

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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November 6, 2016  
*32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

### **Hope for the Day of the Lord**

It is really hard to fathom that anyone here today is not acutely aware that election day is the day after tomorrow. While most modern-day elections are clearly in evidence by the proliferation of broadcast advertising, print advertisements, internet ads, emailers, postal mailers, robo calls, yard signs, bumper stickers, and billboards, all crying out for our attention, these election year practices, this year, have been sullied by rhetoric that has dragged us down, rather than bolstered us up, and that has been discouraging, rather than inspiring. The mood around this election has been far more foreboding than it has been foreshadowing. And while in some elections there is a particular race that dominates all others that sets the tone, this year around here, it seems that this mood permeates the ballot. For many, if not most, there is a strong desire to just get it over with.

Even for election watcher enthusiasts, among which I count myself, there is a new experience this year of weariness and wariness overshadowing all of it. This is in part because of the realization that when all of the votes have been counted this week, with winners and losers established, there is likely to be as much division afterwards as there is going into election day. As much division as we're witnessing now, the prospect of continued and perhaps deepening division is rather daunting and perhaps even frightening.

In the thick of all of this, some historians have been quoted as saying that there hasn't been such an election since the election of, fill-in-the-blank. This is somewhat comforting in the realization that the nation has previously sunk to this level and survived. But it's also somewhat discomforting when we think that we should have learned from previous such elections so as to avoid them down the line. But, ah such is the nature of human history.

Perhaps you have come to worship today in the hope that this would be a time to forget about the looming election for an hour or so, hoping that you might be distracted from all of this negativity by something more positive, at least, if not something more holy. And perhaps some who were hoping for this are tempted to tune out what's being said now. For you, and for everyone here, please hear me out. For I believe that I do have a word of hope, a word of Christian hope, that just might lead to something more holy.

The people of God, across the history encompassed in the Bible, often found themselves in times in which they lived under oppression and resulting despair and hopelessness. In the Hebrew scriptures—the Old Testament—many times the Hebrew people were in exile when they were far from their homeland, dispersed and disconnected. They lived under a foreign rule that had little or no respect for the Jewish religion. While sometimes they were able to peacefully coexist with those who exiled them or those who occupied them, many other times they were oppressed and made second class or worse, even slaves.

In New Testament times this oppression came from the occupying Roman empire that ruled over the lands of Palestine and of the Mediterranean region. While the Jewish leaders had learned to live with the conditions imposed on it from Rome, it nevertheless was far from total freedom to live out their faith.

Interestingly, as the fledgling new Christian movement began to grow and take hold, it faced resistance from the established Jewish tradition, as well as lack of support from the powers that be in Rome.

So that first generation of Christians came into being in a time that was less than ideal as far as the cultural support, or lack thereof, of this new religious movement.

As Christianity began to take hold and grow in this first generations, the political and governmental structures in place were oblivious to the emerging Christian religion. There was no support or encouragement from the side of government which meant that the Christians, like the Jews, had to exist and function within the strictures of the state at the time.

It was into this context that Jesus first entered the time line of history. Many of the Jewish people came to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise of release and restoration that is found in many of the pages of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus was God's fulfillment of the hope that had been communicated by the Old Testament prophets.

And of course we have much evidence in the story of Jesus' life and ministry of how he stood up to the powers of his day—both the religious powers and the governmental powers. And when he overcame the ultimate expression of governmental power—that of sentencing Jesus to die—the Christian religion was born and began to grow.

In the earliest days of the newly emerging Christian religion there was a firm belief that Jesus would be coming back soon. This second coming of Jesus was understood to be central to the hope for Christians who continued to live under occupation.

In many quarters of the Christian church there came about a focus on this return of Jesus that was understood to be something happening within the lifetime of most of those who made up this first generation of Christians. So fervently did this conviction develop that there was a tinge of fear and anxiety that began to overcome many. This fear and anxiety resulted from this fixation on the return of Jesus that wasn't happening as soon as they thought it would. As the years went by, there was a sense that Jesus' return was imminent while at the same time it was not happening.

The words of the apostle to the Thessalonian Christians were meant to provide comfort and hope amidst peril and uncertainty. He is encouraging them to live lives of gratitude, focusing on the good news that is at the heart of the Christian faith. He urges them to turn away from their fixation on Jesus' return that had resulted in living in fear and anxiety. He challenges them to live in hope and comfort that come from God.

We can take a page out of the apostle's book as we face the anxiety and fear that is swirling around us today causing us to lose our hope in the midst of the election milieu. One Presbyterian pastor suggests that "Gratitude and encouragement are the antidotes to this fear-based hysteria." She goes on to say, "We are not called to run in fear that the sky is falling. We are called to be the sons and daughters of Christ." (Elizabeth Barrington Forney, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., © 2010 Westminster John Knox Press. p. 283)

Gratitude and encouragement are the antidotes to this fear-based hysteria. Isn't that who we really are as the people of God? People who, by the love and grace of God, are given new life to live free from the confines of sin and death. Living life in gratitude is a natural response to the favor freely shown by God in Christ.

When we once again embrace the fulness of the amazing grace of God—grace that overcomes everything—absolutely everything—that separates us from God and from each other—the gratitude that emerges is more powerful than anything that can pull us down and drag us down. We are a people of hope for and promise of a new day.

That means that whoever wins the presidency, whoever wins the governorship, whoever wins the congressional election, whoever wins the seats in the legislature, and so on down the ballot, the love of God in Christ Jesus remains as strong and as profound as ever. Nothing can divide or separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What we're really being called to this week, is that on Wednesday when the election results are in, our role as Christians in our nation is not to celebrate (or mourn) a particular outcome. As tempting as that might be for us as individuals who are politically engaged, our *Christian* response on Wednesday and in the days, weeks, months and years following is to proclaim our ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ who is the head of the church. It's those themes of gratitude and encouragement that remain paramount.

So that's one word of hope that I have for you in this election—particularly in the post-election climate that is soon to be upon us. I also have a word of hope for you in these last 2 days *before* the election.

As I referenced a bit ago, a big chunk of our history on the world stage as a people of God has had us living under the rule and sometimes tyranny of a government or state that was opposed or not accommodating to God's people. Much of Judeo-Christian history shows that it was at those times that God's people grew in faithfulness and devotion. So we have been strengthened through adversity.

Quite in contrast to that has been the story of the Christian church in American history. So much of who we are as a nation revolves around that freedom of worship and religious expression. What a blessing it is for us to live in such an environment to this very day. Many of the founders of our nation were devout Christians who fervently fought for these freedoms. A large portion of those involved were Presbyterians. To be Presbyterian, then and now, is to be engaged in the pursuit of the common good when it comes to the role and function of government. Presbyterians have been at the forefront of striving to keep this at the center of what it means to govern.

The amazing good news for us in the year 2016 is that this very precious responsibility to participate has been preserved. It is an amazing privilege that we have to participate through our voting in this election and in every election.

It is in that light that I encourage you as fervently as I can to exercise this amazing right by voting on Tuesday if you haven't already. So precious and important is your individual vote that even if you haven't formally registered to vote, in our state you can go to the courthouse on Tuesday to register and vote all on the same day.

I can get dragged down by the muck and mire of this particular election year. But when I stop, step back and ponder this privilege, I am awe-struck with gratitude for my right to vote.

When we live in the light and buoyancy of gratitude to God and the encouragement that follows, I am humbled and inspired to do my part in moving us ahead as a people who do our part in working toward the common good of all.

In the final 2 verses of our reading from 2 Thessalonians, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

