

Psalm 25:1-10  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

First Sunday in Advent, Year C  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
December 2, 2018

## **Dimensions of the Lord's Coming**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm for today is an alphabetic acrostic. Each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Within this structure we hear the psalmist's prayer for help, with faith that God will answer. Listen to these words from Psalm 25:1-10...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Epistle Lesson today is appropriate for the First Sunday of Advent, as it looks forward to "the coming of our Lord Jesus" as the climax of life. In the meantime, Paul calls for love and holiness. Listen to these words from 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13...

### *Sermon*

Even though the Season of Advent is observed as a time of preparation for Christmas, and thus a time when we direct our thoughts toward the Advent—the coming of the Lord in his incarnate birth—it includes more than this. It is a time to reflect on the Lord's coming in its several dimensions—not only his historical coming at his birth, but also his existential coming—that is, our experience of his coming into our present. And not only his historical coming and his existential coming, but also his eschatological coming—his coming again at the end of time.

The first of these three dimensions of Christ's coming—the incarnation, is not referred to in our lesson from 1 Thessalonians. However, it is clearly sounded in the New Testament.

Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth. And in John we read:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (1:14)

Our Lord's coming to earth in time and space as a real flesh and blood person, is not an *idea* that was developed by the mind of man; it was an *event* that was to change the world, and bring about our salvation.

In 1 Thessalonians the focus is on the future coming of our Lord. Note verse 13:

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

But the existential dimension is there, for the passage speaks of a God who can guide travel plans and bring them to fulfillment, an apostle bound to his church by love, a Lord who can so enrich Christian love that it reaches out not only to those around us, but also "to all people." It also speaks of a Lord who can make our hearts firmly established and our lives holy in preparation for his coming.

We learn from Acts that when Paul wrote this letter to the members of the church in Thessalonica, he had established this church just a few months prior. Much of the early part of the letter is spent recalling his founding visit and reflecting on his ministry among the people. As we read the letter, it becomes clear that even though the apostle is now engaged in evangelistic activity in Corinth, this young, fledgling church in Thessalonica is still very much in his thoughts and prayers. He has tried to visit them but has been unable to do so. Paul recalls the success of the gospel among them, speaking of them as his "glory and joy." He is obviously heartened by the steadfastness of their faith in the face of persecution and resistance, but he is understandably concerned about their welfare. And Paul says that he prays constantly that he may come to see them so that he can build up whatever may be weak in their faith.

Here we see a clear indication of the Lord's coming as it is understood existentially—in our experience of Christ in the here and now: the minister praying for the members of the

church—thankful, joyful, triumphant, yet anxious to see them, concerned about their welfare, eager to teach them more and supply what is lacking, hoping that their love for one another will hold them together and that they will be presentable at the coming of the Lord.

What we can learn from Paul's prayer is instructive not only for ministers but for every Christian today. First, Paul says that he prays earnestly day and night that God might lead him to these church members in Thessalonica. It is to God that Paul turned for guidance in the ordinary, day-to-day problems of life. One of the mistakes many Christians make is to turn to God only in the major events, the hard decisions, the shattering crises, the painful griefs. But through the Spirit, Paul communed with a present Christ. And so too can you and I today.

In Revelation 3:20 our Lord says:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Furthermore, we note that Paul prays that God will enable the Thessalonians to abound in love in their daily lives. We might wonder why the Christian life is so difficult to live, especially in our ordinary routines. The answer may well be that we are trying to live it by ourselves. The person who tries to live the Christ-like life without prayer is, in effect saying, "I can do this quite well by myself." Or, "I can bear by myself whatever consequences my decisions and actions may bring." We heard the psalmist praying for God's help, putting his trust in God. To live the Christian life without the help of God, we were never meant to do.

Then we see that Paul prays to God for the Thessalonians' well-being when Christ will come again, of that day when people will stand before the judgment seat of God. It was his prayer that God would so preserve his people in strength and holiness that on that day they would not be ashamed. Well, the way to prepare to meet God at the end is to live daily with God

in the present. The shock of that day will not be for those who have so lived that they have become the friends of God, but for those who meet God as a total stranger.

What we see here is that Paul carried on his heart to the throne of God's grace, these members of the Thessalonian church. He lifted them up in prayer. We will never know from how much sin we have been saved, and over how much temptation we have triumphed, because someone has been lifting us up in prayer. Or in how much grief we have been comforted, in how much confusion and turmoil found peace, because someone has been praying for us.

There is a story about a servant girl who became a member of a church. One day she was asked what Christian service she rendered. She said that she did not have the opportunity to do much because her duties were so constant. But, she said,

When I go to bed I take the morning newspaper to my bed with me; and I read the notices of the births and I pray for all the little babies; and I read the notices of marriage and I pray that those who have been married may be happy; and I read the announcements of death and I pray that the sorrowing may be comforted.

No one can ever tell what tides of grace flowed from the attic bedroom of that girl who “did not have the opportunity to do much.” When we can serve people no other way, there is one thing we can still do—we can pray for them. It's a wonderful thing for church members to pray for one another. Those on our prayer list, as well as others we know are standing in the need of prayer—our prayers.

Paul's prayer life demonstrates the existential dimension of the Lord's coming—his present experience of Christ. But there is another sense in which this passage reveals the Lord's present coming. For here we see *faith* taking root and taking shape. The Thessalonians have received the word of God, not as a preacher's word, but as Paul says in 2:13 “as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers.” God has come to them through the

proclaimed Word, which Paul sees here as giving them strength and direction. And God's presence remains a powerful force at work in their midst, confirming them in their faith. And it is the community of faith bound to one another in love that becomes the focus of God's activity. Paul's hope is that their love for one another will increase, even as his does for them. But their form of community is not to be one simply turned in upon themselves and their own needs; listen to verse 12:

...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...

The church that genuinely experiences the coming of Christ into its midst, most fully embodies his presence when it extends its love beyond itself and reaches out to others. We journey inward as we come to Sunday School and Worship, as we gather at the table of our Lord and celebrate Holy Communion. We journey outward as we support Meals on Wheels, Good Neighbor Cupboard, Thornwell Home, disaster victims, and missionaries in far off places.

While the existential dimension of our Lord's coming is clear in this passage, it is the eschatological dimension that is most explicit.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

To be blameless in holiness before God demands consecrated service. At the close of the service today we will sing Fanny Crosby's familiar hymn "I Am Thine, O Lord." The second verse says:

Consecrate me now to Thy service Lord,  
By the power of grace divine;  
Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,  
And my will be lost in Thine.

The gospel reading for this First Sunday in Advent is from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke and it includes these verses:

But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm that Christ will come again to judge the quick (living) and the dead. Donald McKim says that

the church has always believed that the second coming is imminent—it can happen at any time; but it may not be immediate—it may happen far into the future. But the emphasis in the Gospels is on watchfulness and keeping awake, being ready—at any time—for Christ to return.

The First Sunday of Advent is a good time for us to consider first, what kind of preparations we are making to worthily celebrate the anniversary of the Lord's coming into the world as the incarnate God of love—his birth; secondly, what kind of practices we are engaged in to open ourselves to the present Lord, making our souls fitting abodes for the Redeemer who comes in grace and truth; and lastly, what kind of preparations we are making for that final coming again of our Lord.

...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.