

“Scared to Death...or Life?”
2 Thessalonians 2:1-8; 13-17

November 10, 2019

22nd Sunday After Pentecost

Have you ever been scared? Not just a little frightened, but really really scared ...scared to death? Obviously, not literally. If you had been so scared that the fear caused you to die, you wouldn't be sitting here this morning. But have you ever been intensely afraid? What could cause such a profound fear? What could alleviate such a fear?

As the church year winds down on our calendar, the theme of the appointed readings turns to the end of the world. Does the end of the world scare you to death? There was a time when that was the case. Those of you my age and older can remember when we feared that the Soviet Union and the United States would get into a nuclear war and literally destroy the world. Students in schools were taught how to hide under their desks in case of a nuclear bomb. Some people built bomb shelters in their backyard in which to hide should there be a nuclear bomb. Events such as the Cuban missile crisis caused us to wonder if the world would literally be destroyed.

I'm not so sure that kind of fear exists anymore today. If there exists yet fear in the end of the world, it's probably not a nuclear war. Some people are convinced that climate change will destroy the world. Some people fear terrorism could cause significant damage, although perhaps not on a world wide basis. Others feel that the division in our world among all peoples which result in constant conflict and escalating violence with no civil discourse possible will eventually cause our world fall apart.

Holy Scripture tells us that the end of the world is a certainty. Our text from 2 Thessalonians tells us that Jesus will return on the Last Day. This time will not be as a weak little Baby in a manger to suffer and die but as a mighty King to judge the world. Every person – man, woman, child – will be judged and held accountable for every single thing they've done in their lives. And there will be consequences for the results of that judgment.

We should be afraid. Judgment and accountability are more than simple speculations. They will happen. Therefore, we should fear the end of the world because of this coming judgment which will be thorough and complete. We somehow have gotten the notion that God is not serious about our behavior and either doesn't care about our sin or will overlook it because of his love for us. But remember Luther's explanation of the Close of the Commandments in our catechism? He said, "God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them."

We should fear what will happen at that judgment. God standard for judgment is 100%. That means refusing to do 100% of the things which God forbids 100% of the time. This means always doing 100% of the things God requires 100% of the time. And, in addition to that, our thoughts, our words, and everything that is us must be in 100% compliance with the Law of God. There will be no plea bargaining and no mistrials. There will be no nonjudgmental God who just lets things slide. If we are afraid of those military and political powers that be to hurt us, we should be even more

afraid of God Himself. Jesus said, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

We should even fear the time between the present and that coming judgment because of what will happen at that time. The entire book of 2 Thessalonians is directed toward a clear understanding regarding Jesus’ return and the events of the last day. Somehow, the Thessalonians had gotten the impression that our Lord Jesus Christ had already returned and they had missed it. Letters, gossip, and chat about this topic had gone around.

St. Paul says that there will be a lot of evil which will occur before Jesus’ return. This is what Jesus had said but only in more detail. There will be false Christs teaching false doctrine to lead people astray. There will be wars and political uprisings. There will be natural disasters – famines, earthquakes, and many other things. There will be persecution of Christians in which many will fall away. There will be lawlessness (complete disregard for the law) and lack of love. There will be signs in the sky: the sun becoming dark in the moon night shining and the stars falling from the heaven.

In addition to all of that, St. Paul says that the Last Day will not come until there is a great apostasy – a falling away from the faith and the coming of “the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction.” This frightening figure not only opposes the true God but also exalts himself above every other false god. He does this so, St. Paul says, “so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”

This is truly frightening stuff. There is good reason to be afraid. However, Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, came into this world to do away with that which causes our fear. The only reason to be afraid when going before a judge is whether or not you’ve done the crime. You fear the verdict of guilty. You fear the punishment that will follow such a conviction.

Now we fear when we’ve done nothing wrong. Who hasn’t gotten into a panic when driving down the street and a police officer in his squad car pulls up behind us and follows us for a couple of blocks? Even though you’re doing nothing wrong, you’re afraid until the officer makes a turn and goes a different way. So, imagine when you are going before a judge, knowing that you are guilty of violating the law, the fear must be overwhelming.

If we take the Word of God seriously, especially His Law, we know that we are guilty of violating God’s Law. This should terrify us to stand in front of One who knows every wrong that we’ve done, thought, or said, as well as every time we failed to do, think, or say that which is right. We try to ignore our guilt, deny our guilt, or pretend that we have no guilt. We try to ignore the Law of God, deny the Law of God, or pretend that the Law of God doesn’t condemn our behavior. Ultimately this doesn’t work.

Only in Jesus can our fear be relieved and our guilt taken away. Jesus Christ has defeated our fear by defeating the sin which causes that fear. With regard to our fear that we are not good enough to stand before God who demands holiness, Jesus perfectly obeyed the Law of God and his perfect righteousness is credited to our account. Having Jesus’ righteousness, we are good enough to stand before God on Judgment Day.

With regard to our fear that the sins we have committed in thought, word, and deed make us guilty before God, Jesus offered up the perfect and all encompassing sacrifice for the sin of the world past, present, and future when He died on the cross. The sacrifice of His innocent life in place of the guilty lives of all who've ever lived pays the price for our sin and deletes them from our account through the forgiveness of sins. Our guilt is gone. Therefore, we are not afraid of the judgment to come.

As far as the "man of lawlessness, son of destruction" goes there is a lot of things which biblical interpreters discuss and disagree about regarding this shadowy figure. Back in the 70s when books like "The Late, Great Planet Earth" were popular and back in the late 90s when books like "Left Behind" were popular, there was much fear and concern about this figure. While there could be great discussion and speculation about his identity, the important thing is that, when Jesus returns, St. Paul writes, "the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming." This powerful figure, as well as every false prophet and false teacher that has ever lived, will be defeated and destroyed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Even the originator of these lies, the father of lies himself, Satan, will be defeated and cast into hell. Therefore, we will not be afraid of the time and the events leading up to the day of judgment.

We will not even fear the greatest source of fear there has ever been: death. Death has made us so afraid that many dare not even speak its name. When death takes a relative or friend, people will say of their friend such things as these, "He passed away.... He passed. We lost him. He's gone." Rare is the person who will say, "He died and is dead." Satan has used death to frighten us for millennia.

When Jesus returns, Satan loses his weapon of fear. Jesus Christ has risen from death and the grave to life and salvation. He is only the firstfruits of those who will rise from death to live forever. All who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will rise from their graves to live the life God always intended for us to have in the Garden of Eden. He has promised, "Whoever believes in me will live, even though he die. And he who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11) Therefore, we shall not fear even death.

Some people have theorized that it is possible to literally be scared to death. In other words, it is possible to become so afraid that you simply keel over dead. Research shows that it all depends on how strong your heart is. While it may or may not be possible to be scared to death, it is certainly possible to be scared to life.

While many people do whatever they can in an attempt to eliminate fear because they think it is a bad thing, fear can actually be a good thing, especially as we approach Jesus' return on the Last Day. Knowing the existence of our sin, the coming judgment for our sin, and the horrific punishment awaiting our sin can cause us to be afraid. However, rather than driving us to despair, this fear can lead us to repentance which results in forgiveness. Forgiveness results in hope, rather than fear, for the future. And hope will never disappoint us.

St. Paul both warns us and encourages us when he says, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter." By "traditions", Paul is not referring to how we dress for worship or whether we should stand or sit. The word literally means "hand over." Paul

is encouraging the people of Thessalonica and us today to stand firm in what our Lord handed over to Paul in which he is handing over to us.

Paul is talking about the Word of God and its teachings. Do not be led astray either by secular fear of nuclear war, terrorism, climate change or the like. Do not be led astray by theological fear of judgment day and the end of the world. Be in the Word of God and you will not be led astray. You will not be afraid. You will not lose hope. Rather, as St. Paul says, "To this he called you through our Gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In the end times, we live in confidence, not fear. We are comforted, not afraid. We experience hope, not despair. We continue doing good and sharing that message of forgiveness, life, and salvation with each other inside these church walls and outside these church walls in the community and world. St. Paul's closing blessing for the Thessalonians is also fitting and helpful for us. He says, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work in word." Amen, come Lord Jesus.