

Living Awake
I Thessalonians 5: 1-11

**First Presbyterian Church
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We have been talking about the return of Jesus Christ. Last week, we saw how Paul taught us that Christ's return is a cornerstone of Christian hope. Our loved ones in Christ are not lost, so we do not grieve without hope of ever seeing them again. No, in his return, Christ Jesus will bring together both the departed and the living, and we will always be together in the Lord. Today's passage continues on the theme of the Day of the Lord, the great moment when Jesus returns visibly and bodily to this world.

In one of my theology classes at Reformed Seminary, there was a student from China. One evening during the break, I spoke with him briefly about life in an officially atheistic society. I asked him how restricted he felt in preaching the gospel. His reply surprised me. He said, "Oh, I can speak about Jesus anytime and almost anywhere. I can talk as much as I want about what Jesus said and did." He let that sit with me for a minute.

"Really?" I said. "I thought Christians were highly restricted in China."

Then he gave me the rest of the story. "As long as I talk about what Jesus did in the past, I have no problems. Jesus is just another religious teacher like Confucius or Buddha. Not here anymore. No threat. But I may not speak about Jesus returning. That gets me in trouble. Because that makes Jesus a present threat to the government's rule."

Now that conversation was some years ago, so I don't know if conditions have changed. But I've thought a lot about that. A Jesus in the past can say all kinds of things, even die on the cross and rise from the dead, but as long as he stays safely in the past, he is removed from us and so no threat to the present order of things. But a returning Jesus gives people hope that the way things are is not the way things are always going to be. And when he returns, the world will be brought into conformity with the way Jesus wants it to be. That means that every power, every form of rule, that is not according to what Jesus taught long ago, will be brought into both judgment and change when Jesus returns. That makes his teachings a threat and his ministers revolutionary. A government obsessed with its own preservation and power cannot tolerate that.

In America, it is no wonder that cynics ridicule Christians who speak of the return of Jesus. Because a returning Jesus threatens the sovereignty of the individual self. If I can't bear not to be king, I try to smear any claims over me, "The return of Jesus is just literalistic fundamentalism. That's people following an exaggerated, even cheesy story of a guy in robes riding on the clouds. Honestly, what kind of intellectual dwarf believes that?" We get socially dissuaded from affirming Christ's return.

Meanwhile, we affluent Christians happily stop talking about Jesus coming again. Because most of us, me included, are very busy trying to get life in this world arranged to suit our pleasure. We're doing pretty well. We have a lot of toys, and a lot of diversions, a lot of ambition and a lot of places to go. Jesus, why don't you just hold off returning until I get my vacation at my mountain house finished? I know, I know, that literally billions of children live below the poverty line. I know that most of the world's population lives without freedom. I know that for most people in most places, the world is a harsh, grinding place. But look, they'll be fine for a few more years. They don't really expect more, do they? And I have so much I want to experience. Let's just not think about your return. We become as effectively silenced as my brother in China.

The return of Jesus, you see, moves our faith out of the realm of safe spirituality and back into the world of public truth. It moves Christian faith from a story about my inner feelings of peace and joy and back to the story of who Jesus is, what he did, and what he will do. It moves the focus from how I'm using God to help me cope to the reality that Jesus is the one it's all about. Jesus is the one before whom every person will give account. Jesus is the one before whom every knee will bow.

We forget how revolutionary the Lord's Prayer remains. We rattle it off by rote and seldom realize what we are saying, "Father, your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Our prayers are that everything will be measured by the standard and will of Jesus himself. That threatens all earthly powers, whether they are cultures, governments or individual selves.

The return of Jesus Christ is essentially about justice. The world which seems out of control will be brought back into alignment with God's will. The wicked who seem to get away with everything will be held accountable. The wrongs done to children, the violence, the deprivation, the swindling, the trampling of rights, the neglect will all be set to rights.

Now when we truly reckon with Christ's return in this way, I think at least three interconnecting emotions will be produced in us.

1) Fear. Really good, healthy, bone shaking fear. I fear that all I have done purely for myself will be exposed. All I have done that colludes with the crushing of others, will be judged. All my inattention to the needs of others will be revealed. All that I thought I got away with will come back to me like a magnet picking up iron filings. That gives me pause. That gives me the willies.

2) Hope. Christ's return not only creates fear, but it also gives me hope. The rulers will not get away with it forever. The poor will not always be forgotten. War will not always rage. The elderly will not always be abandoned. The unborn will not always be discardable. The meek, the slow, the hesitant will not always be trampled. Liars will not always get away with their deceptions. Those who meet untimely accident or illness will see their years returned. It's going to work out in a way that is just. More than fair. Right and good. Justice will prevail.

3) A sense of responsibility. Christ's return, which could always be at any time, which throughout history has always been just around the corner, puts a kind of downward pressure on his people. "I'm coming back to deal with this world. I'm coming back to take you to heaven, yes. But first we will deal with how you fulfilled my mission on earth. Because my return reminds you, it is this world I am concerned about. These people. This life. My gospel mission in the days and place I gave you. You are responsible to me for what you do with what I give you."

Now, as it turns out, accepting this responsibility is the joy of life. For it means participation in God's glorious plan and purpose in the world. We die to self and come alive to God. That's really Paul's focus in our passage today.

He writes, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" (I Thes. 5: 1-3).

God's people live in the awareness that the day to day world of ordinary life is going to be interrupted suddenly by the return of Christ. The Day of the Lord is

going to crash into an ordinary day and change everything. Eternity is going to flood into the world of time.

When Paul writes about “the times and the seasons,” he is using the two different Greek words for time. One kind of time is *chronos*. That’s clock time. If we ask for a *chronology* of events, we want to know when these events happened. We want them in *chronological* order. According to the clock, according to the calendar, when did these things happen? We all live in *chronos* clock time. The clock ticks with no comment on what it means. In the same second a baby is born, a loved one dies. A job is lost somewhere and a job is gained. Time clicks on with no regard to meaning.

The second kind of time is *kairos*. That’s time with meaning attached to it. The calendar may say June, but this time means to me the days of family vacation and fun and unforgettable memories. We speak of a day of sorrow, or a time of plenty, or a season of growth. We mean the deeper meaning we see in certain periods of time. The Day of the Lord is *kairos* time, time of the greatest possible significance pouring into the clock time of daily life.

The summers I worked at J. C. Penny’s folding men’s underwear and fake polo shirts, I watched the clock a lot. Never have hours passed so slowly. *Chronos* clock time moved like a snail and I found little meaning in the hours except to get through them. I didn’t savor the time. I just wanted it to move on. The only way to get the time to pass would be to interact with other people. To talk with customers that I rang up. Or to my colleagues while I was folding and stocking. Particularly I liked to talk to Rhonda’s aunt who worked in the same department. She might just give me some information about this girl I thought was such a babe. And those thoughts would lend meaning to the hour. They would bring some *kairos* into the boring *chronos* of a tedious job.

The sad reality is that most people most of the time live strictly in clock time. One day is the same as another. Just get through it. Get to the end of the duty. And the only *kairos*, meaningful, time is to get to go home and watch TV and drink a beer. Sure there are seasons like Christmas and summer vacation, but very rarely does the world without God look up and see a higher meaning. There is just no real meaning in the times and seasons.

In fact, our hope often is that we could just get things worked out into a healthy, predictable rhythm where we can say, “All is peace and security.” No

worries. No stress. Just living along for what pleasure there is without thought of higher purpose. Just me in a Coke commercial drinking happiness.

Look, Paul is saying, the Christian lives with a higher awareness. One fine day, *kairos* meaning time is going to explode daily clock time. You want to have been participating in the higher meaning all along. You don't want the Lord to arrive and then try to stop time, saying, "Wait! You mean life was about more than me? Wait! Nobody told me that. I was supposed to do something for God with my life? You mean this Jesus story is really all true and I'm accountable to him?" That's a bad scene.

Yes, Paul shocks them with the reality that Christ could come any moment. Like labor pains. Like a thief. But then he assures them. "But you are not in the darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief. You are children of light, children of the day. So let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober... Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

He draws quite a contrast here. Drunk, dark and wandering in the night. Or sober, children of light, suited up to engage life in the daylight. Blowing through your days unaware versus living awake, living intentionally for Christ and his mission. Chewing up time, focused on myself or seeing the meaning in every moment as I seek to love in Christ's name. I trust in the story of Jesus. I believe the salvation he has accomplished in his death and resurrection. I look forward to the salvation he will bring at his return. I live and serve according to the hope of that time.

Now of course a Bible scholar from south Louisiana might challenge one of these statements. Paul says, "For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night." The south Louisiana scholar might say, "Actually Paul, I have good evidence that down here people get drunk in the morning just as easily as at night. Particularly on game day or at the St. Patrick's parade."

These nuances notwithstanding, let's close with the heart of the matter. Paul gives them an identity statement around which they can build their whole lives. "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him."

That's quite a statement. Imagine meeting the great apostle and having Paul look you in the eyes and say, "God has not destined you for wrath but to obtain salvation." Imagine that he looks at you so intently that he seems to see the divorce, he seems to put his finger right on that dreadful time in your life and still he says, "Here's the truth: God has not destined you for wrath." Maybe he looks at you and seems to see that colossal failure at work, the failure that had to do with corners you cut and truths you shaded and creative math you worked, and he says, "God sees that time. He has not destined you for wrath." Maybe he looks at you weeping at night over your children, how far they've strayed, and how much might be your fault, and he says, "God has not destined you for wrath. He has not destined your children for wrath, these children you offered to him in faith." His words seem to seek out the guilt in our lives, the expectation of condemnation, perhaps a very just expectation. Then, the kairos time of God's arrival in our world crashes in on our guilt: God has not destined you for wrath. But to obtain salvation. Not through yourself. Not through making it all up to someone. Not through self-atonement. But through our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ you are removed from the arrival of the Day of the Lord as a shocking exposure. You are taken up into his achievements, his righteousness, his work of atonement and grace.

That is the way, the only way, we can take up the responsibility that the return of Christ places on his people. I cannot, in myself, face the judgment that his coming will bring. But I can trust now that the judge is my redeemer. The just one has created a way for an unjust man like me to be forgiven. He has called me out of darkness into light. He has summoned me from the night into his glorious day, the day of his truth and grace. So now I can live with Jesus, and for Jesus. I can step into his work for me. I can work to help the world welcome the day of the Lord that is coming. In this way, in this way alone, all the futility and oblivion of mere chronos clock time passing can become the hope of kairos, meaning time, the hope that in Christ Jesus all is well and all shall be made well, to the glory of God.