

Written: 1 Thessalonians 5:8-11 “Awake or Asleep at His Return?”

25th Sunday @ Pentecost: Proper 28

Sunday, November 19th, 2023

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:8-11

⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

The text's intent

Having assured the Church that believers who have died will not miss out on Resurrection Day, Paul now speaks to give encouragement and warning to those who are alive now. There is no timeline or foretelling when the Last Day will come. His coming will be like a thief in the night, when least expected. When He does there will be two kinds of people: believers who are awake and active in faith, and unbelievers who are asleep to the call to faith and drunk on the temptations and gods of this world. But God has not chosen us to suffer eternal wrath like the unbelievers. Instead, He has chosen us to receive and hold fast to the promise of salvation that comes through faith in Christ. The gift of faith He gives through the Gospel protects our heart that is so prone to wander as His Spirit works to keep us in repentant faith and reminds us of His promises of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. Through His work we remain awake and active in our repentant faith and use sober judgement regarding how He would have us live. We work together with our brothers and sisters to keep each other in repentant faith and drawing closer in our relationship with Christ through study of His word.

Focus Statement:

Jesus Christ chose you not to suffer the eternal wrath you deserve, but so that you would live with Him now and forever in eternal life. He chose you to receive and hold fast to the salvation He won for you in His life, death, and resurrection. The faith His Spirit creates and sustains protects our hearts and minds from falling asleep and losing faith despite our continued sinning. His Spirit is always at work through Confession and Absolution to keep your faith strong and active so that you are always ready for His return any day.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

There will only be two kinds of people when Christ returns. Those awake or asleep in faith. For those asleep it will come suddenly and unexpectedly, and they will be unable to escape the eternal wrath their sins earned for them. We are warned so that we may not fall asleep and lose our faith.

What the hearer should do as a result:

We work with the Spirit as He works through the means of grace to remain in repentant faith and always be ready for His coming on the Last Day. We are to encourage, admonish, and build up one another through our mutual worship and study of His words and promises.

Subject Sentence: Christ Chose You to be Awake and Ready at His Return

Introduction

Are you a light sleeper or a heavy sleeper? I'm pretty much a heavy sleeper. During the summer months members who live near the parsonage would ask me, "Did you hear that thunderstorm that rolled through in the middle of the night?" My reply would usually be, "A thunderstorm? Really? Nope, not at all."

I had both kinds of sleepers with my children, and some of that was situational. If it was a school morning, you could set off a bomb in the house and they wouldn't wake up. But if it was Christmas Eve, and you're trying to wrap presents, the slightest little sound, cough, bark of the dog or meow of the cat would have them awake and peering around the corner. I'd look up and here would be these little eyes peering around the corner saying, "Whatcha doing Dad?" Each of us are different kinds of sleepers: some heavy and some light. That's just the way God designed us. Our text today talks about those who are awake or asleep at Jesus' return. But thankfully Paul is not talking about the physical sleep our bodies need to do at night.

When I was in elementary school both my parents had to leave for work before the bus picked me up for school. So, they would drop me off at Grandma Pretznov's and I would wait there. Grandma was in her late 70's to early 80's. She was not in the best of shape but could get around. She was mostly with it but had started to lose some of the sharpness of her mind. She had a big photo album that I always loved to look at that had pictures of my dad and uncles when they were young, as well as pictures of me and my brother. They weren't all labeled so I loved sitting down with her on the couch and letting her narrate what each picture was and the story behind it. And she loved doing that too. Looking back, it was a very special time that I had with her.

One morning as we were looking through that photo album, we both became so engrossed that we lost track of time. The bus came, and honked its horn, but neither of us paid attention, we were too deeply engrossed in the photos. So, the bus left without me, and I didn't even realize it. I think it was maybe 30 minutes later that grandma looked up at the clock and said, "Your bus is really late!" We waited maybe another 10 minutes and then she called the neighbor who told her the bus was long gone. Grandma could no longer drive, so she had no choice but to call my Mom, who had to leave work and drive me to school. And as you can imagine Mom was not happy, not at all! She kind of stormed into the room, said hardly anything to Grandma, grabbed me, and left. On the way to school she said hardly anything to me except to ask why I missed the bus. I knew better than to try to start a conversation with her at this point anyway. By the following week she had arranged for me to wait for the bus at someone else's house. This kind of inattentiveness is what Paul is referring to in our Epistle Lesson.

Awake or Asleep at Jesus Return?

As Pastor Hensler mentioned last Sunday, with the Church Year drawing to a close the focus of our Scripture Lessons turn to Christ's return on the Last Day and the Eternal Judgement to come. And it is in this regard that Paul brings up the subject of being awake or asleep. He is using an analogy to talk about how, on the Last Day, there will be two kinds of people: those who are awake with an active saving faith, or those who are asleep in regards to faith as they live in ignorance and unbelief regarding who Jesus is and what He has done for them, as well as what their sin has earned for them.

This matters because no one knows when the day of Jesus return will be. Paul in this Epistle Lesson quotes Jesus words of warning from the Gospels that His Last Day return will be like a thief who comes to break into the home at night when all are asleep and not watching for him. Neither those who are spiritually awake or those asleep will know when that day approaches. It will come suddenly and without warning. Jesus has given us in Gospels and in Revelation many signs of what we should expect to happen in these Last Days, which we are living in now. But He gives them not to be a timeline or a countdown. He tells us so that we do not lose heart, so that as wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, and man's increasing inhumanity to man continue and grow, we will never think that He has lost control or does not care. As we see these things happening around us now, we should understand that just as these things Jesus told us are happening, so too we hold fast that His promise of returning on the Last Day will most certainly be fulfilled as well.

For those who are asleep spiritually His return will catch them by surprise and unaware. While Paul quotes them as saying "There is Peace and Security" that doesn't mean the world will be at peace. What it means is that no matter what is going on, wartime or peace time, these people will be looking to and trusting in anything and everything except the One who rules over all things: The Lord Jesus Christ. They may be worried about the possibility of nuclear holocaust, as many seem to be right now with what is going on in the Middle East and the possibility that we might be dragged deeper into the conflict, with the tensions that exist between the U.S. and Russia, the U.S. and China, the U.S. and North Korea, all who are armed with nuclear weapons. You can tell how much this is on people's minds from this news story I saw quoting The Scientific American Journal with the headline: **"Report: Nuclear war in US would wipe out 90 percent of the population"**. While they may be awake to this, and while they might have knowledge of what Revelation says about Armageddon and the final battle before the end, they will remain asleep because they are not trusting in the One who controls all nations and all events.

And by the way, what's going on in the Middle East is not necessarily the fulfillment of that symbolic war in Revelation called Armageddon. That symbolizes spiritual warfare of the unbelieving world against the believing Church, where those who are asleep are being Satan's tool to attack those spiritually awake in an attempt to put them to sleep. The war in the Middle East has pitted two opponents, Israel against Hamas and the Palestinians, neither of which confess faith in Jesus Christ.

They are also asleep to the understanding that what will happen when Christ returns is far greater and far scarier for them than even a nuclear war. **Zephaniah 1:2-3** ² **"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.** ³ **"I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.** Our Old Testament Lesson speaks of the Last Day destruction involving everything being removed and destroyed on earth. No one and no thing will be left because the very heavens and this earth as we know them will be burned up with fire. The very fabric of reality will become unglued. And when that happens those asleep in faith will have no time to escape it. There will be no time to turn and look and cry out to Jesus to be saved. Instead, they will be destined to the eternal torment their sins earned for them by their refusal to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They lived in the darkness of sin and unbelief in their life on this earth, and they will exist in eternity in the darkness of pain and suffering forever.

Don't Worry: He Has Chosen You to Remain Awake

These are very disturbing and scary words for all mankind. But Jesus has better words for you: great words of comfort and hope.

1 Thessalonians 5:9 ⁹ **For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,**

Eternal destruction is not what Jesus wants for you. And He has done everything necessary so that this will not be your eternal future. He is God the Son who came to earth and took on our humanity as Jesus of Nazareth. He is God who took on human flesh to live the perfect human life, and yet die the horrible death of the worst sinner. In doing so He took the wrath and punishment you deserve for your life of sin to suffer and die in your place so that you will never have to. And the proof that the Heavenly Father accepted His sacrifice in your place can be found in His resurrection.

Christ earned forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life for all people who ever lived or ever will. And He gave that to you in your baptism. You receive it and hold fast to it by the work and faith the Holy Spirit does in your heart and mind. It's His gift of grace that He pours out upon you freely and abundantly each and every day you hear the Gospel Message. He is the reason that you stand awake and alert in the faith, which means you are living out your life in repentant faith.

Living in repentant faith doesn't mean that you confess and repent of every individual sin. As Scripture says we sin in ways and means that we do not even realize. But the Holy Spirit keeps us repentant in His work in Scripture to convince and remind us that we are indeed poor sinful human beings who cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition. It's by His work that we constantly look to Christ as our Savior whose grace, forgiveness, and salvation we need every day. And it's by the faith He keeps alive in you and me that we live out our lives trusting in His grace and mercy. That's what it means to live awake and sober, trusting with repentant faith in Jesus every day of our life.

1 Thessalonians 5:10 (Jesus Christ) who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him.

We don't know when that Last Day will be. We don't know if it will come when we are awake and living out our day, or if it will be when we are asleep at night on our bed. Either way, when He returns you will be ready, not because of what you have done, but because of all that Jesus has done and continues to do in your heart and life. He wants a relationship with you right now, living in faith toward Him, trusting in Him, confessing and confiding in Him. His Spirit is at work to create, sustain, and grow that relationship. And the best part is that it never ends. It continues on. When you die in this faith, your soul goes to be with Jesus. And as Pastor Hensler assured us last Sunday, when Jesus returns, He will bring all those souls with Him. And on that Last Day, all of us will receive new and glorified bodies, and in those we will live with Him forever. No one will miss out. Whether you are awake, or asleep, or you have died, on the Last Day your future is with Christ and His Church and all your loved ones who died in faith. And that is forever.

Therefore Encourage, Admonish, Build One Another Up

How should you and I respond to such a great promise? By what you are doing right now. **1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.** At the end of this Epistle Lesson Paul repeats how ended the last one: encourage one another. Encourage one another by reminding yourself and each other that it doesn't matter if you are alive or you have died when Christ returns, all those who have saving faith will be raised and welcomed into eternal life. No one will be left behind.

But Paul adds this at the end of our lesson: “build one another up.” How do we do that? Once again, just as you are doing here today. Keep coming to Divine Worship. Listen to the Scripture Readings. Listen and take note of the sermons. Partake of the Sacrament. Confess from the heart as Scripture reveals how you are a poor miserable sinner who is redeemed, forgiven, cleansed, and saved just as Christ promises in the Absolution. Avail yourself to the work the Spirit wants to do in you as you study His word in groups and on your own. Read through the Bible. Start your morning with a Devotion from Portals of Prayer, and in this way begin your day renewing that faith relationship the Spirit creates and sustains with you and your Savior Jesus Christ. Do these things, and by your participation, loving admonishment, and encouraging words, help the Spirit move your brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same.

Conclusion

When I missed the bus at Grandma’s I learned I should be concerned about not missing it and work to make sure it never happened again. And I did. Are you concerned about falling asleep in faith and so missing out on the Last Day? It’s okay to be concerned. Those who have repentant faith should be concerned; concerned yet not fearful or worried. There is no need to be fearful or worried because we have Jesus’ sure and certain promise that He has not destined us for wrath, but eternal life with Him. Therefore, He has done all that is necessary for us to live awake in repentant faith, die in repentant faith, and by that faith be raised from death to life everlasting. In baptism He has sealed us in that faith. Those who live awake in that faith have concern for those around us who are asleep spiritually, those who are not believing and trusting in Christ alone, those who will have that Last Day come unexpectedly upon them and will find no means to escape. That day could come anytime, as well as the day of their death in this world when their fate is sealed. Jesus wants us to be concerned about them so that as we have opportunity, we share the Gospel with them. He wants them to know, just as He wants you to know, that He desires them to be saved from eternal suffering and spend eternity with Him. And He has done all that is necessary for them and for us to make that happen. Amen.