

October 18, 2020
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Pentecost 20
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Steadfastness of Hope”

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

By all appearances, Mary Parker must have lived a charmed life. She was always a smiling, positive person to everyone she met, someone who could be counted on for a cheerful hello and sunny presence that left everyone who met her feeling better. She appeared to be in great physical health and maintained an active lifestyle and schedule of volunteer activities in the community. She was always impeccably dressed, and her small home was always kept in perfect condition, especially her gardens that were often featured in the local newspaper. She was a regular presence in the pews of the Lutheran Church by the Brickyard, always sitting in the fifth pew on the left and joyfully singing along with the congregation (even during COVID-19, Mary would tune into the congregation’s online services and sing by herself in her living room). She was generous to a fault, always contributing to worthy causes and was one of the most generous givers in the congregation. Some people even envied Mary for a life that appeared to be free from the cares and concerns faced by others. But those who closest to Mary knew better; far from living a charmed or carefree existence, her life had been filled with hardships. Her parents died in a car accident when she was a young girl, and she was moved around to the home of various relatives who did not all treat her well. Her husband was killed in an accident at the steel mill, and because she was unable to have children, she was left widowed and childless at a young age. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through a bilateral mastectomy and months of chemotherapy. While she was able to be generous to others, she was always worried that she would not be able to afford to stay in the home that she and her husband had purchased and which contained precious memories of her beloved. Mary’s life was filled with dark moments that could have easily defeated her or left her depressed and despondent.

But despite all the hardships and heartbreak she had experienced, Mary was still a loving, caring, positive person. One day, she was having tea with her best friend Elizabeth, who had known Mary since grade school. Even though she knew Mary better than anyone, she was always mystified by how Mary was able to meet each day in such a positive way; what was her secret to not giving in to all of these negative

experiences that should have brought her down? What inner strength did she possess that other people seemed to lack? When Elizabeth asked her “how do you do it?” Mary smiled and gently took her friend’s hand. “There’s nothing special about me,” she quietly spoke. “I’m no stronger than any other person; in fact, some days I think I’m the biggest weakling alive. But my strength comes from the one who is always with me, the one whose love is steadfast and sure, the one who has never let me down and whose promises are sure and certain. My strength comes from the steadfastness of hope that is mine in Jesus Christ my Lord.”

The strength that allowed Mary Parker to live every day as a source of love and light is rooted in that source of confident hope that is at the heart of our Christian faith, the good news that has been proclaimed from the very beginning of the Church’s witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the word of faith, love, and hope that Paul proclaims at the beginning of his first letter to the Thessalonians, which may be the earliest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament and one of the earliest of all of the books of the New Testament. Paul writes this letter “*to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1:1), located in a major Roman commercial centre in Macedonia where Paul had established the church to which he writes. The apostle writes to the Christians in this city “*to encourage a beleaguered church to persist in its new way of life, in accordance with the apocalyptic gospel it has received, despite the fact that it might have been difficult for the members to see the power of God – and the prestige pertaining to that power – at work in their lives.*” (Abraham Smith).

Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica follows the traditional order of letters at this time. It begins with a salutation from Paul and his companions in ministry, Silvanus, and Timothy, and names the letter’s recipients as “*the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” While the original meaning of “church” (*ekklesia*) designated an “assembly” of people, by the time Paul writes his first letter it signified an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ as Lord. He ends his salutation with traditional greeting “*grace to you and peace,*” which he would expand in later letters to include “*from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 1:3). The next section of a traditional First Century letter would be a thanksgiving for the faithfulness of the recipients and the ways they have been a blessing to the writer. Paul’s opening remarks include an *encomium* to God (a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly), the persistence of his team’s prayerful actions, the noting of the church’s active life as believers, the consoling depiction of the church as secure in God’s initiating work,

and the characterization of the gospel as a powerful force. He also uses this opening thanksgiving to announce three of the letter's basic themes:

1. The effectiveness of Paul's leadership team's initial word (or gospel) and its subsequent practices: "... *because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake.*" (1:5).
 2. Paul introduces the theme of persistence – both that of Paul's leadership team and that of the church. Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians' "*work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (1:3). Paul is aware of the challenges they are facing in seeking to live faithfully despite continuing alienation from the larger society in which they live. "*For a church plagued by the hostile action of unbelievers, the persistence demanded (and for which Paul gives thanks) needs to be the goal of everyone in the assembly.*" (Smith). The epistle thereby serves as a *paraenetic* letter, one that encourages persistence in a certain way of life.
 3. Paul reminds his readers of the distinctiveness of the church from the rest of Thessalonian society. The existence of the Thessalonian church "*lies in what God accomplished in Christ's life, death, and resurrection*" (Ernest Best). The church always faces the temptation to return to its former networks of financial, social, and emotional support ("*I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain*" – 3:5). For comfort and support, Paul urges the members of the faith community to look to one another and to demonstrate love toward each other and to all ("*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.*" – 3:12). The church's life is now distinguished by its holiness: "*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 Christ with all his saints.*" (3:13).
- "Paul writes to encourage a beleaguered church to use the words and practices of their foundational leaders as resources for persisting in the church's distinctive, apocalyptic life." – Smith.

A critical element in the church's foundation is the role of the Word of God, the Word the Thessalonians received despite persecution. The result of that reception in the midst of suffering is that they became an "example" (*typos*) to other believers: "*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received*

the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” (1:6-7). The power of the Gospel (the proclamation – *kerygma* - of the good news of Jesus Christ that predates the written Gospels) has been demonstrated beyond the confines of Thessalonica; Paul describes the “echoing” (*execheomai*) of the Word of God in other parts of Macedonia and also in Achaia (modern-day Greece). The church is praised not only because it faced apocalyptic persecution from the very beginning of its existence but also because its zeal has not flagged; its power continues to make an impact as believers await Jesus’ return.

A critical element of the Thessalonians’ witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fact that they “*became imitators of us and of the Lord.*” (1:6). In the ancient world, “imitation” was often used regarding teacher who were noted exemplary figures for their students. Paul frequent uses “imitation” to talk about his relationship with members of the churches to which he writes as an apostle:

- “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 11:1.
- “Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also has become as you are.” – Galatians 4:12.
- “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” – Philippians 3:17.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for the way in which they have grasped the conviction of those it imitated so that it is now itself a model for other believers. The result of their example of faithfulness in imitation of the apostles is that “*the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living a true God*” (1:9). “Turning” (*epistrepho*) signifies conversion to a new way of life. The Thessalonian Christians have turned from their former cultic memberships to a new way of life, “*to serve a living a true God.*” The believers are no longer subject to the presumed powers of false gods in whom they had originally believed:

- “Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” – 1 Corinthians 8:5-6.

The origin of the “steadfastness of hope” that sustains the Thessalonian church amid persecution and empowers it to be a living witness far beyond the boundaries of its community is its faith in the coming of God’s “*Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.*” (1:10).

- “What buoyed their lives so that despite affliction they served God and waited on their deliverance through Christ? It was their full reception of God’s unstoppable word to them, the word that remained a reliable resource in their lives.” – Smith.

Like Mary Parker, it would appear that the church in Thessalonica was a group of people who must have lived blessed, trouble-free lives; their ability to be faithful witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ far beyond the city limits must have been due to the social and financial advantages that they possessed. But in reality, they shared Mary’s circumstances, lives that were far from easy yet were able to share the light and love of Christ even amid challenges that could have easily overwhelmed them. They were empowered to continue the work of the apostles “*in spite of persecution,*” because their faith was rooted in the “*steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,*” the sure and certain hope that is rooted in faith in “*a living and true God,*” a word that is as alive and powerful today as it was when it was first proclaimed and received by God’s faithful people.

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ’s power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among us through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

When the Scriptures are read in worship – both in-person and online – we always declare that what we have heard is “the Word of the Lord.” It is not merely the recitation of an historical document that tells us what happened in the past but is the living Word of God that is being spoken to us here and now. When we study God’s Word, we are always aware that it has two audiences: the originally audience who first heard these words spoken to them, and the audience that gathers today to hear this Word proclaimed as good news. As the Thessalonian Christians were encouraged to continue their faithful witness to Jesus Christ even amid tremendous

challenges, so are we strengthened by these same word of Paul to root our life as God's people in the same "*work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" As we continue to live through the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty that faces us in a circumstance that none of us have experienced, God's Word proclaims to us that living hope that we can continue to love and serve in Jesus' name because the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ is steadfast and sure, because "*the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this*" (5:24).

- "In our moment of fear and insecurity, we may be tempted to hold on to what was once safe and secure. Prophetic tradition knows, on the contrary, that the future does not reside in old, treasured realities. It belongs, rather, to bold faithful thought that evokes bold faithful action. This has always been the prophetic task, and it is now, in this frightened time, our prophetic task. The new thing God is making possible is a world of generous, neighborly compassion. It is before our very eyes! The God who does this new thing has also said, 'Do not remember former things.' We can embrace a new normal that is God's gift to us!" – Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*

Mary Parker has adapted to the new realities of the pandemic; she wears her mask whenever she goes out, visits with family and friends over the telephone, and faithfully washes her hands and uses hand sanitizer. But what has not changed is Mary's loving presence in the lives of people in her neighborhood, her community, and her church. She still shines her light through cards she writes, phone calls she regularly makes, and homemade cookies that she leaves outside of their homes. She prays every day for the people she loves and for all who love her; she continues to support those who work on behalf of others in her community and who continue to serve God to the best of their abilities. She lives in the blessed assurance that as God has sustained her through all of the challenges and difficulties of her past, God will continue to bless her with the steadfastness of hope that is rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ, the Word that is with us "*in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*" (1:5). Mary knows what all God's faithful people have known for all generations: that because we live in the hope that is rooted in the steadfast love of God, we can live in trust and hope and shine the light of Christ's love before others "*so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*"

- "We dare to pray, not because we are at our wits end, but because you are the center of our life. Our hope is in no other save in thee alone!" – Brueggemann.

Amen.