

“What Now?”

We are many generations beyond the time when Jesus walked the ground in Galilee. We read the stories about him in the gospels and can only imagine what it was like to actually hear his voice or to be a firsthand witness to his power to heal and restore life. The early Christians were not hindered by a long barrier of time between Jesus' life and their own. The Apostles were teaching among them. The territory of Jerusalem was still populated by those who had gathered with the crowds when Jesus taught or had watched from a distance on the day he was crucified. We think of the presence of Jesus in a spiritual way. Many early Christ followers had the memory of his physical presence. In part, this is why there was a belief in that early time that Jesus would return soon. They were expecting the day when the risen Lord would walk among them again. They longed for that day and they wanted to know when it was coming so they could be ready to stand with him when it was their time to be raised up into glory. The section of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we've heard today addresses the anxiousness of the early followers about when the Day of Lord will come. What we've heard is a correction to any out-of-balance concern about the timing of when the day of God's final judgement will arrive. Instead, those who follow Jesus are to think about their commitment to Christ on this day not just the final day. Yes, there will be an opportunity for us to name our commitment to Christ on some distant and final day but what really matters, what the scripture teaches, what God seems to be most concerned about, is how our commitment to Christ impacts the way we live now. This is the difference between thinking about what God will do for us then and what God is doing through us now. We are children of light now, says the scripture. We aren't those who stumble around in the night not knowing where we are going. The scripture says we belong to the day and we are clothed in faith and love, and we are rescued by God through Christ, who died for us so that we can live with him. The truth for the early Christians, and it is a truth that extends to each of us, is that they and we are God's people now. What follows in the letter is clear instruction on what that means for the way we live our lives. Because of the light of Christ, because of the salvation we have in Christ, because of the way in which Christ casts out all darkness in us, we are to “encourage one another and build up each other” (1 Thess. 5:11)

Not much needs to be said about the evidence that encouraging one another and building up others is not the default attitude in our world. Whether we look to the political landscape, the tensions around race relations, or the competitiveness in many places where we work and relate to others, the default position is to take up sides, where we question, are suspicious, and prepare to take up the fight against those who are different from us. Instead of just working out our faith so we can secure our personal place in heaven, the bible reminds us that the work of faith makes a difference in our attitudes and relationships with other people. Before we are Republican or Democrat, we belong to Christ. Before we recognize the various shades of our skin, we are clothed in faith and love. Before we expend our energy to ensure we are on the winning side of whatever the issue is, we have been won by Christ, and it is that light that shines for us and through us. “What are we supposed to do, then?” we may ask. The bible couldn't be more clear, “encourage one another and build each other up.” This is what Christ does for us and what we are called to do for others.

In a weekly bible study this past week, a group of us were reflecting on today's passage. One member reminded us of the story of the day students were asking their spiritual teacher when they could tell when the night had fully become day. I've been thinking about that lately because the days continue to grow shorter this time of year. Even with the hour change of a couple of weeks ago, when I walk our little dog in the early morning it can still feel like night. And so, if we think about this from a spiritual point of view, when is night over. Is it a time? Is it when the sun reaches a particular point in the sky? In the story, the students say to the teacher, “Has the day begun when you look into the distance and can tell if it is a pear tree or an apple tree?” The teacher says, “No.” The students then ask, “It is the day when you can tell the difference between a deer or a dog?” Again the teacher says, “No.” “Well, when is it,” the students demand to know. “How do we know when the light of a new day has come?” To which the teacher said, “You know the light of day is shining when you can look into the eyes of another person and see that it is your brother or your sister, because if you can not see this it is still night.”

Encourage one another and build each other up, this is what it means to walk as children of God and in the light of Christ. Each time we read scripture it works on us to shape us and form us more and more into the image of Christ. What does that make possible for us this week? In the bible study group I mentioned a suggestion came up that can be helpful to us this week. When we are with those who think differently or do things differently than us, what if we were more curious than judgmental. What if we asked them to tell us why they've come to the conclusion they're holding and then listened. What if we didn't try to change their minds, right at the start, but listened in a way that communicated we value them as a person. What if we were able to see them first as a child of God and then

looked for the ways God was shining light on our relationship, and then followed that with words that didn't darken the mood but added to the brightness of the day?

It is not possible to name the specifics of how this will play out in our lives this week, except to say with certainty that we will each have the opportunity to make decisions that will either increase or diminish the light. The very word of scripture is our encouragement today and we are given everything we need to encourage others going forward. Amen.