

Bleak Malaise

Joshua 24: 14-17,24-25 "So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD.

¹⁵ But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD."

¹⁶ Then the people answered, "God forbid that we ever leave the LORD to serve other gods!

¹⁷ The LORD is our God. He is the one who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. He has done these mighty signs in our sight. He has protected us the whole way we've gone and in all the nations through which we've passed.

²⁴ The people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and will obey him."

²⁵ On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people and established just rule for them at Shechem.

(Jos 24:14-17, 24-25 CEB)

CEB **1 Thessalonians 1:1-3, 6-9** From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to all of you. ² We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. ³ This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering. ⁷ As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it. ⁹ People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a result, you are serving the living and true God.

Bleak Malaise

The first part of this past week was not a good time for me. I was so tired of hurting. At the same time I was no longer enjoying the fuzzy-headed feeling that came with the pain medication. I was tired of wrestling with a walker to get through narrow doorways. I was tired of every move from bed to dining room table to bathroom to recliner being a major effort that sapped what little strength I had. When I was awake, the pain was often too distracting for me to get anything done. When I took the prescribed pain medication all I wanted to do was curl up and sleep. I was pretty useless – and I really, really, don't like feeling useless! I was not recovering from the second knee replacement as quickly as I did from the first one.

If I believed all of the political ads on TV, there wasn't anybody running for office who wasn't either incompetent or a cheat and a thief. Cars were being recalled by the millions because of dangerous air bags that hurt passengers rather than protected them. There were athletes who finally admitted taking illegal drugs, Ebola was taking more and more lives, and the threat of terrorism seemed to be everywhere. The world was a bleak and painful place.

Watching the news one evening, I saw a report on the Russian take-over in the eastern Ukraine. It was another discouraging bit of news. Then there was an interview with an ordinary Ukrainian woman who looked to be about the right age to be a grandmother. She said, "All I want is some peace so that we feel safe and we can go to

work and make enough money to support our family.” Her wishes seemed so simple and so basic. And I realized that in my blue funk that had me down in the dumps, I already had the simple things that this Ukrainian woman yearned for. I am safe in my home and on the streets. I have work, meaningful and important work. We have food, clothing, lights, and heat – and so much more. Hearing the simple and basic yearnings of that Ukrainian woman put my situation into proper perspective. I already have far more blessings than she has. My pain will go away and my strength will return, but not today and not tomorrow. If I look at things in the proper context, my prayers should be filled with thanksgiving.

My personal aches and pains are of little consequence. I only mention them because I see parallels with the outlook held by many people in this congregation. Some of us fret over all of the maintenance that is needed for buildings that are no longer new. Some of us worry because many of the members of this community of faith are growing older. The day will come when they will no longer be able to generously support the church with as much energy and time as they have in the past. The day will come when their financial support will no longer be available. And if that is all that we see in the present situation, then the future of this congregation is bleak and limited.

Some say that we must be practical and realistic and recognize that decline is the only future available to us. That perspective overlooks one important thing. The future of First Pres doesn't depend entirely on us. When we think that it all depends on us, we leave God out of our thinking. We forget the generosity of God. We ignore the providence of God. At Christmas we are quick to remember that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” And sometimes in a committee meeting we will recall that whenever two or more are gathered in Christ's name, Jesus has promised us that he will be present in Spirit, as well. But most of the time we just mouth the words and repeat the phrases. We don't count on the divine presence; we don't depend on the Holy Spirit. We can't imagine stepping out in faith because we have little trust in God.

As I look around town, I see older mainline churches that have – or will soon – close their doors. But there are new congregations that are springing up and buying those empty church buildings. It's doubtful that they paid cash. More likely, they borrowed money and stepped out in faith, confident that God will provide. There is a huge difference between a congregation that will borrow money and count on the Lord for the future and a congregation that feels like they are failing and have no future if they lack financial reserves to cover every contingency.

In the first few decades following the death and resurrection of Christ, a Christian was an odd duck. If you were a Jew who became a follower of Christ, then you would be accused of abandoning the faith of your ancestors. You violated the law and hung out with gentiles. If you were a gentile who became a Christian, you were ostracized by your friends and family. You abandoned the gods of your family and your heritage. Many would see you as an atheist that you had no god, and you worshipped a convicted felon, not a god. In short, no matter what your background, being a Christian didn't cause admiration from others around you.

Paul begins the letter to the Thessalonian church with high praise. He speaks of their joy in spite of great suffering. He praises their work that grew out of their faith, how love motivated their efforts, and how their hope in Christ Jesus caused them to have perseverance.

The church at Thessalonica was characterized by joy, joy even though they were ostracized by their neighbors. How are we doing? What's the level of joy here at first Pres? We have much to be joyful about. Our long-held dream of younger families in worship is being fulfilled! Where churches in the area have shriveled and folded, we have maintained our size, cared for our facilities, added challenging adult classes, and broken free of ruts in how we worship. I see people whose faith has led them to do good work in this town, people who are involved in Meals on Wheels and who cook food to serve at Meals of Grace at a local food pantry. And I think those efforts are truly motivated by love of their neighbor. But sometimes, from some people, I hear a lack of hope. When hope shrinks, perseverance goes away.

Yet we have so many reasons to be filled with hope. Our buildings are in pretty good shape. There's nothing that needs to be done that couldn't be covered by money we already have. We have a wealth of seasoned Christians who bring the wisdom that only years of experience can provide. We have a growing younger population that brings fresh energy that dares to dream of what might be, and isn't bound in its thinking by years of indoctrination. Despite all of the obstacles in their path, the Thessalonians lived lives full of faith, love, and hope. They accomplished much because their work was supported by energy and perseverance. Because of the culture in which they lived, the Thessalonians suffered greatly, but they were still filled with joy.

We, on the other hand, do not suffer because of our faith. Our only obstacles are those that we put in front of ourselves. Since we don't suffer the cultural resistance that the early church did, how much more shall we be filled with joy? How much more do we have reason to hope? So, let us move forward with love, doing marvelous things through our faith, and persevering in the work that is set before us! Amen.

Sisters and brothers,

Take time to recognize just how generously blessed you really are.

Pray for and count on God's vision for the future of First Pres.

Let love motivate your efforts and good works be a product of your faith.

Filled with hope, move into the future with persistence and perseverance.