

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Living in the Present”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, November 10, 2019

Psalm 98

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory.
The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.*

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.*

*Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*
2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians 2:11-5, 13-17

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?

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Will you pray with me? Holy One, Holy God, your gift to us comes in many ways and through the living Word. And as we wrestle with the living Word this day, may the words that you have given me to share and the wrestlings of our heart be sources of challenge, comfort, and grace. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

This morning's reading, the Epistle to the Thessalonians, is focused on the issue of the end times and when they would occur. It brought to mind a story from one of my favorite books, *The Good News from North Haven*. The book is a collection of stories, reflections from a pastor in a small town as he weaves his way through the church year. I find the stories very powerful. Some are poignant, some are funny and some are profound. The one that came to mind was the one that the author Michael Lindvall wrote about the Reverend Lex Ardent. Reverend Rex was a pastor who had gone hither and yon, preaching at tent revivals for years, and now he was retired. That made him available on Sunday morning to sub in a pinch. Now, to be honest, he wasn't always the first choice, not because he was a terrible preacher but because he only had one sermon and it was about the rapture, another name for the second coming. Mind you, he didn't preach the same exact words each time. But no matter the time of year, he found a way to weave the issue into his sermon.

This was the season of Thanksgiving, and Pastor David was ready with his sermon, about gratitude, by the middle of the week. But Thursday night came, and all of a sudden, he realized he had chills and a pastor's dreaded condition, laryngitis. So David asked Reverend Lex to preach, or I should say his wife did because David had no voice left. Lex agreed that he would come that Sunday morning. Sunday morning arrived, and David, while he still had no voice, was feeling much better. So he went to church, and he found true to form, Lex was soon preaching about the end times and how all the righteous ones, one by one, would be plucked up and vanish in the manner described in the *Left Behind* series. So he preached about salvation and the importance of it happening sooner than later and described the images of those who were suddenly gone and the unfortunate who were left behind. His energy level rose and rose as he laid out the warning and invited those who wished to be saved to do so before it was too late.

Finally, the sermon ended, and Lex plopped into his chair with sweat running down his face, and things settled down a bit. The closing hymn began, and, as always, the choir began recessing their way out during the last verse. But suddenly, David saw that Lex was standing there with his mouth open and a shocked look on his face. He turned to see what Lex was looking at and saw that there was a large space in the choir line. One of the women had suddenly disappeared, and in due course, it was learned that Emma had stepped into the old wooden furnace grate with her high heel and pulled it up out of the hole. And ever the trooper, she moved along trying to act like nothing was wrong when there was this thump going on. Now, her sister, Elsie, who's always right behind her, was unaware of what happened. She stepped into the vent hole and with a sound of "Whoop!" completely vanished from sight behind the communion table. Luckily, Elsie was unhurt, but the look on Lex's face was a sight to behold. David said he didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him because poor Lex thought it was the end times and he couldn't imagine that he'd been left behind.

Believe it or not, this story has parallels to the reading from this morning. Now, this is the second letter to the Thessalonians. The first one is firmly in the "Paul wrote this letter" camp. But the second one, that's up for discussion. The letter has a sterner tone, like a parent calling out his or her child's behavior. But nevertheless, the writer is responding to the anxieties of the people in that place for it appears that someone, who claims to have heard it from Paul, was teaching that the awaited end times were upon them right now. And like Lex from North Haven, they couldn't believe that they were unaware and had been left behind, and they were very, very upset. Now the writer of the letter seeks to assure them that the end times have not yet come. He encourages them, telling them he knows they have been faithful and that they would not have been left behind. But as he addresses this issue, we become aware that the delay, the unexpected delay of the second coming is having its own ramifications. Some followers are starting to wonder whether it will happen. This, in turn, makes them think, "What do we do now? Do we plant our crops for next year or not? Will we be here or not?" And others use it as an excuse to no longer work at their jobs. "If the end times are coming, why bother?" relying on others to take care of them.

Now we know that Paul had expected Jesus would have returned sooner rather than later, and that's clear in his first letter to them and other letters as well. But at this point, the writer wants to ease their anxieties as they wait. The writer accepts that the end times have not come and reminds them not to second guess God's timing. After all, even Jesus told his disciples and others that he did not know when this would happen. Only God knew. We can understand though, why they are anxious. Many of them have been persecuted. Some of them are suffering. It's a difficult time and they are anxious and they want to know. The writer wants them to have hope and trust that in the end, God will prevail. So he encourages them not to focus on when it will happen. He encourages them to live their lives in the meantime. "Go about your daily lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Feed the hungry. Share the faith. Encourage others with true need. Don't be obsessed with worry."

Now, for some of us, it may seem odd to get caught up in the speculation on the endpoints, at times to the point that we would neglect our daily lives. But we have to remember historically that's happened a lot. The leader of the Millerites in New York State thought it would happen between the spring of 1843 and the spring of 1844. His followers sold their farms and their land and they waited, and when it didn't happen they had to go back and try and reconstruct their lives. A man by the name of Russell who started the Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the end times would occur around the time of the start of World War I. But let's not leave ourselves out. Who of you on December 31st, 1999 didn't have extra food? Didn't some wonder if the world was going to come to an end because people were sure the internet would go into this wild tailspin? So in this reading, for those there and for us, we are reminded by Paul that we will not know the answer to certain things and that we are to live our lives in the meantime.

But we all know that that is easier sometimes to say than to do. Some of us are so addicted to worry and what-ifs that we find it hard to live day-to-day. Some of us find it hard to let go of things that happened in the past, and we can't live in the present because we are so filled with if-onlys and what-ifs. And some of us are so focused on what will happen in the not too distant future that we miss out on living in the present.

A number of years ago a parishioner in Pacific, MO talked about a conference he went to where one of the speakers talked about how we fritter away our energy on different things. She told each of them to write down ten things that they were worried about, to put it on a piece of paper, and then fold it up, put it in your briefcase or in your purse and in three weeks look at that list. And he said he pulled his out and he couldn't believe it. There was only one thing left on that list. He said, "I realized how much time I had spent worrying about things that did not happen. That I squandered my energy on worry instead of living in the present." And I think it's true. Many of us are more focused on the future and the past, than on the present. We want things. We want them now. When we have to wait we just keep looking forward instead of being in the moment. Or we think we need more things and overlook what is truly important. Deeper relationships. Service that brings a sense of meaning. Taking time for things that nourish us in spirit. In our search for wealth and prestige as a means to happiness, we miss out on gratitude for the gifts of life we have now, and as a result, always have this sense of wanting.

Anxiety, worry, worrying about meaning and purpose, these are contemporary issues as well. In his new book, **Second Mountain**, David Brooks speaks about these concerns, addressing the challenges we are facing as a culture. He thinks that we have moved from a 'we and me' culture to a 'me, myself and I' culture. Our obsession with individual rights and overwhelming focus on the self leave us wanting. It undermines the importance of community and contributes to one of the most significant things doctors are dealing with--loneliness, depression, isolation, and a struggle for a sense of meaning. We are really missing out when we are not connected with others. Brooks calls us to see there is more to life than individual success. That we need to work on common bonds. To remember that there is more meaning to life than acquiring things or status. The writer of the letter speaks to this too. Encouraging the people then and us to live in the present. To focus outwardly instead of just on ourselves as individuals. To give thanks for Jesus who brought them together in one body. And he encourages them to work together serving as a community, offering words of promise that God will prevail, and that God will be with them all of their days. That while they may have challenges and struggles they can find hope in trusting that, in the end, good and truth will prevail over evil.

The mystic, Julian of Norwich, had such questions too. She was a woman who lived in the 1300s. She devoted her life to her faith. And at one point in her life, she was very, very ill and not expected to live. But afterwards, after her recovery, she talked about revelations she had had from God during those days. She too had struggled with "the reality of sin and evil, and she asked God about the suffering of the world, about evil, and the Church's teaching regarding hell. How could all things be well once we take into account all this suffering and pain? God assures her that by the mysterious action of divine love, power and wisdom all things will be made well. But Julian presses on wanting to know how. Ultimately, God does not explain it. But God invites Julian to trust in the future with these words, "All will be well. All will be well. In all matter of things, all will be well."

I think that's the desire of the writer of the letter. To trust that even in the face of fear and suffering that God will prevail. That in the face of our struggles we are not left alone. These are the promises of God in the midst of challenge and change. In the midst of times of wondering if we matter. And the answer is yes. Yes, you do. Trust that "all will be well. All will be well. In all manner of things, all will be well." Amen.

Articles on end times came from Time Magazine, Top 10 End-of-the-World Prophecies by Kayla Webley, May 20, 2011.

Material on Julian of Norwich and "All will be well, in all manner of things, all shall be well" is from Church History Institute series "In Context," from Article # 51 by Dan Graves on the internet.