

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for November 6, 2011
Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:4-12 and I Thessalonians 5:1-11

STAYING AWAKE WITH HOPE

Many years ago, a professor remarked in class one day, “We see only from our own viewpoint.” Being a kid and something of a smart-aleck, I wrote his statement in my notebook with a sarcastic comment about his grasp of the obvious. My sarcasm was foolish because the professor’s statement of the obvious tells a truth we human beings often fail to respect when we give our opinions. I do see life and understand other people only from my limited viewpoint and experience. God does respect that truth about us. The Bible reveals that God meets people *where they are* in time and place and *as they are* in their souls – meaning their very selves and their lives. God addresses us as we are, not as we should be or think we should be. God comes with love and hope, not scorn and condemnation.

We are not ancient Israel. There’s another declaration of the obvious, right? Well, yes and no. It will be helpful for us to understand how we differ from both ancient Israel and the Christian congregation in Thessalonika if we are to hear God’s word spoken to us through our scripture lessons.

“Hear, O Israel . . .” All the Israelites are addressed together as a people and not as separate individuals. God has made a covenant with the whole people, the community. Each household and person lives in that communal covenant relationship with God. Each one is Israel because each belongs to the whole people. They had no understanding of any individual’s relationship with God apart from the whole people; the modern idea of an individualized relationship with God would have made no sense to them. They had no concept of life as an individual matter. Life was relational. An individual alone was no one. Do you see how different their view was from ours? We are trained to see ourselves as individuals and our lives as private matters.

The ancient Israelite would not have comprehended the modern question, “Why do I need the church?” The word “church” speaks of the assembly or gathering of a people, and God’s covenant in Christ is made with the whole people – the church. Neither would the ancient Israelite have regarded that gathering as an institution or its shared faith as a matter of what we call religion. They had no word for religion and no need for one. Their covenant relationship with God was about life – all of it. Our modern idea that God can be confined to one part of life would have seemed to them utter nonsense.

It is with that communal understanding of life that Deuteronomy goes on to address each person and household in the singular – “you” – and call for deeply personal responses to God’s love. “You shall love the LORD your God,” “(You) shall teach your children,” “(You) shall speak of these words you are commanded, write them on your hearts, your doorposts, and your gates.” All spoken to each individual in the singular “you.” The Bible affirms the personal but does not recognize the individual apart from the others. Each is called by name, but none is regarded alone.

The ancient Israelites had to keep learning that each person mattered to God and was never just a name on the rolls or a number or a functionary lost in a faceless mass. Justice was to be done for each person, with special care taken for the one in a vulnerable position. No one was to be left out, and the king himself was judged by his active provision for the needs of those most easily overlooked – the foreign worker living among the citizens, the widow, the orphan, the poor person, the sick, and the disabled. A king might win wars, make treaties, build cities, and increase the prosperity of the nation, but if he did not provide for the most vulnerable among the people, the Bible says of him simply that he reigned, did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and died.

They needed to learn the personal – the love of God for each specifically, but within the whole. We need to learn our relatedness – our belonging together in God’s love. If anything, the ancients suffered from too much communal thinking, pressuring the individual to conform to the ways of the tribe and clan. We suffer from too much individualization, isolating us in the terrible loneliness of modern life and modern people’s generational estrangement. This recession, which I think we’re still in, reveals our society’s lack of generational responsibility. To guard and keep what we have and fear losing, we are throwing our children as a generation to the wolves. The infrastructure rusts and crumbles, school systems decay, we send jobs to places where labor is dirt-cheap because it’s wage slavery, and we keep what jobs remain for the “good old boys.” We poison our rivers, oceans, and the air itself, dumping in more chemicals to cover the immediate dangers. The idea of self-denial or even self-restraint for the sake of our society and our world’s children and grandchildren seems unconsidered. Too much of my generation lives as though we were the last generation to matter. Oh, most try to take care of their very own but privatize their concern for the young without regard for the younger generations as a whole. The current attitudes toward education reflect this self-centeredness: take care of your own, position them to get ahead, and forget the rest.

We modern Christians need to keep learning that each individual or family is not a separate world, that life is relational, and that God relates to us *as a people*. So, we come to God’s redemptive truth from the other direction – from our isolation in life, our private confinements, our habits of escape from human society, our selfishness, and our loneliness.

The modern human being is profoundly alone in life, and modern thought has twisted the gospel of Jesus Christ to promote, unwittingly, an aloneness in our faith. “Why do I need the church?”

The Thessalonian Christians were troubled by the delay in Christ’s expected return, and distressed because some of their members had died before Christ returned. What would happen to them? Were they left out of salvation? The apostle writes to assure them that God is not defeated by life or death and that the time of Christ’s coming, whether soon or later, need not concern them. Contrary to modern end-time Christianity, the apostle dismisses as foolish and unnecessary all attempts to predict the future and the coming of Christ. Those who put their trust in him are alive in the present with a sharing in his life as God’s beloved daughters and sons, God’s covenant people, and so the delay should not distress them and his coming should not take them by surprise. Their salvation is both present and future. So is ours. If we belong with Jesus Christ to God today, why should we worry about tomorrow? God is faithful. If in this life we trust God who knows our fears, weaknesses, failings, and sins, why should we be plagued by fears about what awaits us beyond death? Life is already new, because we already belong with Christ to God; death will not change that.

So, we have no need for fear, which doesn’t mean we won’t have our fears but that we can counter them with hope and handle them with trust. Tomorrow is by nature a scary thing because we cannot see or control it, but the more we trust the more we learn to trust, until even death becomes just another tomorrow entrusted to God. Meanwhile, we stay awake, meaning alert to the grace of God at work in our lives and in this world. The seed of God’s redemptive love may be growing secretly, as Jesus puts it, but it should be no secret to us. Sure, we see the troubles of this world and feel its sufferings more deeply because we do not accept them as the norm. We know God wants better and will have better. To know Christ is to be rendered incapable of writing people’s sufferings off as “just the way life is.” To belong with Christ to God is to be rendered incapable of looking out only for ourselves and our own families. To put our trust in Christ for today and all our tomorrows is to have hope thrust upon us anew each day.

I think it’s a factor of my age in life. I wake up in the night, start thinking, and have to get up and read or do something. So, when I hear the apostle telling me to stay awake, my first thought is that my problem is the opposite: I don’t stay asleep. But, of course, he is talking about staying awake in life, keeping alert – but to what? Our fears about tomorrow or even our ultimate tomorrow? No, we are to keep alert in hope, not in fear, so we will see and discern God’s grace at work among us and so do what we are enabled to do, separately and together, to keep hope alive and growing in this world. We are stewards, caretakers, not merely of an institution and its buildings, but of the great hope God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ holds for this world and its people. Amen.