

Pentecost 25, Proper 27, Year C, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Have you ever had the experience
where you are supposed to be listening to or watching or doing
something really important
but you get distracted
and end up focussing on something much more dramatic
but much less important
instead?

It's kind of like that
in our reading from the second letter to the Thessalonians
today.
It begins with those words
that always seem to bring confusion in their wake:
“At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...”
And then goes on to talk about rebellion and destruction and a lawless one.

It's what biblical scholars call “apocalyptic”,
a particular style of writing
that speaks about what will happen
at the end of time as we know it
and some sort of ultimate struggle between good and evil,
God and Satan,
a kind of reversal
of the entry of sin into the world
as told in the beginning of Genesis.
The most obvious example
is most of the book of Revelation,
but apocalyptic is found in Daniel,
in some of Jesus' words close to the time when he died,
and here in 2 Thessalonians.
The language is frequently surreal and fantastic,
the stuff of nightmares,
and if you take it literally
it can be quite frightening.
And it's often hard to distinguish between
which parts
are meant to be realistic, to be taken literally,
and which parts are metaphor,

carrying a deeper message.

And of course, what that means
is that we frequently get sidetracked by it,
trying to analyze it and find past or present parallels in it,
and ultimately to make sense of something
which defies rational analysis.

And what happens
when we do that
is that we lose sight of what it's really about:
the message that yes, there will be a time when good triumphs over evil,
when God triumphs over Satan,
and we'd better be ready.

And the times when apocalyptic
is most commonly used
is when people are under threat.
Just like today's reading,
where the Thessalonians
are struggling,
where they are being attacked and persecuted
and most desperately need reassurance
that they have not been abandoned,
that their suffering is not in vain,
that God
will vindicate them.
God is on their side.

But that's not
such an issue
for us.
We, as Christians living at this time in history
in this part of the world
are not being attacked,
at least, not in the direct, physical way
that the Thessalonians were.
And so for us,
these apocalyptic words
all too easily become a distraction,
diverting us
from the challenging and promising words
that follow.

And so we come to verse thirteen
to words that apply as much to us
as they did
to the Thessalonians.

“But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord,
because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and
through belief in the truth.”

And the key is here.

“God chose you
as the first fruits
for salvation.”

When we hear those words, first fruits, I suspect we immediately think
of the first produce
that comes off a plant.

Those first warm ripe tomatoes
of summer,

the first sweet strawberries
peeking out under the leaves,

the first zucchini that you have to pick quickly before they turn into massive squashes!

But when Scripture talks about first fruits,

it's sending us back

into the early part of the Old Testament,

to Deuteronomy,

though the roots go back even further, to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis.

But in Deuteronomy

it's codified.

The people of God

have escaped from Egypt.

They've wandered in the wilderness

for forty

years.

And finally they've made it

to the promised

land.

And planted crops, and their first harvest

is approaching.

And God says,

I want you
to give me the first part
of your harvest.
Those warm ripe tomatoes
and sweet strawberries
and monster zucchini.

Okay, so the first fruits weren't necessarily tomatoes and strawberries and zucchini.
But what they were
was the first of the harvest for a people
who had been wandering in the desert for a generation.
They'd never known
where the next meal was coming from,
never known
if their children would have full bellies
or starve.
Finally
they have a sense of security,
finally
they know where their next meal will come from -
the seeds they planted
six months ago
and are now ready
for harvest.

And then God comes,
and demands
the first fruit
of the harvest.

And this wasn't the normal tithe,
the ten percent
that always went
to God.
This was separate,
an extra gift of that first flush of harvest
that belonged to God.
And that first first fruit
was placed in a basket
and given to the priest
in thanksgiving
for all that God had done.
And then

with the rest of the harvest
there was a celebration,
a party,
in honor of God.

The Thessalonians
are the first fruits.
They are dedicated
to God, offered up,
a living celebration
of the saving work of God in Christ.
They belong
to God.

And we too
are the first fruits.
We
belong
to God.

You might have noticed last week
that just after I baptized young Jeremy
he asked,
“when will I get my special mark?”

He knows
that chrismation,
when the sign of the cross
is drawn on the baptized
with holy oil
is when you get marked
as belonging to God.
Or, as I explain it to kids,
it’s like an invisible tattoo
that only God can see
so God knows
that you belong.

We
have been signed
with the sign of the cross.
We belong
to God.

So what does it mean
to be the first fruits?
What does it mean
to belong
to God?

I suspect that each of us
has a different answer
to that question.
But if we look at Scripture,
and particularly at this section of 2 Thessalonians where it is discussed,
the answer is fairly clear.

“To stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught.”

You see, belonging to God
is being part of a long tradition
of followers of Christ.

We belong to God
and that means
that we get all the benefits associated with that.
The promise of
eternal life.
The miracle
of prayer heard and answered - though not always
in the way we expect it.
The presence of the Holy Spirit
working in our lives.

But it's not all
about what we receive.

It's also about
some expectations.
“To stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught.”

We, as people who belong to God
are expected
to hold fast
to the traditions that we are taught.

For the Thessalonians
that meant
remembering the things that the apostle Paul had taught them when he visited them.
Things about Jesus,
about what he did
and what he taught.
About the one who lived among human beings
and offered them forgiveness and new life.

But also about the practical implications
of being followers of Jesus.
And we know what those were in the early church,
as described in the second chapter
of the book of Acts:
The first converts to Christianity after Pentecost
devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the
prayers.
They were together and had all things in common;
they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,
they broke bread at home
and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,
praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.
And day by day the Lord added to their number
those who were being saved.

Two thousand years later,
those same practical implications still apply.
Because we belong to God
we remember Jesus Christ.
We remember the things he did
and the things
he taught.
We remember how he lived among us
and offers us
forgiveness and new life.

Because we belong to God
we gather together to worship week by week.
We devote ourselves
to God's teaching in Scripture, and the prayers, and the Eucharist.
We share what we have
with those in need.

But above all,
we offer ourselves.
Because as followers of Jesus, chosen by God,
we are the first fruits,
offered to God
in celebration
of the life God has given us.

Today
is the first week
of our annual pledge campaign.
It would be easy
to have begun
in time honored tradition
by begging you
for more money
so we can make the budget.

But that's not
where stewardship begins.
Stewardship begins
with the knowledge that we have been called,
chosen
by God.
We ourselves
are an offering, dedicated
to God's purpose.
We are an essential part
of God's work in the world

We belong
to God.

And everything else we do
flows from that.
How we live,
what we do with our time,
how we spend our money,
how we use our gifts.
The whole of our beings,
the whole of our lives,

everything we are
and everything we have,
all of it
belongs to God,
who as 2 Thessalonians reminds us,
strengthens us
in every good work and word.
Thanks be
to God.