulness is measured by our faithfulness to the gospel despite opposition. Fruitfulness is measured by our endurance in the face of suffering. Fruitfulness is measured by our commitment to holiness and discipleship.

Here are the questions we should be asking ourselves: Do we have a positive influence on our neighbors so that they speak good words about our God? Do we keep Christ at the center of our lives? Are we convinced of our salvation? Do we have hope that God will finish the good work He has begun in us? These are the marks of fruitfulness that most concern Paul. And they should be our priority, too. The quality of our witness in the world depends less on our numbers and more on whether we are nurturing disciples of Jesus who are convicted of their need for a Savior, convinced of their salvation, and able to endure in faith, hope, and love.

We have been called as people of the light. There is much in this world that will try to smother that light. But we carry this great hope inside us: That we have received the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and that revelation has changed us. Once we were no people; now we are God's people (1 Pet 2:10). On the Sunday after the Epiphany we traditionally remember Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, when God claimed Jesus as His son. We also remember our own baptisms when God claimed us as His children, too. Baptism has many meanings, but one meaning is the transformation from darkness to light, death to life. Ancient baptistries were oriented from west to east: You descended into the water from the west, the location of the setting sun, and rose out of the water facing the east, the direction of the rising sun. This was the ancient church's way of symbolically reminding people that their old life was behind them; before them was only the Way of Jesus.

We walk in the light of the eschaton, in the sure hope that Christ will come again. In the meantime, we have been given the Holy Spirit as a downpayment on God's promised future. God has good things in store for us! Despite whatever opposition we face, despite whatever suffering is to come, we can be faithful because we have nothing more to fear.

Amen.