

The First Baptist Church, Midland
April 18, 2010
II Thessalonians 2:13-17

On Standing Firm

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Eschatology In the Light of Easter

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub's watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake
I pray my Volvo they won't take.

Steve Farrar, *Family Survival in the American Jungle* (Multnomah Press, 1991),
pg. 63.

It's such a heartfelt prayer, don't you think, reflecting the wonderful world in which we live. Of course, for some it's a sad depiction of the life in which they are trapped... a life focusing solely upon luxury and acquisition. No question about it... this prayer truly represents a "this worldly" view.

On the other hand, there are those who embrace an "other worldly" view. They suggest that life isn't all that good. In fact, they go on to say things are so bad it's not going to be long until Jesus returns to claim the faithful and condemn the rest to the fires of eternity.

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their *Left Behind* series captured the imagination of a lot of folks with this kind of thinking and it made them very wealthy. Their incredibly popular book series captured a world caught between the forces of good and evil fighting for the very souls of men and women everywhere. It was good, action packed fiction for most of us but there were others who saw it as an extension of the gospel for they believe like many others over the past 2000 years that Jesus is returning one day very soon. Yes, there are people in every generation who believe the end is at hand.

And there you have the two extremes. On the one hand there are those who live in the moment seeking all the creaturely comforts they can find without concern for the deep spiritual issues of life, while on the other you have people who are (in the extreme) naming the day of our Lord's return. So where does the truth lie? Or as Yogi Berra once said to his roommate, Dr. Bobby Brown, who was studying the ponderous medical tome, Gray's Anatomy, *Let me know how it ends!*

Well I would not pretend to stand before you this morning to suggest I've got the clear and definitive answer on the issue of eschatology. But I would say there is word from the Lord which sheds a little light upon this foggy issue. And it's found in Paul's correspondence with the Thessalonians.

It feels to me like this might be a good time to address an issue like this because we are just two weeks removed from the Easter miracle. And let's face it... ours is a story which creates some confusion to the uninitiated. 2,000 years ago, Jesus was here for awhile – about 33 years the historians tell us – then death took him and he was gone. Three days later he was back and visiting with many friends and followers until he left again several weeks later to be with God. And this time we're given to understand it's a permanent departure. At least to this point in time, Jesus hasn't been back. So what are these expectations of a return all about?

As we come to these 2 letters to the church in Thessalonica, I should say first of all that it's necessary to consider them in tandem because in order to clearly understand what Paul is saying in this second letter it is imperative to know a bit about his first communication with these people. And it is just as necessary to know the conditions under which they were living.

To say life was easy for a Christian would be to negate the pain with which they found themselves surrounded. For the followers of Christ, persecution was a way of life. And it was in light of that suffering that the first letter was written for it had a simple yet clear theme: *the return of Jesus was imminent*. It is interesting to note, I think, that this is the oldest book in the New Testament so it gives us some insight into the earliest pressing issues for this young faith community. In short, Paul was writing to relieve some of the stress of suffering. And as his word was spreading it quickly became the hope upon which the believers were grounding themselves.

Yes, they were suffering but it didn't matter because Jesus was very quickly going to return to relieve them of their struggle. Put another way, the coming of Jesus was immediate and Paul had set out to prepare the church with words like these: **“The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Let us not fall asleep as others do.”** (I Thessalonians 5:2) This was a message to be taken literally. Before the day was over, Jesus might return. Then beyond that he gave other descriptive accounts of what the return would be like and people were stoked. This first epistle set up the expectation of excitement and joy. Jesus was on the way and his arrival would mark the day of glory! Forget all the rituals and traditions that had begun to take root. None of it mattered now. The end was at hand and that was good!

However, now we need to fast forward. We're not sure when the second epistle was written, but things are grave. The immediacy of the expectations of the Thessalonians was dashed and doubts were beginning to creep into their thinking. So along comes this second letter in an attempt to relieve the tension and disappointment. This time the apostle attempts to reassure his friends in Thessalonica that the **"day of the Lord"** will come in God's good time and as earlier promised, they will be released from their suffering. More than that, Paul was writing to assure them they had not missed the event.

Do you see what was happening? This concept of *parousia* which means "presence" or "arrival" was taking on more and more significance in the minds of those early believers. And as the period of time between the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' life and work and its awaited consummation with his triumphant return lengthened, people grew more and more frightened and concerned. What was to become of the culmination of God's purpose for history?

It is fascinating to follow the sequence of events regarding this very important dimension of our faith, wouldn't you agree? And it helps us see why there is such diversity of opinion around these issues of eschatology to the present day. So what is a person to do? Where do you come out in the debate?

Personally, I find my peace around this issue through Paul's wisdom in this second letter when he says, **"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."** In other words, remember what it means to be the church and to live faithfully and obediently in the traditions of our belief. Be in prayer... worship... gather in community... share meals together... tell your story... build your relationships in one another and see that you are always grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then I am also heartened by the words of Jesus himself unfolding in Matthew's gospel. As he moves toward the end of the time of his ministry on earth and his crucifixion is beginning to loom upon the horizon, Jesus gives some clues to those of us who are left behind to follow. **"And this good news (or gospel) of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, (he says) as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come... But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."** (Matthew 24:14, 36)

Well for me, this pretty much settles the issue. I can't begin to know or guess when, where or how Jesus is going to return. But in the meantime, during this interim period when we live between the promise of *parousia* and its fulfillment, we are to do our best to be the obedient children of God. There will always be times of struggle, as illustrated by Paul's correspondence with the Christians in Thessalonica. But we will always have the hope of the Lord Jesus and his return upon which to hold.

As we end, let me frame all of this against the experience and wisdom of an elementary school teacher. She had a very special teaching assignment. It was her call to work with children who were confined in a large city hospital.

One day she received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child who had been admitted and would require a long stay. She took the boy's name and room number and was told by the boy's regular teacher, "We're studying nouns and adverbs now. This boy needs help so he will not fall behind."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher reached the boy's room that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to confront a boy who had been horribly burned over much of his body and who was in great pain. She wanted to turn on her heel and walk out, but she stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your regular teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

Because of his condition, the boy could barely respond. The teacher stumbled through the grammar lesson, but felt guilty for asking him questions or trying to correct him.

The next morning, however, this teacher ran into a nurse on the burn unit who asked her, "What did you do to that boy in 409 yesterday? The teacher started to apologize, but the nurse interrupted: "You don't understand. We've been concerned about him. But ever since you were with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment, like he wants to live."

The boy himself later explained with tears rimming his eyes, "I had given up. At the lowest moment, the teacher came into my room. I suddenly realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they? I decided I wanted to get well if they thought I could. So I prayed, asking God to help me want to live. And here I am."

My friends, the signs all around us may point to death and destruction, and yes we do live in a frightening day. September 11 changed our world forever symbolizing the catastrophic potential of the human condition. But God wants us to keep working on our nouns and adverbs. There's a lot of life yet to live, and work yet to be done. (Story from Wesley Taylor, Tigard, Oregon) And this is especially true for God's Easter people. Our good news affirms that the resurrection spirit is still very much alive and present to us today, and it's our call to understand that Jesus is inviting us, just like the prophet Micah did before him (Micah 6:8), to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Take this seriously, and everything else will fall into place.

"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." Amen and AMEN!