

Living Like It Is Not the End of the World

*A sermon preached by Rev. James Calvin Davis at Hebron United Presbyterian Church (NY)
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[Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11](#)

If you heed the dire warnings of social media—and some conventional media outlets—you will know that we are living in the end times, for the end of the world as we know it began on November 3rd. If not the end of the world, then we are living the end of democracy. Depending on what political perspective you're reading at the time, the end of our country (or the world) is coming as a result of encroaching socialism or persistent fascism. Be vigilant, for you know not what day the end will come, but it is coming!

This kind of dire prediction of the cataclysmic end of human history is called apocalypticism, and though the Bible didn't invent apocalypticism, it contains a bunch of it. Some of the Old Testament prophets engaged in that end-times talk, and of course the Book of Revelation is all about the end of human history, the final battles between God and Satan, and the ultimate triumph of God's Kingdom. The earliest generation of Christians thought this end of the world was coming very soon. Jesus, the Messiah of God, had come to proclaim the nearness of God's Kingdom. Jesus was crucified, but he rose from the grave as a testament to God's power to save. And then he ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father, promising to come again to usher in God's final Kingdom on earth.

The earliest generation of Christians—those communities described in the Book of Acts and all of Paul's letters in the New Testament—those earliest Christians believed that Jesus was coming again *soon* to bring about the apocalypse, the end of the world as we know it. There would be judgment of those who failed God's intentions, salvation for those who embraced Christ as Savior, and a melding of heaven and earth. Those early Christians believed the apocalypse was right around the corner.

But, of course, they didn't know *exactly* when it would happen, and that created more than a bit of anxiety among those believers. If they did not know when the world would end, how could they be ready? Some of them tried to predict the exact instance of the apocalypse, looking for signs in the stars that Jesus was revving his engines to return. Still today, many Christians mine the Scriptures for clues to help them predict the end of the world, and there is a cottage industry among televangelists who claim to be able to match events of the day to biblical predictions to produce a fail-proof forecast of Christ's return.

In today's reading, the Apostle Paul is responding to just those kinds of questions, but what is interesting about his response is that he gives them no clues to look for to predict the end of the world. Paul knew that he didn't know the precise time either, and so he recognized that the effort to guess God's intentions was futile. But he also does not recommend that they mail it in as a result, hunkering down and doing nothing until that mysterious end of the world overtakes them. This has been a temptation for Christians since Paul's time too, to turn their hope in God's deliverance into a kind of escapism where they do nothing more than sit with their heads between their knees and wait for Jesus to come and get them.

Paul knew that he and they and we do not know when the end of the world will come, but **his suggestion was that we keep on living as if it is *not* the end of the world.** That's right, Paul's suggestion was not to live as if it is the end of the world or could be the end of the world, but to live as if it is *not* the end of the world. He uses the metaphor of light and darkness to make his point. People who live in darkness, who live in the wrong, will be surprised when the light is suddenly turned on and they are out of time. We all know that experience when we are in the dark and suddenly someone turns on the light. Many of us who have had small children certainly have had this experience in the middle of the night. The light suddenly comes on and you can't see a thing. You can't even remember who you are or where you are. You are disoriented, unprepared for the sudden change of circumstance.

But when we are in the light already, more light doesn't disorient us. Those who live in the light every day will not be startled, says Paul. Those who live in the light will not be jolted or thrown off their game. They will be ready, precisely because every day they are already living the life God intends them to live. Live as Jesus asked you to live the time between his resurrection and the final coming of God's Kingdom, and you will be ready for when that Kingdom comes. No special preparation or prediction necessary. Live as if it is not the end of the world, and you will be fine when it suddenly is.

And what does it mean to live as if it is not the end of the world? Lucky for us, Paul defines that pretty carefully. He first encourages a certain righteousness of character. Your attitude matters, he says. Be sober, by which I think he means be serious about your intention to live for God. He says put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope. Make these virtues of Christian living part of who you are, your protection against the despair, cynicism, and selfishness the world may tempt you to participate in. For your compass is the saving grace of God.

Committed to this character, he says, then live that character with and for one another. Encourage one another, Paul instructs, build up one another. Be Christian community with and for each other. Encourage faith, hope, and love in one another. You cannot be a Christian in isolation, and you cannot be a Christian if you are not relating to other members of the community with the faith, hope, and love that you claim to be your character. So live that faith, hope, and love out in building up, encouraging, and bearing with one another.

And what does that look like? To answer that question—which Paul helpfully does—is why we need to read farther than the lectionary would have us cut off today. In verses 12–23, Paul describes for us what a Christian community building up and encouraging one another in faith, hope, and love looks like. It is a community in which Christians respect one another, including their leaders, who regularly sacrifice their own good on behalf of the needs of the community. It means being at peace with one another, exercising patience with one another through disagreements and disappointments—challenging one another when that seems necessary to live the Gospel together, but doing so with love, never with the intent to wound one another. Christians building up one another in faith, hope, and love always seek one another’s good. They are not vindictive. They do not hold grudges. They do not whine and complain but rejoice with one another and in one another’s blessings. They do not allow the winds of suspicion to sow enmity between them and other Christians. They discriminate wisely between choices clearly rooted in the character of Christian faith and the temptations of the Enemy, who prefers not faith, hope, and love but cynicism, despair, mutual suspicion, demonization of others, anger, and self-service. These are not Christian values; they are anti-Christian values, and Christians must always be on guard against them. A faithful community encourages one another in faith, hope, and love. A faithful community prays for one another and gives thanks to God for one another.

Here in this First Letter to the Thessalonians, then, Paul gives us a short but powerful lesson on Christian character. This is what it means to faithfully live with others as Christ commanded us. This is what it means to be Christian community, in good times and in bad, in uncertainty and disagreement, through trials and tribulations. And Paul assures us that if we are living as Christians with this kind of character when it is not the end of the world, we will be well equipped when it seems like it might be.

We Americans have just been through a harrowing election cycle, one that will leave scars on us as a nation, one that has not encouraged optimism about the near future of our country. We are deeply divided. Some 73 million citizens are preparing for the beginning of a presidency they did not want to happen, while another 78 million can’t wait for it to get here. Some of our leaders are suggesting that there was something unfair and undemocratic about this election process, while others openly wonder what long-lasting damage the current administration will do on their way out the door.

A quote from Reinhold Niebuhr has become incredibly meaningful to me in these last couple of years:

*Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation’s future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony endangers the nation’s health more than any specific policies.***[1]**

We are deeply, dangerously divided politically as a nation. This we know for certain. But here is something else I know. Some 200 million Americans profess the name of the Lord Jesus and identify as Christians, and they show up on both sides of that political divide. Many, many of those 73 million Americans who voted for President Trump are Christians, and many, many of those 78 million Americans who voted for President-elect Biden are also faithful Christians. What effect could it have on the health of our nation if those 200 million Christians recommitted to the character of Christian community, and pledged to practice Thessalonian character even in the midst of the political circumstances we find ourselves in?

What effect could it have if American Christians together professed that there are ways to navigate disagreement that are faithful to Jesus Christ and there are ways that are not, and peddling in name calling, mutual suspicion, and vitriol are not reflections of the character of Christ? What effect could it have on our political predicament if those 200 million Christians—on the national stage and in their own communities and families—committed to navigating differences with faith, hope, and love? What effect could it have if we Christians encouraged and built up one another, insisted on peace and patience with one another, even as we wrestled with important priorities on which we disagree? What impact could it have if those 200 million American Christians modeled for the country and its leaders what good Christian and democratic community looks like?

I suspect such an effort could pull our democracy back from the ledge of its own demise, if we American Christians would just recall for ourselves, and then witness to the rest of the country, what it means to live with one another faithfully—to live as if it is *not* the end of the world. Amen.

[1] “Democracy and the Public Spirit” in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1957), 66.