

Faith, Love and Hope

King of Glory Lutheran
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Year A: Pentecost 22: Mt 22:15-22 & 1 Thess 1:1-10

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I Thess 1:1-10 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

These troubled days call for us to live as the young church in Thessalonica: with faith, love and hope. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can do just that.

Holy God, through your Holy Spirit you move us to believe.

Open our hearts, open our minds to focus on you in this hour.

Grant us the ability to do the work of faith, the labor of love and keep hope steadfast. Amen.

I've said before that if the church – capitol C – and individual congregations ignore the events of our world, then we aren't equipped to apply our faith to what we read in newspapers and see on media. Within our church - large C – the Evangelical

Lutheran Church in America – and within our congregations, we have multiple opinions every week about news events. Yet when we come together as church... what we do here...in this space...is sacred. We worship the living God. *Together* we worship, united as one in Christ. We worship God who lives, moves and gives us our very being.

It's what the group gathered to listen to Paul, Silvanus and Timothy also did. They were in the seaside town of Thessalonica, about 200 miles north of Athens. It was clearly the work of the Holy Spirit among them that day as they heard Paul preach and teach. Having grown up with all their Greek mythology and Greek gods, they now heard about a new god: a living God! The one true God. A God that raised from the dead. None of their gods did such a thing. This was a Jewish message, not a Greek message. The Holy Spirit grasped them. God opened their hearts and minds to believe in Jesus Christ. The preaching took hold! It made sense. There were wide eyes, head nods and receptivity. God moved those hearers to believe.

I pray you've had an experience like this...where the Holy Spirit took hold of your heart in such a way, you knew without a doubt God was with you.

Now they are telling other communities far and wide about the Lord Jesus. The peoples in Macedonia and Achaia are talking about this young church in Thessalonica. If there had been Tik Tok or Facebook back then, this story would have gone viral!

As Paul writes this letter of encouragement to the church at Thessalonica, he remembers three things about the community. He recalls their work of faith, their labor of love and their steadfastness of hope rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ. They became imitators of the Lord and it has changed their very lives and community. He knows they've suffered because of their beliefs. Paul worries about how they are getting along in challenging days.

This week, I've worried about how we – how are you - getting along in challenging days. The events that have unfolded since October 7th in Israel and Gaza have been horrific to behold. Being able to see images exactly as they are happening or through videos from cell phones is both helpful and hurtful. Please protect your spirit. Only watch enough or read enough to get the information you want or need. If the images become stuck in your minds' eye and you cannot release them, then turn everything off. The news will still be there tomorrow or next week.

When we as God's people encounter this kind of suffering, it can strain our faith and trust in God and the future. It is normal to ask questions. "Why God?" "Where are you God?" "Why do the innocent ones: elderly, young, men and women have to die?" As Lutherans we know how to call a thing what it is. The evil that reigned down that fateful day is evil. We also know how to sort through the varied voices and hold them in tension. We embrace a both/and not either/or theology.

The calamity is widening with more casualties and more countries involved. Yet faith rises up. Pastors Meghan and Gabi Aelabouni are ELCA missionaries to the Holy Land. You might recognize their names as they served Trinity Lutheran in Ft. Collins as a clergy couple. If anyone is competent to speak to the situation it is the Aelabouni's. Pr Gabi was born and raised as a Palestinian Christian, in the Galilee region of Israel/Palestine. He has served the ELCA in several capacities. Their children are Palestinian and have dual citizenship: United States and Israeli. The Aelabouni family lives in Jerusalem.

They are not without pain and grief. In their October newsletter they write: "We worship in the chapel at Redeemer, expecting a congregation of no one except the presiders. Instead, twelve come: young German volunteers; the representative for the Lutheran World Federation program in Jerusalem; an ELCA couple from Iowa. We sing the Kyrie and light candles. None of us make it through the sermon without crying. We share communion and end with an Advent hymn: Come Now, o Prince of Peace."

But their work continues as they accompany our ELCA companions, especially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Holy Land. They tell of an Arabic word, "sumud" (soo-mood) which means steadfastness or perseverance. A ministry will be reshaped and reformed as Sumud: for Justice in Palestine and Israel. In their newsletter a caption next to an unripened lemon says: Maybe hope is a green lemon bitter on the branch, trusting justice will ripen in its season. Pastor Mitri Raheb, Pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, says, "Hope is what we do today."

These words sound to me like the faith that Paul found in the church at Thessalonica. A community grounded in the work of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope in Christ.

NT Wright explains. "Each one demands effort. Faith is something you have to work at. It is not a 'work in the sense of a 'work of the law' done to earn God's

favor; but a work of love, done out of gratitude for grace. It means thinking the Gospel through, and bringing our minds and wills into line with it. Love – is a very practical thing – also requires the kind of effort we associate with hard physical work. Hope needs patience, which is also demanding.”

Said another way...out of our deep gratitude for God’s grace and love, we continue to ‘work’ at our faith. We sit with the Bible. We pray our prayers. We go through seasons where it seems faith comes easily and seasons where it is stagnant. And because of this incredible gift, we keep believing. We keep trusting. Not in ourselves. But in a trustworthy God.

Love...takes work. Anyone who is married or has a good friend knows this. Love takes time and attention. It takes patience and humility. It does it’s very best not to be resentful. Love rejoices for the other. Love bears all things – even the worst of events, love believes all things, and endures all things.

Hope...a friend of mine keeps two items on the shelf above her kitchen sink. Tylenol and a blooming plant. The blossoms give her hope, the pills take the pain away. Hope is what we can do today. It requires energy and thoughtfulness. But when the whole world looks dark, God shows us light. The morning star. A call from a dear friend. A kind doctor who promises to walk alongside for the whole journey.

King of Glory, I see this congregation as having the same characteristics as that dear group of people who dared to believe a crazy message about a living God. We understand growing in faith through easy and harder times. We know about working at loving others; including all peoples because they bear God’s image. We keep up the hope for one another...hope that we receive only from God.

There are candles at several places near the altar. During the remainder of the service, feel free to come up and light a candle. Offer a prayer. Offer your heart. God will know what to do.

In these days, we too, can and will, live by God’s grace, powered by the Holy Spirit, trusting God in all things. May Christians and Jews all over the world, do the same. Amen.