

July 18, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:5](#)

TITLE: First Words, Last Words: Grieving with Hope

Imagine sitting on the stoop in front of where you live and opening your bible to begin reading at 1 Thessalonians 4, vs. 13. As soon as you get a few verses into this passage, you look up and notice there are dozens of people standing around you, trying to get your attention so they can explain what this all means. There's the worship leaders from the mega-church with skinny jeans and tousled-yet-carefully-moussed hair wanting to invite you into their auditorium space to join the hundreds there praising God and lifting their hands to the heavens from whence Christ will soon return. There's the seminary professor with copious lecture notes inviting you to her seminar room with tiered seats and retractable desk tops where she can fill you in on the nature of Jewish apocalyptic texts that shaped Paul's language about archangels, trumpets, and the Day of the Lord. There's the cable TV preacher with his whitened teeth and comfy chairs admonishing you not to cry at funeral services since the only faithful response is to rejoice that our loved ones are now with Christ. There's the nervous neighbor, anxious to show you the latest Facebook and blog posts about how to interpret the signs of the approaching end-times since the Rapture written about in so many books is surely upon us. I can speak from experience because all these people plus others immediately clustered outside my study door when I turned on my computer to write this sermon.

I decided not to engage in conversation with these uninvited guests. I did let my dog into my study, since she likes to sleep near my desk hoping I'll push away from the keyboard soon to take her for a walk. But otherwise I shut my door and pictured a different setting for reading Paul's words—and I invite you to do the same. Imagine sitting in a comfortable living room with a friend. You know each other well enough that you're comfortable with occasional silences as you sip hot tea or coffee, as you glance at the trees and sky outside the window, or at the family pictures on the wall. One of you, maybe both of you have lost someone you loved. The grief you feel isn't a fresh, open wound, but it is an unavoidable presence in the room that day. Rather than avoid the subject altogether, you choose to hear what faith can say on this topic—and the first phrases to break the silence are these quiet words of assurance from Paul: *We do not want you to be uninformed, my friends, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus God will bring with him those who have died.*

In this quiet, caring setting, Paul begins by gently offering to fill a possible gap in knowledge—*We don't want you to be uninformed.* Next, Paul gives you permission to grieve even as something else is mentioned with that grief—hope. This hope is not just a concept, but a person—Jesus, who died and rose again, and who will bring together around him those who have died. Then Paul borrows the language of his own Jewish faith tradition to capture the bold certainty of this promised event. He talks about trumpets, about a coming together of the dead and the living, a convergence around Christ in that space where the seam between heaven and earth is suddenly visible.

Then Paul pulls it together with his main point: *We will all be with the Lord forever. So comfort one another with these words.*

We let those words sink in, taking another sip of our drink, grateful that the noisy intruders on the front porch have left us alone for a while. And in that moment, the same comfort Paul offered the Thessalonians centuries ago is also given to us. Back then, some of their church members had died and yet Christ hadn't returned yet. Had those loved ones done something wrong? Would they miss out on the promises of a new heaven and a new earth? That fear made their grieving process even worse. So Paul began by answering that question right away. They've done nothing wrong. They haven't missed their chance for glory and new life. Death remains a reality present in this world, but it is not the only reality. There is also hope, a heavenly love that is stronger than death. Grief and hope are connected in Paul's conversation and that's okay.

Many of you are familiar with the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who is credited with ending many of the taboos associated with talking about death and dying. When she was teaching at medical school, she was frustrated that student doctors were not given instruction about the nature of human grief. One day in 1962 she was asked to fill in for a popular colleague. But the class was rude to her, talking among themselves and scarcely listening to this small woman with a German accent. The room though grew quiet when she brought in a 16-year old girl who was dying of leukemia and she asked the students to interview her. They nervously asked about her blood counts and how she tolerated the chemotherapy. Eventually the teenager exploded in anger and asked her own questions: What do you think it is like not to be able to dream about prom or going on a date or growing up? Why won't doctors tell us the truth? As the class ended, many students had been moved to tears. In that moment, Kübler-Ross said, "Now you're acting like human beings, instead of just scientists." (NY Times, obituary, 8/25/2004)

The verses about Christ commanding the trumpet to be blown on the last days have always attracted a lot of attention. Books and movies about the end times, about being "Left Behind" while driverless cars crash during some hypothetical rapture, have been quite influential and profitable. But that is all a flawed, modern American creation and not at all what Paul is focusing on in these verses. Even when the Thessalonians tried to push him to be more precise about when Jesus was going to return in power and glory, Paul deflected that impulse as well saying, *Now concerning the times and seasons, you don't need an answer from me. You know it cannot be predicted; it will come unexpectedly.* Paul uses the old phrase "like a thief in the night," which is unfortunate because thieves are not welcome guests. But he is trying to impress on people the importance of this coming day. It is something grounded in God's will and ultimately in God's love. It is not a continuation of the way things are but rather a time of transforming this world into the way it should be, healing and correcting all that is unjust, broken, and unfaithful in our life together.

Yet just as soon as he says that, Paul again takes a breath and offers words of hope: *You, my beloved friends, already walk in the light. You seek what is good, true, just, and loving. So that day won't surprise you like a thief. When it comes, it is simply the dawn*

after a time of darkness. Encourage one another with these words. This is not a superficial faith. This is not something that ignores a 16-year old with leukemia who is angry at cancer's toll on her body. This is not a late night preacher insisting you ignore the person-shaped hole left in our hearts when a loved one—a miscarried child, a deceased spouse or parent—is not with us any more. Paul enfolds the reality of grief within the deeper reality of hope. In the words of Holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom, "the worst can happen but the best remains."

As I mentioned last week, scripture is misused when verses are pulled out of context and then used as the foundation for an entire theology—perhaps a theology of racism or sexism or homophobia; perhaps a theology of nationalism and exceptionalism or the fear of the immigrant. Yet when we take the bible as a whole, a wonderful, complex, honest and hopeful message is given to us. It is a story about God being constantly on the move and persistently working on our behalf. There's the creation of the universe and the unfolding development of human life. There are also extinctions—and Noah and the flood—all serious threats to life and yet life persisted. There is the creation of a people in relationship to God—a group of Jewish tribes that come together as a confederation guided by Torah and the Ten Commandments. They were almost wiped out by enemy empires and years in exile. Yet still they persisted, returning home, rebuilding their temple, and preserving their faith in one God.

God continued to be on the move, coming to us in a child, an incarnation on the margins of life. The child grew to teach and to heal, containing the fullness of God's being yet one with all of us. That story appeared to end tragically with an unjust capital punishment on a cross, and yet it persisted—with an Easter resurrection, with a Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit, with the birthing of small churches in places like Thessalonica that have literally led to us being together here today, celebrating baptisms, celebrating God, celebrating life. The worst can happen but the best remains.

We are a people of grief, yes, but we do not grieve without hope. We are a people who've seen darkness and loss, yes, but by Christ's grace, we persist as children of the light. We await the movement from this broken and hurting world to Christ's realm of peace, justice and love, worrying not about the times and seasons and logistics of all this—but rather walking by faith today no matter what tomorrow may bring.

In closing: The poet Mary Oliver wrote this: *I want to see Jesus, maybe in the clouds or on the shore, just walking, beautiful man and clearly someone else besides. On the hard days I ask myself if I ever will. [But] also there are times my body whispers to me that I have.*

And the poet and apostle Paul wrote this: We do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died or what is to come, so that you may not grieve as one without hope. We will be with the Lord forever. You are all children of light and of the day. Encourage one another with these words.

AMEN