

December 12, 2021 | Journey worship

TEXT: [1 Thessalonians 1:1–10](#)

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today I want to do a close reading of our scripture passage for this morning: I Thessalonians 1:1–10. We'll first go through it verse by verse and then I'll close with a short reflection.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is one of the first letters of his that we have. In fact, it is one of the first written records of the entire Christian church. Jesus' death and resurrection occurred sometime between 30 and 33 AD. Paul wrote this letter around 50 AD—between 17-20 years after Christ. We can assume that lots of people who had seen Jesus or heard him preach were still alive. We know that the first disciples of Jesus spread the gospel in Jewish Palestine, followed by later apostles like Paul who carried the gospel into the neighboring Gentile lands of what is now Turkey and Greece. With this letter, though, we can actually see how the seeds of faith took root.

The story of Paul's missionary journey to Thessalonica is briefly told in Acts 17. The opening verse of this passage verifies that Paul wasn't traveling alone. He had at least two traveling companions and fellow missionaries: Silvanus (also known as Silas) and Timothy. And that is how the first chapter opens – from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. They are most likely writing from Corinth, checking on how this young congregation is doing. Notice the titles that appear in vs. 1—esp. Lord Jesus Christ. In a place known for emperor worship and idol worship, Paul is emphasizing this faith in the true king, the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

(vs. 2,3) Greek correspondence back then opened with a salutation and then moved to a time of giving thanks. So Paul is giving thanks for this congregation and for three Christian virtues: their faith, love, and hope. Paul will list off these three virtues again in I Corinthians 13, the famous passage read at weddings that says "*Faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.*" But notice in the Thessalonian passage, these are not abstract ideas. They have real content—real expression in daily life; which is why Paul commends the church for their "works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope in Christ." Faith and works together.

(vs. 4,5) To say that God has chosen you was a way of acknowledging that God's Spirit was active among the Thessalonians. They had turned away from worshiping false gods and accepted a new gospel shared by words, power and the Holy Spirit. This Christian story wasn't one story among other equally valid stories. It was something different, life-changing and life-giving. And it affected Paul as well as the Thessalonians. Notice how he says "you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake." Paul too was affected and changed by the sharing of the gospel. 1 + 1 added up to something more than 2; something greater than the sum of the parts come to exist by God's Holy Spirit.

(vs. 6,7,8) Remember this letter is giving us a snapshot into the life and ministry activity of the earliest churches. Paul's work was not like a street corner preacher shouting at passerbys. Hearing this gospel wasn't simply a "head thing"—taking in some information and nodding in agreement. Those who heard Paul, Silas and Timothy became imitators of them, following their example even if it led to rejection and afflictions. This imitation wasn't just about preaching the gospel. It involved how they lived their lives—how they rejected idols, rejected the distractions of life that numb our spirits or the injustices and grudges in life that deaden our souls. They became an example to others who lived in the northern part of Greece known as Macedonia, and down to the southern areas as well, known as Achaia.

In vs. 8 Paul says that the word of God "sounded forth" from them so that many heard, saw and believed. This is the only time in the New Testament that this word is used. To sound forth was to be like peals of thunder echoing off the mountains, rolling over the hills and valleys for miles and miles. In the same way, this gospel of Christ was rolling like thunder over the land, reverberating off people everywhere and changing lives for the good. It is like the confidence of the old hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God"—or the exuberant good news of the Christmas carol, "Go, Tell it on the Mountain." That was the experience of the early church and our guide for faithful witness today.

(vs. 9,10) Paul has been away from the Thessalonians for a while, so this chapter ends with him sharing what he has heard about them in his absence—that they've been turning away from idols, that they serve a living and true God (as opposed to living in fear of Roman Emperor or placing their hope in carved pieces of wood and stone. And in keeping with the Advent theme of joyful expectancy, Paul knows they too are waiting—waiting for Christ's return, the risen Savior; waiting for the One who is both judge and redeemer.

The idea that the church was living through the final days was very prevalent in the early years of Paul's ministry. However, soon thereafter Paul would have to remind them to be patient—to not be led astray by false prophets who claimed to know the secrets of heaven and the timing of Christ's return. Paul will say more about this topic in his second letter to the Thessalonians, even as he would encourage them to live now as redeemed children of God. Just as he offered them "grace and peace" to start this letter, in 2 Thessalonians he'll pray that Christ will "comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." (2 Thess 2:17)

Now a few more words on this passage that I hope will help you find the advantageous nature of God's promises in this season of Advent.

REFLECTION:

During the first century AD, the young churches founded by Paul and other missionaries had lots of questions—mostly about how they should live as followers of Christ. What should they do in their daily lives? How should they work at their jobs or teach their children now that they believe in the risen Savior Christ Jesus? In many ways, those same questions still shape our lives today. Amid a pandemic, in times of war and

rumors of wars, of racial and economic inequities, we too wonder how we should live so that the gospel of Christ brings hope to this world.

Advice on how to live is readily available. Mark Twain used to say: *Just do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.* My parents' old pastor used to say, "*Live so people will be happy where you go, not when you go.*"

As I mentioned earlier, Paul was pleased by how well the Thessalonians had taken to heart the gospel of Christ. He complimented them on becoming "imitators of us and of the Lord." So, this begs the question: Whom do you imitate in your life? Whom have you modeled yourself after? You may insist that you are your own person, but those who truly know us see glimpses of others in each of our behaviors. My parents have been role models for me. My father was a hard worker, dedicated to providing for the family but also committed to helping others and treating all people fairly. My mother was a survivor and a thriver. She loved challenges—whether fixing up an old barn or running for the local school board. Neither parent graduated from college, but both ran their own businesses, were officers in the church, and active in the community. My brother has never met a stranger—my sister is a talented musician whose career has been spent helping choirs of all ages make beautiful music. And Beth, my wife, is incredibly loyal – anxious to help others—quick with a laugh or a musical quote from some Broadway show and a loving soulmate. (And her birthday's tomorrow in case you see her today.)

So I've been fortunate to have role models from my immediate family whom I can imitate. Likely all of them might not think they're worthy of imitation—they haven't done great, Nobel-prize type achievements. But they have done a lot—much that I've noticed and much that I care to emulate. Maybe this same thing is true for you—perhaps there are family members you can imitate, or maybe there are other role models you've known in your life, like teachers or friends, people you've read about in history books or biographies.

Having said all this, I know that it is one thing to name off whom we each should imitate—but it is another thing to tell someone else: *You should imitate me.* But that's basically what Paul told the Thessalonians. He congratulated them for being imitators of him and of Christ. Now we may demonstrate for a child how to tie their shoe and say "Do what I do." Or we may teach a youth how to cook by saying "Watch what I do." Great artists learn by copying masterpieces in the museum; musicians learn by hearing how other artists perform the same pieces. In truth, we imitate one another all the time. So why are we hesitant to say, "You should imitate me in your own life and faith?"

The reason is simple. We regularly separate who we are from what we do. Do as I say, not as I do. Or we say things like this: I'm not my day job—I'm much more than that. I'm not my report card or test score—I'm much better than that. I'm not my past record—I've changed and am different from that. In this world, we are too often judged by superficialities and external traits—judged by our age, our gender, our ethnicity, our income, command of the English language, or zip code. The apostle Paul doesn't have time for any of those things, any of that nonsense. He treats all such things as rubbish,

choosing instead the surpassing goodness of being found in Christ—knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

It is that conviction that leads Paul to tell the Thessalonians to become imitators of him. Faith and integrity are not one portion of who you are; they are entirely who you are. The message and the messenger are always one and the same. Others are already being guided by our actions—either imitating us in our good ways or avoiding imitating us in our bad ways. The process of imitation is already happening. That’s why we need to lead exemplary lives, to be models of faith and integrity, for such is the calling of the church from its earliest days until now.

Now, the good news is that when we imitate Christ, Christ provides the grace we need to do a good job of it. We are thankfully not left to our own devices. The Holy Spirit is the ongoing, daily presence and supporting activity of God in our midst. The Spirit is why our God is the living and true God—not static, like a wooden idol; not impersonal and abstract, like a philosophy textbook; not restricted to one race, gender, orientation, or nation, like state-sponsored religions—but living and true by the power and grace of God’s Holy Spirit.

Imitating Christ still requires a conscious daily commitment on our part—opening our eyes each morning and choosing God—but this commitment is never one-sided. Christ seeks us out. Remember the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son parables? Remember the hand that reached out to Peter when he was sinking beneath the waves or the voice that turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle? Imitating Christ is taking that step forward by faith so that others see the Christ that is already in you and the Christ that is proclaimed through you. That’s what Paul was talking about long ago—and he’s still telling us today. And that’s a word from I Thessalonians for the church here and now.

Thanks be to God.