

Looking Forward

Haggai 1:15-2:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Of the seven churches I have served as interim or transitional minister, three were in deep conflict due to the rumors that had begun, been circulated, and perpetuated, many of which had no real truth or fact as the basis. My first and primary task in each case was to gather the facts and then to make the facts – the truth, known to the entire congregation. It never ceases to amaze me that many, when faced with the truth, distrust, even refuse to accept it as truth. They continue to hold on to the rumors, even to the point of losing friendships and close relationships.

In the case of this Second Letter to the young Christ-followers of Thessalonica, rumors had spread through this church concerning Paul's teaching about the end times and these rumors are causing significant distress. In this Second Chapter, Paul is encouraging the new followers of Christ in Thessalonica that they "not become easily unsettled or alarmed," but instead that they "stand firm and hold fast to the teachings" he gave them while with them in person.

Paul must set them straight about the second coming of Christ. There were people who brought doubt and uncertainty into the minds of these hearers as they were quite convincing as they tried to instill fear in the hearts of the new converts. Jesus had said he would return, but, as yet, had not. Years had passed and still they awaited his return. How do you explain that? If Jesus had not kept his word about his return, how could you expect these young Christians to believe any of the other teachings Paul had brought to them. And, how were the Thessalonians to know who to believe, after all Paul was no longer with them.

Like a parent, Paul warns the hearers to stay away from those who instill doubt rather than faith. He wants to remind them to hold on to the truth they know and he seeks to clarify the misconceptions about the return of Christ and the way in which they should wait for that return.

This new, different teaching might not seem like a big deal to those of us in this room. We've waited 2000 years and have heard many explanations about why Jesus has not yet returned. However, this young congregation had been shaken and each person was left wondering how they ought to act. Should they work or should they wait? Should they provide for those who were not working or should they make them work? Had they already been perfected? After all, they all appeared the same. Nothing seemed to be different. How do we live while waiting? Do we just quit working? Do we have a party, live as if this is....?

Paul's message to them and to us today is that we should live everyday looking forward in faith. Tuesday the citizens of America will complete the voting process, electing leaders for our nation, for the states, and for local governments. Wednesday morning will come and we will get up, get dressed and go about our lives pretty much as we have everyday leading up to the election. For you and me life will go on as usual. Looking forward, though we may

not agree with the outcome, though we may have some concerns about what comes next, especially due to the campaign rumors, the campaign ads that have perpetuated the rumors and fears that have resulted. Wednesday and Thursday and everyday thereafter, we move forward in this life, putting our differences behind us, trusting in God, who knows the future and in whom we have our faith.

Thus the prayer that Paul uses to encourage the congregation of Thessalonica to stand firm and not fear. Paul insists that they must focus on the love and grace of God in Christ.

That language encourages us (and them) in hope and strengthens us in every good deed and word. This sort of prayer functions as benediction, encouragement, and inspiration. The holistic picture of “every good deed and word” sums up the entirety of life lived: thoughts, emotions, and actions, all brought forth by the strengthening of the Spirit through the encouragement of the love of God. Paul’s confidence in them rests not in them but in the God they all worship, and to that end he encourages them not to be shaken or startled out of this confidence, but instead to grow in faithfulness.

And so, for each of us, as we enter this week of divisiveness and fear mongering, I encourage you to take these words with you as you go.

"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." Amen.