

“People of Encouragement”

“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

Of the thousands of sermons I have preached during my over forty years of ordained ministry, one of the most memorable was when I have a guest at a local African American Baptist church on the occasion of their anniversary. The congregation was inviting all the local pastors to join them for their evening worship service (this congregation worshipped both morning and evening on Sundays, with a dinner in between), and when it was my turn to preach, I was warmly greeted by the ushers and escorted to a seat in the front of the sanctuary. The service began with rousing gospel music and prayers by several deacons who joined the pastor and me in the chancel. After being introduced by one of the congregational leaders, I took my place in the pulpit and began my sermon – at which point something happened that I had never experienced. In our Lutheran tradition, the congregation usually listens in silence while the pastor preaches; but in the African American church, the congregation acts more like spectators at a hockey game than congregants in the pews. From my opening sentence, I would hear shouts of “amen” and “preach it, brother!” At first, I was somewhat taken aback, but soon I found that these shouts of encouragement began to inspire me in my preaching. Soon I got into the rhythm that is at the heart of the African American preaching tradition, in which the congregation acts as a source of encouragement and inspiration for their pastor, even calling out “help him, Lord” when it seems as if the preacher has hit a rough patch in the sermon. While it is not an aspect of the preaching tradition in which I serve, that experience of congregational encouragement in preaching is one I have grown to understand and appreciate; it is an experience I will always cherish.

While Lutherans may not begin shouting “amen” in our worship services, we have experienced situations in which we have either given or received encouragement. When we attend a football or hockey game, we do not sit in the stands quietly while our team plays; we shout out encouragement to the players and cheer them on to a hoped-for victory. When we attend a concert, a play, or public performance we cheer the players on stage to encourage them in their presentations. Before a friend or family member goes on stage or onto the ice, we offer words of encouragement to help them deal with any nervousness they are experiencing so that they can perform

up to their full potential. Encouragement is essential for a person's psychological well-being:

- “Encouragement helps you succeed. Encouragement provides a boost to lift someone's confidence. It helps motivate people to approach their attempts with positivity. Your words have the power to change and make a big difference in someone's life.” – Dr. R.K. Suri.

One of the purposes of the writing of the letters of the New Testament is to offer words of encouragement to persons and churches that are experiencing suffering and opposition in their lives as followers of Jesus Christ. This can be seen in the earliest of all the books of the New Testament, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Not only is 1 Thessalonians the earliest of the letters of the Apostle; it was written earlier than all the Gospels. The letter “*gives us a glimpse into the concerns of one of the first communities outside of Syria-Palestine to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. It is an under-appreciated treasure.*” (Kristofer Phan Coffman). Paul writes the letter to the church in Thessalonica, a city located in what is now northern Greece that was an important trade center and the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. The Christians in Thessalonica are living their Christian faith amid a pagan culture that is often hostile to the good news of Jesus Christ. The letter offers us glimpses into the life and ministry of the early church as it struggles to be faithful to its calling while anticipating what was believed to be the imminent coming of the Lord in their lifetimes (an expectation that Paul shares at this time, but one he has to rethink when it is obvious that the second coming was not going to happen as quickly as he had previously thought). Following the traditional format of a New Testament letter, “*1 Thessalonians seems written 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).

In today's second lesson from the fifth and final chapter of the letter, Paul focuses on the *Parousia*, the “day of the Lord” spoken of frequently by the Old Testament prophets (as in last week's first lesson from Amos) and draws on various apocalyptic images to clarify the importance of that day for believers in the present, including encouraging appropriate behavior in light of these beliefs in the future fulfillment of God's promises. Paul reveals “*more of his thought about the present impact of vindication or judgment in the new age on believers.*” (Smith). The day of the Lord (*yom YHWH*) is rooted in the teachings of the prophets on God's vindication of the righteous and judgment of the unrighteous:

- “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” – Joel 2:31.
- “Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light ...” – Amos 5:18.
- “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” – Malachi 4:5.

Paul begins his teaching on this “day of the Lord” by reminding his readers that *“concerning the times and the seasons ... you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”* (5:1-2). While Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel According to Luke was written after this letter, the Thessalonians may have been familiar with the preaching of our Lord’s warning of the unexpected way the Lord will return:

- “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” – Luke 12:39-40.

Paul then shifts to the third person to declare the destruction the day of the Lord will bring to the unbelievers whose lives are exclusively tethered to the present life: *“When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!”* (5:3). “There is peace and security” was a propaganda slogan of the Roman imperial government to encourage their conquered people to look to them as the source of these qualities; Paul quotes this phrase to warn his readers that those who place their trust in the Roman Empire will find that *“there is no escape!”* The reference to the labour pains a woman experiences in childbirth are a reminder that as the last days of pregnancy are full of waiting and watching, so will be the *“inevitability and uncertainty that mark the coming of the Day of the Lord.”* (Coffman).

Shifting again to his readers, Paul contrasts believers in Christ with unbelievers, those who do not confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Employing the familiar imagery of light and darkness, Paul addresses his readers to remind them that *“you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.”* (5:4-5). Paul presupposes that “night” represents a condition of unawareness or insensitivity. He presents darkness and light imagery as contrasting “spheres of existence.” Believers are not in a state of darkness and do not have darkness as the

source of their existence; as Paul would later write in his letter to the Ephesians, *“once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.”* (Ephesians 5:8-9). Believers will not be surprised at the coming of the Day of the Lord because they are “children of the day,” a Semitic expression that means that they belong to the realm of the day. By contrast, unbelievers are in darkness and have this darkness as the source of their existence. It is helpful for us to remember that night in the ancient world that was categorically different from night for modern westerners because night was truly dark; there was no source of illumination that we enjoy since the dawn of the age of electricity. Therefore, *“understanding the fear of darkness in antiquity helps to illuminate the courage required to stay awake and keep watch during the night”* (Collman).

Paul’s teaching on the distinction between believers and unbelievers now shifts to the behavior required of believers, those who in Christ are children of the light and day. The behavior required of believers is one of vigilance: *“So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.”* (5:6-7). When Paul urges the Thessalonians to stay awake and watch for the Lord’s return, he is calling upon them to show the same faith and courage that Jesus urged upon his first disciples in Mark’s Gospel:

- “Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” – Mark 13:35-37.

Paul returns to his words from his opening thanksgiving in which he proclaimed that *“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”* (1:2-3), reconfiguring the earlier triad of faith, love, and hope as the church’s *“weaponry for the eschatological battle”* (Helmut Koester), proclaiming that *“since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation”* (5:8). For readers who are familiar with the armor-clad battalions of Roman soldiers occupying their land, these metaphors are words that encourage believers to look to the Lord for the protection they will need in the challenges they face from forces that are opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what he will later identify as the *“whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil”* (Ephesians 6:11). Paul’s readers live in the assurance that *“God*

has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him” (5:9-10). For Paul, because of God’s initiative and the saving grace of Christ’s death and resurrection, a reunion with the Lord is possible for all believers, whether they are awake (alive) or asleep (dead). As the Apostle will later write in his letter to the Romans, “we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7-8).

- “Yes, certainly, we are the Lord’s, and this is our greatest joy and comfort, that we have as a Lord the one to whom the Father has given all power in heaven and on earth, and into whose hands God has given all things ... With his dear blood he bought us and washed us clean from sin. And again he has given us in our hearts the pledge of our inheritance and salvation, the Holy Spirit, and has made us kings and priests before God. In short, he has made us children and heirs of God, and joint heir with himself. Yes, truly, this is a faithful saying.” – Martin Luther.

Because of this blessed assurance that is at the heart of the faith that Paul shares with all who are believers in Christ, he instructs the Thessalonians to *“therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” (5:11). The verb *parakaleo* (“to exhort, comfort, encourage) is used eight times in 1 Thessalonians as the encouragement Paul and his companions offer to their readers and that in turn, they can give to one another. Paul’s use of “encourage” denotes the comfort that God brings through God’s present and future salvation. Paul is continually concerned with comforting the churches to whom he writes in their afflictions (“I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself.” – Colossians 2:2). God is the God of all comfort and encouragement, who makes a fellowship of suffering a fellowship of comfort (“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves have been consoled by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). The comfort of the present salvation is set in the light of the coming consummation when God will remove all suffering by God’s glorious presence (“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” – Revelation 21:3-4). Because of this blessed hope that is ours in Christ Jesus our*

Lord, Paul offers the benediction that *“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.”* (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). Paul’s repeated teachings on mutual encouragement in 1 Thessalonians indicates that the building up of community in Christ is, for Paul, evidence of holiness of life, which for the Apostle is *“not an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us”* (Jane Lancaster Patterson). As the letter to the Hebrews presents an image of the saints surrounding and encouraging us as the Church in this generation (*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ...”* – Hebrews 12:1), Paul calls the church in every generation to be a source of encouragement and support to each other so that they may have strength and courage to meet whatever challenges and obstacles are presented to them in their mission to be faithful to the Lord’s calling to be children of the light, shining the light of Christ before others *“so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16). The hope that is ours in Jesus Christ is hope that is *“lived out in behavior that exemplifies belief, and hope is worked out in the promise of salvation and ongoing life in Christ, whether we are awake or asleep.”* (Karoline Lewis).

The importance of encouragement for those engaged in various activities was apparent during the recent Covid pandemic, when spectators were not present during games, concerts, or worship services. While those activities were able to take place without being surrounded by crowds who offered encouragement by their presence and their words the tasks being performed were far more difficult. As a preacher, sharing God’s Word in an empty sanctuary was one of the most difficult challenges I have faced in my years of preaching. Even if we are not in the habit of shouting “amen” during a sermon, the presence of God’s people makes that task of proclaiming God’s Word much better; the presence of a people of encouragement is essential in our fulfillment of the mission that God has entrusted to us in this time and place.

- “Life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not form itself into a movement, an order, [or] a society ... but rather where it understands itself as being a part of the one, holy, catholic, Christian Church, where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings and struggles and promise of the whole Church.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

One of the most devastating experiences of my youth was when a coach took me aside after watching me fail time and again to become a great basketball player and told me that “we need spectators too.” It marked the end of my futile attempts to

become an athlete, but it was the beginning of my becoming a spectator and encourager to the teams I followed then and continue to follow today. We are called to be sources of encouragement to one another, to build one another up, to cheer each other on so that we might experience the power and support that we need to fulfill God's purpose for us amid the challenges we face as the church of the 21st Century. May we commit ourselves every day to be people who "*encourage one another and build up each other,*" so that we may delight in serving our Lord as God's holy people, born anew to a living hope that is ours in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.