

St. Luke's UMC
May 16, 2021

Everyday Hope
The Hope of Gratitude
1 Thessalonians 1

Well this morning, for all of you worshipping in person, I am excited to announce you have won a very special gift. Don, tell them what they've won...

You've won an all-expensive paid, imaginary trip to the Mediterranean! Your imaginary trip begins in a boat just like the Apostle Paul traveled in. You'll get to hep row the boat just as people would have done in the first century. Eventually you'll arrive on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea in the beautiful city of Thessaloniki, Greece! You'll spend seven incredible days in the second largest city in the country overlooking the magnificent water, visiting ancient Roman sites as well as the location where the first church in the city was located at the home of some guy named Jason. You'll imagine gorging yourself on sumptuous Greek cousine, staying in luxurious accommodations, and of course, being spellbound by the stimulating teaching of Dr. Rob Fuquay. Your trip of a lifetime starts today! Now back to you Rob...

I'm hoping that might incentivize those of you at home to return to worship in person. You never know what you'll get. One week its doughnuts, another its a trip to the Mediterranean. So you'll never know what you'll get!

But no matter where you are watching, we all are going to be encouraged to leave where we are and travel not only in distance but time. We are starting today a series based on the oldest writing in the New Testament, Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. This letter was written some 20 years before the Gospel of Mark, which is believed to be the first Gospel. When Paul wrote in chapter 4, ***"For we believe that Jesus died and rose again,"*** that was the first written declaration of Easter! Paul's letters predate the Gospels and show not only the issues facing the early church and the questions people had, but also the faith and theology that shaped the church. Most importantly, it shows the hope people found in Christ, and why it was powerful enough to turn them away from other spiritual interests.

SO I want to take a moment in the first part of this message to set the stage and learn a little about Thessa-lonica, or Thessalo-nIca, depending on whether you say tomAto or tomato. In Paul's day, like today, Thessalonica was a major city of power and commerce in the territories of Thessaly and Macedonia in northern Greece. It was about 200,000 in population at that time. It was named after the sister of Alexander the Great—a name that is the combining of Thessaly and Nike, meaning victory. Alexander's father, Philip, came from this region, so in many ways the Greek empire spread by Alexander started in this area.

Thessalonica was located along the main east-west highway from Rome called the *Via Egnatia*. This brought many traders and travelers from through the Roman Empire to

making Thessalonica a very cosmopolitan city. There would have been diversity of races and nationalities.

Paul's length of ministry in Thessalonica was most likely just 3-4 weeks. For extra credit you can read about his time there in **Acts 17:1-9**. It tells how Paul, when he arrived in the city, went straight to the Jewish synagogue to teach and share his faith in Jesus. It says some Jews and God-fearing people were persuaded by what Paul said. The term "God-fearer," meant non-Jewish people who became part of the synagogue. Often, these were Gentiles of some financial means, so they were welcomed in the synagogue. To see these people being persuaded by Paul was threatening to the old guard in the community. So they went to the marketplace and rounded up some rough characters to handle the situation. They went to the place where Paul was staying, the home of a person named Jason, but Paul wasn't there. So they dragged Jason before the city officials and accused him of **"defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."** (**Acts 17:7**) Why would this have been a significant charge? Because Thessalonica was given the status of "free city" in the Roman empire meaning Roman citizens didn't have to pay tax and they could be self-governed, provided Roman laws were followed. If it could be proven that authorities tolerated a threat to the empire and ignored the threat, then their status could be taken away.

So for fear of his life Paul had to leave town.

This leaves us with a question, why did people become Christian? Doing so could ostracize you from your friends and neighbors. It could even cost you in your business. Why would anyone at that time become Christian? Some people ask that question today, why would anyone become Christian? Why associate yourself with a group where so many won't welcome your friends who are gay? Why be a part of something that in many places ignores the real issues going on in our world. Well, the reasons for asking were different, but the question was still the same, why become Christian. And in Thessalonica the simple answer is hope. People found hope, hope they weren't finding elsewhere. Like most Roman cities, people were very spiritual. There were plenty religions, but the hope offered for most people was to get everything out of this life you can, because that's all there is. Such philosophy was captured in an Epicurean epitaph found on a Roman tombstone. It read, "I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care."

There was something about the message of eternal life through Christ that gave hope to this life, hope for this world, that God's plan was not to throw everything away one day; and therefore what we do in this life matters. This hope pertains to everything we do, and it spills over into the everyday parts of life like suffering, grief, sexual ethics, criticism, wanting to get even with others. And these are issues we will look at in this series. These are matters still relative to our lives today. We are not all that different from the Thessalonians. And so this morning we begin with a topic Paul addresses at the outset of the letter: gratitude.

After his initial greeting in which Paul recognized that he is writing on behalf of himself, and his companions Silas and Timothy he says: ***We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God***

and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. This was not an unusual way to start a letter in the first century. A proper letter began with the salutation, announcing who is writing and who is being greeted. Then you compliment your addressee. You heap some praise on them. Then comes the main body of the letter, your reason for writing, then a farewell.

But Paul spends more time on his praise of the Thessalonians than would have been typical. All of chapter one, and several places after, elaborate this gratitude. Why? No doubt Paul was concerned for them. He had to leave them after just a few weeks. He knew they were facing opposition and probably wondered if this church would even survive. Hearing that they were doing well, he writes to praise them. Paul understood that the best way to encourage a community that gets tired and weary is to remind them that they are doing well and there are others being inspired by their example. We all need that don't we?

One morning a couple weeks ago I met a member of our church for breakfast. We hadn't seen each other in a while. I baptized his kids back in the fall. They wanted to be emersed so we did it in their swimming pool. Well, when we finished he said, "Come out to the car, I've got a present for you." I said, "Its not even my birthday." He said, "It's for doing my kids baptism." I said, "You don't need to give me something."

There were several things. One was this blanket...The other was a box with this inside... Now there is a giant version of this picture hanging on his wall. When I was there the day of the baptism and saw this he told me the story. How shortly after he contemplated taking his life some years ago, he took his first hiking trip to these mountains out west. He's a photographer, and there was something about the light of this moment, he felt God speaking to him. He calls this picture The Mountain of Promise. And his story is on the back.

A few days later I wrote to tell him thanks and share how special this picture was to me, here is what he wrote back: I just wanted you to know the answer whenever you ask yourself the question does what I do really matter? Do I ever really reach anyone? All you need to do is look at that picture or wrap yourself in the blanket and know the answer is yes! God helped You save me from myself!! Enjoy the sunny day brother and cheers to the many more ahead this summer!

You just try taking this picture out of my hands! This is one I will hold onto. Do you have some things to hold onto? My guess is we get them all the time, cards, emails, a passing word letting us know what we do matters, but they can be easily forgotten. The next time we are going through a period of doubt, or discouragement, it can be easy to let that moment become a carpe diem and seize the day. Unless we have something to hold onto. What are things you have to hold onto? And what can you give others to hold onto? What notes, what words, what gifts can you offer to someone to say, "Thank you. I want you to know you matter in my life."

But, you know, I don't believe Paul's letter was just for the Thessalonians. Huh-uh. I believe it was also for himself. Consider what led up to Paul's writing First Thessalonians. Paul departed on his second missionary journey following a terrible argument with Barnabas, the person most responsible for Paul becoming an apostle. They parted ways. Then Paul was prevented from going to Bithynia. Instead he goes to Greece. At his first stop in Philippi he's arrested, beaten and put in jail. He goes to Thessalonica where he's threatened again and has to leave. Then to Berea, and again the same thing.

He traveled to Athens where he got to speak before the Council of Philosophers. This was perhaps Paul's most impressive speech, but in the end the council for the most part shrugged their shoulders in disinterest. From there Paul went to Corinth. Later in his letter to the Corinthians Paul describes his state of mind at the time. He wrote, ***"I came to you in weakness and in fear and with much trembling."*** (1 Corinthians 2:3)

Paul was feeling defeated, probably wondering if he was making any difference and perhaps whether or not to quit. Often we look at great leaders like Paul, people who are determined and strong, and assume they never had moments of doubt as if they are just wired differently from the rest of us. But everyone has times when they get discouraged and defeated.

There's a story about Martin Luther King Jr about a year before he was assassinated. He got so discouraged and questioned whether he was making a difference, that he went to bed and would not get up, for three days! Finally his friend Joan Baez came and sat by the bed and sang a song called "Pilgrim Sorrow," and he got up.

Even the greatest people have moments when they want to quit. The Apostle Paul had a moment like that when he reached Corinth and then he got news from Thessalonica and it came at just the right moment. For Paul it was probably like a letter from God saying, "You can do it! You're making a difference. Keep going!" And so he wrote back. And begins with a whole chapter of gratitude and praise. Sure it was for the Thessalonians. But it was for Paul too. His thanks was giving him encouragement.

Not long ago I got a text from John Girton. John was our videographer at the church some years ago, and he is also a pastor who leads the Indiana Healthy Marriage and Family Coalition. At the time he was leading a program for fathers, and he shared in worship one Sunday about it and brought his friend Steve Echols who had been in the program. Steve had his 6 yr old daughter with him that day. Some of you might remember.

Well I get this text from John about a month ago, and he said Steve had asked if he could come and share something with the church and when he told me what he wanted to share I said, "Absolutely!" So I want to welcome Steve to join me...