

Saints Triumphant Sunday – November 18, 2018

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

“Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play; where seldom is heard a discouraging word, And the sky is not cloudy all day.” That is the opening verse of a poem written by Brewster Higley in 1872. Later it would be added to music and in the 20th century “Home on the Range” would be made popular by singers such as Bing Crosby and Gene Autry, an unofficial anthem to the American West. Here is the story behind the song: Higley had recently moved to Kansas and was so inspired by his surroundings that he wrote this poem in praise of the prairie. His previous life helps us to understand why. Higley had been a doctor in Indiana. His first wife had died in 1852. His second wife had left him, taking their son. His third wife and mother of two more children died in 1864. He then did not get along well with wife number four and so left her and the children behind, running away to Kansas. And so his line about not hearing “a discouraging word” takes on new meaning. Higley's story is not unusual for many who live in this world. People yearn for a place of peace, to leave behind the problems of this world. And while we can do that for a time, whether on a vacation out West or in calm times of our lives, such things never last for long. The discouraging words, the effects of sin and death on this world will come roaring back at some point along the way. And so as we celebrate today the Saints Triumphant and remember our fellow believers who have gone home to heaven, we will look at our text from 1 Thessalonians 4 and find some **Words of Encouragement**. First, **about the saints who are sleeping** and second, **for the saints who are waiting**.

In Acts chapter 17, the apostle Paul first visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. He spent three weeks there, preaching the good news of Jesus in the synagogue. But as he had faced elsewhere, some Jews who opposed his message started a riot in the city and Paul was forced to leave, sneaking away at night. Paul was not able to address every issue in teaching the Thessalonians and so part of his reason for writing his letters was to fill in some of the gaps, to answer some questions they might have.

One such question involved wondering about the fate of those Christians who died before Jesus' second coming. These new Thessalonian Christians were so eager for Jesus to return, they thought that those who had died might have missed out. Verse 13: “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” Paul offers them the comfort of knowing that these fellow Christians were asleep. Jesus himself used this same language when talking about Lazarus (Jn 11) and Jairus' daughter (Lk 8). For a believer, death is only sleeping, because they will wake up again in heaven.

Paul also mentioned not grieving like the rest of men who had no hope. For unbelievers there was no hope, nothing positive to look forward to. Verse 14 gives the basis of hope for Christians: “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” Because Jesus did not stay dead, so also neither would their fellow Christians. Paul was not saying here that the Thessalonians could not grieve for their loved ones who had died. But they could work through their grief because the outcome was positive, in the end they would wake up from their sleep at Jesus’ second coming.

In verse 18, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to encourage each other with these words. And so also, we can encourage one another with these words. Death is certainly a part of this life. Depending on your place in life, either you have or you will face the death of a parent or grandparent, a sibling or spouse, or another close friend or relative. We read before the names of eleven members of St. John’s who died in the past year, leaving behind spouses, children, grandchildren, and other relatives and friends. Grieving, being sad at our loss, is certainly normal and okay, we will miss those who have died. But whether we are trying to cope with a loss that has already happened, or whether we are preparing for the time when that will happen, these verses give us hope.

The idea of sleep is a great comfort. Our loved ones who died in the Lord will wake up someday when the Lord comes again. Unlike the unbelieving view of many in this world, death is not the end. It is not the end of existence. We will see them again some day. This certainty, this hope is not based on how well they lived their life. But it is based on the fact of Jesus’ death which took away their sins and his resurrection which guarantees their eternal life in heaven. The time we wait to see them again may seem long, but we are looking forward to an eternity with them in heaven that will never end.

When we talk about those who have fallen asleep in the Lord, we are talking about their bodies. At death, soul and body separate. The body goes into the ground and the soul goes to either heaven or hell. For our proof of this we need look no further than the cross when Jesus said to thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). Unbelievers who have died too are sleeping in a way—they too will wake up on the Last Day, but it will be more of a nightmare, condemned to an eternity in hell. This serves then as continued motivation for us, to keep reaching out to those friends and family who do not know Jesus, so that they can die with hope, having fallen asleep in the Lord.

Paul was not just offering words of encouragement to the Thessalonians about the saints who had died, but also for the saints who were left behind and waiting. These Thessalonians were so eager for Jesus to come again, that they wanted to be sure that they did not miss it. Paul reassured them that they would not miss that day. Verse 16: “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” That day would not come quietly. With the sounds of trumpets and angels Jesus would visibly appear to all on that day with a command for the resurrection of the dead. There was no need to worry about missing out; they would know when it happened.

For us who are waiting today there is probably not as much of a concern over whether we have missed Jesus’ second coming. The danger for us more often has to deal with losing focus on the fact that the end could come at any time, whether that means the Last Day or our own death. It’s so easy to become wrapped up in our day-to-day activities and in a way fall asleep in our lives. We may think: “Jesus has not come back for two thousand years, he probably won’t be coming anytime soon. I’m in pretty good health, I’m young yet, I’ve got plenty of years

before I die. Either way, I have plenty of time later to live my life for God, serving him in all that I do.” But just as it’s not a good thing to fall asleep while driving a car, if we fall asleep in our lives we risk losing our faith and waking up to an eternity in the fires of hell.

So as saints, how do we wait? Our motivation comes at the end of verse 17: “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” We live our lives focusing on the end because it means that then our eternity in heaven begins. Forever cannot be fully understood by our human minds which are limited by how we think in days and months and years. But the years of our life will be less than the tiniest part of our time with our Father in heaven. This is all made possible again by Jesus who died and rose again. And so we strive to find a balance in our lives with the Lord’s help because we cannot do it on our own.

To illustrate that balance: it’s like keeping one eye on earth and one eye on heaven. Now if we are trying to look at two objects that are spaced apart, our eyes cannot split and look different directions. If we turn to focus on one, we cannot see the other and vice versa. But if we look down the middle we can see both in our peripheral vision. If we focus only on the things of this world, the things that do not last, putting all our efforts into making this life comfortable, we won’t see the things of heaven and may miss out. If we focus only on waiting for heaven, shutting ourselves off from the world until Jesus comes to take us home, we won’t be able to take care of the earthly responsibilities that God has given us. With the Lord’s help our goal is to focus on coming back to the middle when we head off in either direction in our lives.

While we may find times of peace and safety in our lives, we will never find our true “home on the range” in this life. That is waiting for us in heaven. And so we have words of encouragement: for those saints who have left us, we have the comfort of knowing that they are only asleep and the hope of knowing we will see them someday again in heaven. For those saints who are still living, we strive for the balance of living our earthly lives while waiting for the time that Jesus comes to take us to our true home in heaven. “And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (vv. 17b-18). Amen.