If the books of the New Testament were arranged in the order in which they were written, First Thessalonians would be on page one. This letter from Paul to the church at Thessalonica was written around 51 CE, making it the earliest Christian writing. Our passage today begins with “Now concerning the times and seasons.” “Times and seasons” was understood to refer to the events of the end times. In this passage, Paul identifies believers as Children of the day who are not like those of the night. It is important to note that in this letter, Paul is not concerned with determining who’s in and who’s out. He does not castigate or even identify those of the night. His purpose and major concern is to nurture this fragile community of believers in Thessalonica. Listen now to God’s Word as it comes to us from First Thessalonians 5: 1-11.

“I’m gonna ride in the chariot in the morning Lord, I’m getting ready for the judgment day, my Lord. I’m getting ready to see my Lord!”

Anticipation of the future reign of God is characteristic of many Negro Spirituals. In the midst of the darkness of oppression and slavery and the fear of families being torn apart or loved ones killed, the spirituals expressed longing and great hope for that future day when all will be made right and when God’s children will finally be home with their rightful and only true Lord. These future oriented spirituals had a great impact on the present lives of the slaves who sang them. These songs were sung not so much as an escape from this world, but as a means of encouraging one another in the darkness of their present situations. It is true that the spirituals often played a very important subversive role, but at a very basic level, the singing of Spirituals functioned to bind the community together, building solidarity among the slaves and sustaining the community’s faith and hope in the future, in the sure and certain deliverance awaiting them on the judgment day and the hope of deliverance in this life. This morning’s spiritual encourages us to lean into the future with great hope and expectation.

“Are you ready my brothers and sisters? Oh yeah! Do you want to go to heaven? Oh yeah! I’m waiting for my chariot and I’m ready to go.”

The church at Thessalonica was waiting for the judgment day as well or at least for the return of Jesus. The clues we get in this letter indicate that Paul’s teachings in Thessalonica took firm root. In spite of the opposition that had broken out against the Christians there, they had remained faithful and conducted themselves with love. In these early days of the church, Jesus’ return was expected to be imminent...within the lifetime of those first Christians. They waited with great anticipation and hope for Jesus’ return. As time drew on and Jesus did not return, their anticipation became clouded with anxiety and questions. “What will happen to those who have already died before Jesus’ return? When will Jesus return? Might we miss it?”

In the verses just prior to our passage today, Paul assures his readers that the dead have not been abandoned by God. At the time of Jesus’ return, they too will be raised to new life and
will join those still alive in unending fellowship with Jesus in the new age. As to when this will happen, Paul says the church already knows the answer; there is no way to predict. What is certain is that the day of the Lord will come and it will come with the suddenness and hiddenness of a thief in the night and it will be as unpredictable as labor pains. And when it comes there will be sudden destruction from which there is no escape, no one is exempt, it will be all encompassing.

I don’t know about you but at this point in the text, I’m not ready to say “Oh yeah!” But Paul insists that the terror he has described should not cause the Thessalonians to wait in fear of the day of the Lord; they are to wait in hope and with expectancy for they are Children of Light, Children of the Day. God has destined them not for wrath but for salvation. “This is who you are,” Paul says, “Children of the Day. So act the part. Stay awake. Keep alert to all the signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom in your midst right now. Do not sleep through life, inattentive and insensitive to what is happening around you and to the people around you. Stay awake. Live into the future with hope and expectancy, encouraging one another and building each other up, as indeed you are doing.

Our anxieties and fears are different from those of the church at Thessalonica but we do live in fearful times. Theologian Daniel Migliore notes that as a society we no longer view the future with fascination but with fear. Today I think it would be safe to say that we live in a culture afraid of its own future.

- Terrorism lurks
- Ecological disaster threatens
- And the current economic crisis continues its chaotic twists and turns.
  - The crisis in the financial sector has left the experts flummoxed…or at least it seems that way to me.
  - The auto industry is in peril, and it is estimated that 1 out of 10 jobs in the United States is related to that industry.
  - Consumer spending dropped sharply in October, the quickest drop ever seen. And while there may be good news in that figure in terms of Americans coming to grips with their needs versus their wants, we also know that such a drop will likely put many out of work.
  - And one look at a 401K statement, or an investment or retirement account, and you may think that a thief has literally come in the night!

These are some of the thieves of our times, those unexpected and unpredictable events that rattle us and threaten to steal our hope.

In our personal lives the unpredictable comes upon us as well, causing anxiety about our future as we find ourselves unexpectedly having to ask questions such as:

- What will life be like now that my spouse has died?
- Will the chemo work?
- What does the future hold for my child with special needs?
- Will my marriage survive?
- Will I be able to get in my college of choice after those horrific grades freshman year?
  - Will I get into college at all? Am I really ready to leave home?
- Will there be enough money for me to stay in the retirement community and if not, what will happen to me?
These are unsettling times in our society, and for more people in this congregation than any one of us know, these are frightening times for many individuals as well. So what guidance, what nugget can we glean from this strange passage we read this morning for the living of our days?

First, this passage reminds us that we are people of hope. We do not have blind hope in an unknown future for we know that the One who is coming is the gracious and merciful One we have come to know in the babe in Bethlehem. We have hope because Jesus is Lord and it is Jesus the Christ who has the final word—not the market, not our illness, not our bank statement. In the ultimate sense, the ills of this world cannot harm us. Yet, this hope does not remove us from the present struggle any more than it removed the slaves from their far more horrific conditions. Even in that great hope we do not have the answers to the questions and problems that plague us today. What we do have is the constant encouragement that whatever the future holds, God will be there, in ways often hidden, bringing all things to fulfillment in Christ.

Secondly, I think this text reminds us to lift our eyes. We cannot and should not be so consumed with the troubles of this time that we fail to scan the horizon for God’s activity in the world right now. We must stay alert to God’s eternal message and to how God is active in this mess and in the messiness of our lives right now. It is easy to be consumed by the darkness of our times but we are children of the day. We are called to stay awake and alert, to look for the in-breaking of the kingdom. We are not waiting for an absent God, after all. Our hope is in the one who’s humble and hidden comings have awakened and sustained our hope all along. God in Christ is active in our world right now and as Christians we are called to be alert to God’s calling and guiding.

Lastly, Paul is very clear about what the Thessalonians are to do while they wait for Jesus’ return. They are to encourage one another and build each other up. Or as Eugene Petersen says in his paraphrase, “So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you’ll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you’re already doing this; just keep on doing it.” iii

What does it look like to encourage one another and build each other up?

I immediately think of Sam Newell, a former pastor of this congregation and a true saint in the church I attended in Richmond. On one particular occasion, my preschooler (I won’t mention any names) became angry with me during worship. The more subtle I tried to be with my correction, the more demonstrative he became in his response. He kept sliding further down the pew to get as far away from me as possible and of course there was a grimace on his face. I was embarrassed and completely exasperated by the end of worship. As I was walking out of the church that day, I felt a hand on my shoulder. There was Sam Newell, smiling. He simply said, “You’re doing the right thing” and turned and walked away. That may sound like an inconsequential gesture to you but 13 years later I am still telling this story.

What does encouragement look like? It looks like a man reaching out to a brother or sister who has lost a job, providing whatever counsel and advise his experience allows, encouraging him, walking along beside her.

Encouragement looks like taking time after worship to welcome and talk with visitors.

It looks like two women who know what it is like to grieve the loss of a loved one all too well, inviting two recent widows to dinner because they think the two might find encouragement and comfort from one another.
Encouragement looks like women and men who offer to be extra hands and extra laps in the nursery or Sunday school room so that parents who would not ordinarily be able to leave their child with special challenges can attend worship.

It looks like a church member calling his pastor and saying, “I know you are struggling this week. I want you to know that I am praying for you.”

Encouragement looks like thousands of different gestures, small and large, and thousands of different words, some profound, some simple. Overall, I suppose encouraging one another does not seem like a match for the problems of our world and of our lives. Perhaps this sounds too simple, trivial even to be talking of such small things when such large problems loom. But I don’t think so. Don’t get me wrong, there are large things that must happen as well; systemic changes that need to be made. Hope in Jesus Christ does not allow us to just settle for the way things are. But the church is called to encourage one another and build each other up. That is the beautiful and happy work of those whose hope is in Christ.

Friends, we are children of the day, Easter Day. Our ultimate hope lies at the opening of an empty tomb. But all is not as it will be or should be. These are unsettling times and none of us can keep the faith alone. In the words of another spiritual sung in times when the community needed to come together:

Walk together children
Don’t you get weary
Walk together children
Don’t you get weary
O talk together children
Don’t you get weary

There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

AMEN

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i Taken from The Chariot Spiritual sung by the chancel choir prior to the sermon.
ii Ibid.
Other sources used: