

No Time for Slackers

3:6 Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

(2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, NRSV)

They thought it was the end of the world.

I'm speaking of the people of the people of the church in Thessalonica in the middle of the first century A.D. But with the events of the past week, I could also be speaking of many Americans in 2016. I will do that. I will address where we as Christian Americans go from here. But there are times when the lectionary's wisdom far surpasses what I might have chosen otherwise, so let me tell you first about the first century in Thessalonica.

Thessalonica is a port city at the north end of the Aegean Sea, in Macedonia. The book of Acts tells us that Paul and his companion Silas, on Paul's second missionary journey, were the first to preach the message of Jesus Christ there, about 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. These were the days of the Roman Empire. The Christian message ran counter to other cultural, political, and religious currents swirling in that port city. And that message included an apocalyptic strain which became more prominent whenever the world seemed more threatening. Jesus is returning soon. The world as we know it will soon end. The signs are all around us—wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Indeed, Jesus spoke of all these things. But most pressing on these little groups of Christian believers were the times of persecution of which Jesus warned, when their emerging Christian practice was mocked and scorned by society and suppressed by the Empire. These were the times when hope came from believing that Christ's return was imminent.

The persecution of Christians was not constant in the early centuries of the church. But there is internal evidence in 2 Thessalonians that this letter was written at a time of persecution. So the need for hope was heightened. What would the apostle say in this situation?

One response could be to prepare for the end by doing what you can to survive. Sales of underground bunkers have risen dramatically this year, particularly at the upscale end. Some of these luxury underground units include swimming pools, greenhouses, home theaters, gyms, and even horse stables. For some extremely wealthy people, maintaining one's lifestyle appears to be top priority.

For others, the escape they plan is to another world, a heavenly one. These folks look forward to doomsday because they are confident that they are among the saved who will escape the trials of life on earth and live in eternal bliss. This approach welcomes the end times. War in the Middle East is not

considered a bad thing by this camp—there are preachers who believe that this is what the Bible tells us is God’s plan for the salvation of true believers. If nuclear destruction is the means to God’s end, so be it. Or if it is environmental catastrophe which will hasten the end, that must be God’s plan. These are frightening, un Christ-like theologies. Let me be clear.

In Thessalonica in the mid 1st century, apocalyptic fever was high. The feeling that the end was coming prevailed. So some concluded that it was pointless to go to work anymore. Some concluded that the effort involved in being a responsible member of a community was futile and unnecessary. Some may simply have been lazy and thought they’d found a good excuse for freeloading. Still others may have given up because they felt defeated by the forces around them. They were scared, and they were worn out.

The times we are living in evoke fear and weariness in most of us, too. Fear dominated the mood of the presidential campaign. Now no one knows what’s going to happen, but many are scared. The rhetoric of the campaign pitted women against men, people of color against white people, and those who favor immigration against those who want to shut it down and deport. Religious differences have been exploited to fracture us. We’ve been told that on a whole raft of questions there are only two choices, that we must choose environmental protection or economic development, open borders or a great big wall, gun rights or having our guns taken away. You’ve been listening to this noise for way too long, and so have I. Maybe you’d like to retreat to your safe space, and I to mine, and let the world end up however it ends up.

My friends, this is the time when we need to hear Paul’s stern command to the Thessalonians: this is no time to be idle, no time to slack off. **Do not be weary in doing what is right.** Christ is Lord. And Christ will come. My friend Rabbi Ed Stafman of Congregation Beth Shalom says that the Bible gives us two visions for when Messiah comes. One is prominent in the book of Isaiah, a vision of peace and harmony and justice, when swords are beaten into plowshares, the lion and the lamb lie down together, and everyone sits under their own vine and fig tree. The other vision is prominent in Ezekiel, an end in which there is violence and destruction and suffering before the judgment. So, he asks, Why would the Bible give us two opposing visions? And his answer? Because we get to choose. So which coming of Messiah will we dedicate our lives to? Which one will we work for?

You know which one I choose. And to get there, there is no time for slackers. It’s time for us to get to work for Christ’s mission. It’s time to renew our commitment to work for justice and peace and the reconciliation of the world.

2016 is no time for slackers when the dignity of 51% of the world’s people has taken a public beating. It’s simply not okay for women to be treated as sex objects put on the planet for the pleasure of men. I know you agree with me, and I also know that you know the offensive words and attitudes and behaviors I’m talking about. We cannot ignore them and pretend they don’t matter. Nearly one in five women in our nation say they have been sexually assaulted. That’s the tip of the iceberg of the ways women are demeaned, their personhood denied, and their gifts oppressed. Christ calls us to lift up the dignity of all human beings, for we are all created in the image of God. Do not be weary in doing what is right.

This is no time for slackers when racial division and strife keep rearing up in our beloved country. When the polls show a sharp division based on race and ethnicity in who voted for whom, we know we have work to do to bring justice and healing to our people. Racism was strong in this campaign. People of color feel very threatened by what might happen next, that their concerns and

their rights have been ignored or trampled on by those with power. This is not a time to turn away from the call for racial justice. This is a time to listen, and learn, and be vigilant in protecting those who are most vulnerable, promoting equal opportunities, and lifting up the downtrodden. Christ's mission, he said, was to let the oppressed be free. (Luke 4:18) "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," said Martin Luther King. Do not be weary in doing what is right.

And this is no time for slackers with regard to the poor of our nation, many of whom are scared to lose the health care coverage they only recently gained. What other changes will affect the situations of those on the margins? Will we be a society which cares for its needy? Recently I heard a sermon at a meeting of our board of deacons. Kay May, one of our deacons, recalled the mark on her grandmother's home, a mark she never found but was told it was there, a mark which told Depression Era and beyond hobos that here lived a woman who would feed them. "The Bible says, 'the poor you will always have with you,'" her grandmother taught. And her grandmother's corollary to that was something like, "so you must always do what Jesus would do, and show his compassion and love to those in need." Ask any deacon about Kay's powerful testimony. Do not be weary in doing what is right.

These are times which call us to action, not idleness. These are times which recall us to the foundations of our faith, hope, and love. These are times which remind us to pursue justice with all that we are and all that we have, to love kindness in each action and interaction of our daily lives, and to walk humbly with our God, trusting that our obedient walk is part of God's way toward the coming of Messiah, the fulfillment of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

So take a deep breath. The election is over, but our work for Christ's way is not. This is a good time to assess, "what am I doing to work for the vision of the world God gives us in Christ? What am I doing for justice? What am I doing that makes for peace? How am I demonstrating and sharing the hope I have in Christ, hope not just for my own salvation but for the saving of the world?" And if the answer to your self-assessment is "not enough," then you are in the right place. Because church is where we mobilize one another, encourage one another, and act in concert with one another to demonstrate the kingdom of heaven to the world. Church is where we let the Holy Spirit unite us in service to God's mission, the mission we know in Christ. Church is where we find hope when we are weary, courage when we are afraid, and healing when we are beat up and lying on the side of the road.

Do not be weary in doing what is right. That's not just good advice, it's a command from the apostle which still has authority in our world. With God's help, we can do it. And for the sake of the world, we must. Let it be so.

After any election, when we collectively fixate on worldly leaders, I find it helpful to reread Psalm 146 and be reminded of God's sovereignty, and God's priorities. Would you read this psalm with me?

*Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.*

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.*

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.*

*The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

*The Lord will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord!*

(Psalm 146, NRSV)