

December 3, 2006  
Psalm 42:1-5, I Thessalonians 4:13-5:11  
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**“Hope for the Future”**

How good are you at reading between the lines? When we read Paul's letters, we are only seeing one side of the correspondence. If Paul kept the letters he received from the churches he founded, we do not know what happened to them. Perhaps they are crumbling away in a clay jar in some ancient ruin and we have yet to find them. Who knows? Anything is possible. When we find them, we will know exactly what situations and problems they presented him for his advice. Until then, we have to read between the lines of Paul's letters to know what debates and troubles these early these early Christians faced.

Is it so difficult to read between the lines? In these words we read from his letter to the church in Thessalonica, there is a growing concern about what will happen to the believers who have died before the return of Jesus in glory. In the first years after the resurrection of Jesus, many people thought that Jesus would return quickly to gather the saints for the final day of judgment and salvation. They believed that the kingdom of God, which was present in ordinary moments like a flash of lightening or a planted seed about to burst with life, was coming in power for all to see. What would happen to those who died in faith without receiving the promised Kingdom?

It is not so difficult for us to read between the lines to know the terrible fear in their hearts, because we also feel it. We have kicked the dirt at the graves of our loved ones and wondered, "What next?" or, "Is this the way everything ends?" We return to an empty house full of memories and wonder, "Can the promises of Jesus really be true?" We can read between the lines of Paul's letter and feel the anxious flutter in their hearts and the knot in the pit of their stomachs because it is our fear and our knot too.

Paul says a strange thing. He says, "I do not want you to be uninformed about those who have fallen asleep." Why didn't he just come out and say "die," as the modern translations do? Translators think we will miss the point of Paul's gentle image of death. Is Paul afraid that these Christians can't take plain talk? Is that why he resorts to the kind of metaphors we use when we talk about death, expressions such as "he has passed away" or, "she is no longer with us"?

I remember a 98-year-old matriarch in our former church whose body was slowing down but her mind stayed as keen as it ever was. To stay sharp, this faithful lady played in her mind the piano pieces that her arthritic fingers could no longer play and she memorized the names and dates of all the U.S. presidents. One day, a great-grandson came to visit. At the end of his visit he offered a prayer and recited the words of the 23rd Psalm. The next time I saw her she told me how much his visit and prayer meant to her. She also said that he left out the line in the 23rd Psalm that goes, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Her wry comment was, "I guess he felt I couldn't

take it." Few of us have her faith and courage. We do have a hard time staring death in the face.

Maybe Paul knows something about death that we have a hard time seeing. Paul knows that the enemy death, for all its inevitability and its sad reality, is from God's point of view a "falling asleep." Of course we grieve. God made us to live together in love. When death comes to those we love, we grieve. As one rabbi said, "God gave us tear ducts for just such times as these." The more we love, the more we grieve. Paul does not say that we should not grieve. Paul says that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our grief is tempered by our hope in Christ.

It is this hope for the future that sustains us. Paul paints a vivid picture of Christ's return. He draws a sky ablaze with the colors of dawn; he imagines the heavenly sound of the Lord's own voice filling the universe; he hears the archangel's cry that commands the mighty armies of God. As far out on the horizon as you can see, he pictures the space between heaven and earth filled with angel wings lifting up all those who have fallen asleep and welcoming them into the Kingdom. As the heavenly band breaks out the sweet sound of a new song, we who are left behind join them in a moment of joyful celebration.

My father died suddenly and tragically only a few weeks after Bunny and I moved from seminary to a small town in Eastern North Carolina to take up our first call to serve two churches. We heard the news just days before our ordination service was to be held. There was nothing to do but drop everything and drive to my hometown to be with the family for the funeral. My heart was like a roller coaster, careening between hope in our new calling and grief over my father's death. When we arrived at the service, two of our friends, who had finished seminary with us and had taken churches not far from my hometown, suddenly appeared. I do remember what they said; but their voices sounded like the archangel's cry of command dispelling grief, bringing hope and awakening me to the heavenly celebration in the ashes of the moment.

There is another worry that presses in upon the faithful in Thessalonica. If we read between the lines, we see that they are also wondering when that final day will come. We have a sense that some of them are holding on by their fingernails to the edge of the world. They have grown weary with waiting. Their hope for the future has dimmed. They see the struggle, but not the victory. They know the pain, but not the release. When the promised future seems so far off, the temptation is to let go and drift in the world without purpose or plan. Or, as Paul describes it, there is a very real danger of falling into a different kind of sleep. Here he is not talking about physical death, but spiritual death.

We can read between the lines because we, too, know how hard it is to keep the faith, to do the right thing and to love one another. Sometimes, we, too, are hanging on by our fingernails. It would be easier, we think, to give in to our anger, to let our doubts overwhelm us and not to bother with caring for others in need. Some days, it may be all we can do to get out of bed in the mornings, put both feet on the floor, shake off our discouragement and make it to the office to do a job we can't stand. Other times, we wonder if we can get through another day because we miss the unmistakable and now absent sound of a door opening and a husband or a wife's voice calling our name. Each

one of us here has known what it feels like to want to give up and to sleep the sleep of the spiritually and emotionally dead.

We would give up, but for one thing. We have one another to encourage us. Twice in these verses, Paul says that we are to encourage one another with these words. The older versions translate this command as "comfort one another." The word comes from the same root as the word for the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John - the Divine Comforter, the Paraclete, who comes up alongside us and whispers the truth of these promises in our ears. We have one another to remind each other that we belong to the day and not to the night. The Spirit speaks through you as you come alongside of those who are discouraged, troubled and grieving and you wrap them in the breastplate of faith and love and put on them the helmet of the hope of salvation. Then, together, you eat the bread and wine of hope and know that you will feast with Him in glory.

There is a prayer from Ghana that will be my prayer this Advent season. It is called "Cover Me with the Night." (p. 122, "*An African Prayer Book*," by Desmond Tutu)

"Come, Lord, and cover me with the night.  
Spread your grace over us  
as you assured us you would do.  
Your promises are more than  
all the stars in the sky;  
your mercy is deeper than the night.  
Lord, it will be cold.  
The night comes with its breath of death.  
Night comes; the end comes, you come.  
Lord, we wait for you day and night."

The Advent Season is the season of hope. We wait for the Lord. Advent proclaims the hope for the future of your life, for my life, for the lives of all those who have ever been and have fallen asleep, and for all those who are yet to be.