

Pentecost 24, Proper 26, Year C, 2013  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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For the last few weeks, our New Testament readings have come from  
the first and second letters to Timothy,  
likely the last letters  
written  
by the apostle Paul.  
Now we jump back a decade  
to one of the first letters.

It's only about twenty years  
since Jesus has died,  
twenty years  
since the Holy Spirit  
came down on the apostles  
that first Pentecost morning,  
twenty years  
since what we call the church  
was born.

And it's probably only a couple of years  
since Paul himself  
visited the city of Thessalonica,  
It was then, as now, one of the major cities in Greece,  
and for much of its history  
was the capital of the province of Macedonia.  
As well as being a port city on the Mediterranean,  
it was situated at the junction of the main east west trade route , the via Egnatia,  
which allowed trade with Rome and Byzantium,  
and on the road that came south from the Balkans, connecting them with the rest of Greece.  
Paul had been traveling around the north-eastern end of the Mediterranean,  
preaching the gospel to anyone who would listen to him.  
Silas was with him,  
and probably Timothy  
as well.  
And when he arrived in Thessalonica,  
he did what he always did -  
went to the synagogue on the Sabbath,  
and for three weeks  
spent time with the people there discussing scripture,

arguing and explaining  
that Jesus was the Messiah  
that they were waiting for.  
Some people were convinced - a few members of the synagogue, plus some Greeks and a  
number of the leading women in the town.  
But Paul and his words  
were not universally  
popular.  
Next thing they knew  
some of the Jewish leaders  
had gotten together  
with some hired trouble makers who hung round the market place,  
and formed a mob,  
surging through the city  
and hunting  
for Paul and Silas.  
They made it as far  
as Jason's house where Paul had been staying,  
and had Jason arrested on trumped up charges,  
but Paul and Silas  
sneaked out of the city  
and down the road to Berea,  
where they were made  
much more welcome.

Though it didn't last long -  
the mob from Thessalonica  
came after them,  
and once again,  
Paul had to escape to safety.

It was with those unpromising events  
that the church in Thessalonica  
began,  
and against all odds, grew.  
It wasn't easy;  
the people who hounded Paul out of the city  
also persecuted them,  
so that their decision to follow Jesus  
was a struggle.  
But they persevered,  
so that when Paul wrote to them  
a couple of years later,

he commended them  
for their faith.

And so begins today's reading  
from the second letter  
to the Thessalonians.  
And it begins as every letter did in those times,  
with a greeting,  
from "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

The rest of our reading today  
takes the form of a prayer:  
Paul is reporting  
what he has been praying for the Thessalonians  
ever since he met them,  
and especially  
as he has heard how hard their lives have become  
as followers of Christ.

And you'll notice if you look at the reference  
that we have left a few verses out:  
our reading  
skipped  
from verse four of chapter one  
to verse eleven,  
verses that depict in graphic terms  
judgement  
and vengeance  
and eternal destruction.

And the simple explanation for their omission  
is that the people who put our lectionary together  
don't want us to have to read  
those purple passages  
about judgement and punishment  
especially at the hands of God.

And that's partially true.  
But I think it's a little more complex than that.

Because we live

in a very different world  
from the Thessalonians.  
Being Christians, for us,  
might mean living on a little less  
as we learn to be generous with the material blessings  
that God has given us;  
we might face the incredulity of family or friends  
if we decide that worshipping God  
takes priority  
over some event.  
But you can hardly say  
that the vast majority of Christians in the west  
suffer  
for their faith.  
Our lives are not in danger  
because we are followers of Jesus.

But the lives of the Thessalonians are.  
They've been chased down,  
arrested, charged,  
put in prison.  
Some have barely  
escaped with their lives.  
And human as they are, they want to know  
that God  
has not abandoned them,  
that God  
is not ignoring them,  
is not casting a blind eye  
over their suffering.  
They want to know  
that somehow,  
some time  
there will be justice,  
that their persecutors will face  
some sort of consequences  
for their action.

And Paul's words,  
as extreme as they seem to us  
are giving the Thessalonians that assurance,  
letting them know  
that God does indeed hold people accountable for their actions,

and that God is indeed  
on their side.

And it's in that context  
that Paul offers  
his words of prayer.

“We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.  
To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul gives thanks for the Christians in Thessalonica because news has spread across the Mediterranean about how they have been growing in their faith, and about how their love for one another is increasing. When you think about it, that is astounding!  
These are people who are constantly under attack.  
We could understand if they had fled from the city, moving somewhere where the locals were more hospitable.  
We could understand if they had given up on Jesus, gone back to their old religion.  
And we could absolutely understand if they had decided to keep their faith quiet, conforming to the external expectations of their culture and just practicing their Christian beliefs in private.

But instead they have grown in faith. They've worked hard at it. They listened to what Paul taught them when he first came to Thessalonica, and they've taken every opportunity to learn more. They've prayed, they've given thanks, they've lived lives that honor God.

And so much so  
that their story  
has made its way back to Paul.

And they have grown in love.  
Each and every one of them  
has been so loving of each other.  
They're known  
for their willingness to care for one another,  
to forgive,  
to build relationships.  
So much so  
that people have commented on them,  
and those comments  
have made it back to Paul.

They have grown in faith,  
they have increased in love.  
And Paul has been using them  
as examples  
to other Christians.

Who would have thought it?

And all this, even though  
they were going through persecution.

Paul encourages them;  
he reminds them  
to hang in,  
to celebrate  
these incredible gifts of faith and love that God has given them  
and that they have worked hard  
to preserve  
and grow.

And he continues his prayers: he doesn't just thank God for them,  
he prays for them,  
prays that where God has called them  
God will give them the gifts and strength and power  
to do what they are being called to do,  
that when they step out in faith and obedience  
God will bless their actions, bless their lives,.

Not just  
so Paul will have something else to boast about them to the other Christians,  
but above all  
so God will be glorified,  
so that when people look at their lives  
they will glorify God.

We live  
in a very different time and place  
from the Thessalonians.  
But I was struck, when I read these verses  
how the first two ways in which the vestry has discerned God calling this parish of St James  
echo  
the prayer  
and the lives  
of the Thessalonians.

To grow in faith through Scripture and prayer.  
To build relationships in Christ.

Those are two central parts  
of our lives together.

And like the Thessalonians,  
we need to work at them.  
Maybe even more,  
because we're not persecuted.

It's easy, isn't it,  
to take our faith for granted.  
To keep on in the same old patterns  
relying on what we learned as children,  
caring for the people we know, but not really  
getting to know people  
who aren't so much like us.

And so I want to challenge you.  
What would it take  
for you to be known  
because of how much you have grown  
in your faith?  
Have you ever joined a bible study?

Do you ever discuss the sermon?  
How do you  
grow in your faith?

And how has your love  
increased?  
Have you ever gone  
beyond your comfort zone  
to reach out to someone else?  
Have you ever done anything  
that has shown greater love  
to someone?

In a few minutes,  
we are going to baptize young Jeremy.  
And in preparation, we'll pray for him

We'll pray that God will open his heart to grace and truth.  
We'll pray that God will teach him to love others in the power of the Spirit.  
We'll pray that Jeremy will want to know and love God.  
And those of you who've had the privilege of spending time with Jeremy in Godly Play  
will know that those things are already true.

When he first came here, I guess a year and a half ago or so,  
he didn't know anything about God.  
Now he listens to a Christian channel on his clock radio,  
and treasures the things he's received in Godly Play.  
And Jeremy loves with abandon,  
Many of us have been blessed by his joyous smile in church.

He is so excited  
to be here today, to be baptized  
and to receive the Eucharist for the first time.

And I'm excited.  
I'm excited, because here is someone  
who is doing his best  
to respond to the call of Christ.

And so I invite you to pray for him,  
and to pray for one another,  
that God will make us worthy of his call to us

and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in us,  
and we in him,  
according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.