A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Hang On*

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2 Thessalonians 2

If you’re following along on the church calendar, we’re now in the last three weeks of the year. We have two weeks, then Christ the King Sunday, and then Advent inaugurates a new Church year. In this final stretch, the gaze of the scripture readings turns upward and outward beyond toward ultimate things: the great mysteries and great promises of God’s reign, Christ’s victory, the final resurrection, the consummation of God’s purposes for all creation. For the last few weeks of the year all the texts point this direction: directing us toward assurance of our ultimate hope in God in all things. To keep this hope is to get this message: Christians do not live in fear. Or at least they’re not supposed to.

We need that hope because things can look pretty dark around here sometimes. That’s where we find the Thessalonians. They are a group of Christians in the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece, right on the coast, kind of remote, but a city where Paul visits, preaches the gospel, and starts a congregation of Christ-followers. We don’t know much else about them except what we can infer from the two letters in the New Testament to the Thessalonians.

If there’s any picture of them that comes clear, it’s this. While Paul was impressed with their faithfulness in the face of persecution, these folks, as a group, were highly anxious. They worried and that worry crippled them. When Paul writes the 1st letter to the Thessalonians they are anxious because Christ had not yet returned. This was no small thing. First generation Christians had a pretty strong conviction that Jesus was going to return in their lifetimes. But the days went on, and he didn’t. As individual members of the congregation began to grow old and die, the living wondered and worried, what is going to happen to them? Will Jesus ever return? To this concern the Apostle writes, Yes, Jesus will return in glory and in power. And you will know it when it happens. And the dead--your dead, your loved ones, they will rise in Christ first. That word of assurance must have been comfort for them.

And yet, by the time the 2nd letter was written possibly within a year of the 1st letter, they were worrying about something else, the exact opposite thing actually. Now they were worried that Christ had already come and they’d missed it somehow and now were left behind to continue suffering the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring without relief. It was tough to be a Christian in the early centuries in many places. Apparently their lives as Christians were not easy. They were weary; they were fearful; they were anxious. Has it already happened? Has God already done all that God is going to do and this is it? Did we miss it?

So at first they worried that Christ wasn’t going to come. 1 Thessalonians. Now they worried that Christ had already come. 2 Thessalonians. To their anxieties of every kind, the message of comfort is gently but powerfully put forward in both cases: do not fear. That message takes root in the particular ways Paul tries to straighten out their thinking, but it even transcends the cosmic, apocalyptic questions they were wondering about. When you have fear in your heart, your fear will find something to latch on to. You’ll find it. Especially when the stakes are as high as life and death, eternal destiny, and Christ’s return.

But the phenomenon of finding something to worry about if you are anxious goes from humanity’s highest inquiries about the end of the world all the way down through us to daily life: money, relationships, friendships, body image, and on and on. What’s true about ultimate things is true about quotidian life. If we are anxious, we will find something to be anxious about.

The same is true for all kinds of human psychologies. Like pessimism. If you are pessimistic you’ll find something to be pessimistic about. There are lots of candidates for your pessimism. The same is true for judgment, for anger, for resentment, for consumptive addition. If you are judgmental, angry, resentful, consumptive, you’ll find someone to judge, something to be angry about, something or someone to resent, and something to buy, eat, or consume. What is true about us deep down comes out in our attitudes, our theologies, our behaviors, and our hope or our despair. That is why Christianity isn’t just about disciplining our actions but about the redemption and transformation of our core selves, as broken as they are.

These particular people despaired as they were controlled by fear; immobilized by it. They were in the words of verse 2, “shaken in their minds.” Somehow they have gotten the word, a rumor, a letter, and another preacher perhaps . . .someone has told them: The day of the Lord has already come—and you missed it. Paul writes assuring them, no it hasn’t.

What follows in 2 Thessalonians 2 is notoriously impenetrable apocalyptic imagery. Understanding exactly what everything means is beyond me, I confess and quite possibly beyond you. But we’re in good company. St. Augustine wrote about this, “I frankly confess the meaning of this completely escapes me.” And William Neal wrote, “This is probably the most obscure and difficult passage in the whole of Pauline correspondence.” Our only quibble with this verdict is he uses the word *probably*, understating his claim.

Whatever we don’t understand 2000 years later, most likely the Thessalonian people did understand. Whatever has been lost in translation we can accept, as the main point of the letter comes through clearly to them and to us. It may sound foreboding to us, but to them it was a word of encouragement and comfort. Remember, Christians do not live in fear. They live in hope.

All through the Bible this message is repeated. From prophets and heavenly messengers to patriarchs and kings, to disciples huddled on Easter morning. We’ll hear it again by candlelight on Christmas Eve, “Do not be afraid.” Whatever comes, whatever happens, whatever you understand or do not understand, even when it comes to life and death, Christians do not live in fear.

Brothers and sisters, the Thessalonians are told in a piece of sage wisdom, stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught. When your mind is shaken, when your heart trembles, when you are immobilized by anxiety; when your head is swirling . . .find the handholds. Find the things that you can trust and hold onto them. Your Baptism, the Bread and the Cup—hold on to them. The Scripture and how it has spoken to you over the years. What you’ve been taught—the songs that you sung when you were a child—hold on to them. Hold onto the handholds and don’t let go. Find the things you can trust; go back to the simplicity at the heart of your faith; go back to that, find the things you know you can hold on to and hold on to them with all your strength.

Years ago I used to work down in south Florida with a retired couple, John and Christine Smith. Two of the hardest workers, most committed people you’ve ever met. He was a retired contractor, and she was his partner in everything they did. I don’t remember exactly why, but they’d had a particularly frustrating, difficult, discouraging weekend. They came into work that morning and were down and frustrated and anxious about all kinds of things. They told their story, and then they asked me how my weekend had been.

I said, “it was good. I went to see a movie.”

“What is it called?” they asked.

It’s called Twister. You should see it. It’s great. It will make you forget all your troubles for a few hours. They never listened to any ideas I had. Little did I know this time they would actually take this advice.

Do you know this movie? It’s literally about tornados ripping through small towns, the lives of the people who live there, and competing teams of tornado chasers. It’s not at all a movie to calm you and make you forget your troubles. Those poor people needed something soothing. I sent them to the midwestern apocalypse.

The next morning, John and Christine came in the office. Eyes bulging out of their heads. I don’t think either one of them slept at all that night, lying awake heart pumping, adrenaline soaked. John pointed at me and said, “I will never listen to your movie advice again.” I don’t blame him. Life is too much like a tornado to go see a movie about tornados.

But there is one scene from this movie worth remembering in the middle of the storm. At the end the two main characters are caught in a tornado in the yard of a rural farmhouse. Winds are whipping; farm equipment is flying around; the world might as well be ending. Theirs certainly was. Out of options, they flee into a doomed pump house shed; in the moment before it too is shredded by the tornado, with a leather belt, they strap themselves to an exposed pipe and hold on. As the wood splinters and the shed is obliterated around them, they are lifted up, their feet in the air above their heads, but they are held tight. The anchor holds.

Nowhere around them is safe whatsoever. But they are anchored to something that will not move. And they are saved, no matter the storm raging around them. The scene is called “Hang On”. Hang on. That could be the subtitle of both Thessalonian letters. Just hang on. God is good. The storms will come. The storms will pass. Stand firm; hold on to what you’ve been taught. And God will comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word for all the days that come.

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