

November 19, 2023  
Lectionary 33, Year A  
The 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

### The Times and the Seasons

Last Sunday, I was not here. And, much to my shock to hear about it, those who did gather here for worship got a gospel reading object lesson. The gospel reading last week was about wise and foolish bridesmaids. The wise bridesmaids brought extra oil for their lamps so that they would have light when the bridegroom came. The foolish bridesmaids brought no extra oil and when the bridegroom came, they had to go to the market to buy more oil and because of that, they missed the wedding reception. The reason it was so cold in here last Sunday was because our oil delivery company missed a delivery, so we had no oil. It was a mistake on their part, but it was kind of timely, kind of ironic, that those who were here last Sunday got to experience the perils of running out of oil on the same Sunday when we were reminded to stay prepared, to be ready, to bring extra.

Meanwhile, while people were shivering at Emmanuel I was at worship at the chapel at Susquehanna, visiting our daughter, Abigail. There was heat in our worship space, so I didn't get to live the gospel reading. It was a 36-hour trip to visit Abigail. We left around 8:00 a.m. on Saturday and returned home around 8:00 p.m. on Sunday. John, Julia, and I went to see Abigail in a show, The Mystery of Edwin Drood. It was a fun show and Abigail and the other students did a great job with a challenging show that included audience participation and a potential for over 30 different endings.

While we were there, when Abigail wasn't busy with the show, we spent some time catching up with her, including discussing when she was coming home for Thanksgiving. Because also, while we were there, someone said, not to me, but in my hearing, "Can you believe that Thanksgiving is less than two weeks away?" And while the question wasn't directed at me, I answered it in my head and the answer was, "No. No, I cannot not believe that Thanksgiving is so close." In a self-protective move, my brain had imagined up an extra week of November, pushing Thanksgiving and Christmas a week back, farther away, with more time to prepare.

But, wishing and imagining doesn't make it so, the person, I was probably eavesdropping on, was right. Thanksgiving, at that point was a week and a half away. So, it was time to have the discussion with Abigail. When was she going to be able to come home? At first, she said Friday, as in last Friday, the 17<sup>th</sup>. Then she remembered that she had a class and changed her answer to Saturday.

I absorbed her answer, but didn't communicate it. It still seemed like a long way away. I think it was yesterday morning, when I said to my husband, Britton, "You know, I think Abigail is coming home today." I texted her to confirm. Indeed, she was coming home on Saturday, after her class. But still it didn't seem real, that it was time for Thanksgiving break already. And I still didn't communicate her imminent arrival widely, so after she arrived home and was thoroughly hugged and greeted by parents and siblings, I texted her grandmas to let them know that she was home safely. And the perfectly reasonable response from one of them was "What a great surprise!" Because she had been uninformed about the times and the seasons and for her, Abigail had come like a thief in the night.

To me, this whole time of year has come like a thief in the night. How could it be Thanksgiving? And looming right behind it, how could Advent and Christmas be coming so soon?

And in the bigger picture, how can Abigail be home for Thanksgiving of her sophomore year of college? I hope that her college experience is going by more slowly for her than it is for me. Because for me it feels like this, "Blink and second year is over."

I know that I'm not the only one who's having this relationship with the holidays quickly approaching. I have some friends who have been preparing for Christmas for weeks, if not months now, but many people that I have talked to lately seem to be shaking their heads in disbelief. How can it be November already? Thanksgiving already? Christmas already? The end of the year already. I had barely settled into 2023 and now 2024 is right around the corner. It's like someone hit fast forward on this year, on our lives.

In our epistle reading for today Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonica about the importance of being ready, of staying awake, staying alert, because the day of Jesus' return is imminent. He is warning them to live their lives in readiness, a kind of spiritual preparedness,

because though no one knows the day or the hour, it could be any day. It could be today. Paul doesn't want them to be caught sleeping, be caught off guard. And in order for them to be prepared for the day of Lord, the day of Jesus' return he commends to them a certain kind of lifestyle, living in faith, love, and hope. That is what he tells them. To live in the light and to put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

He urges them not to grow complacent with the ways of the world. In our reading for today Paul quotes a Roman slogan, one that invading Roman armies proclaimed to conquered nations, which they claimed to be a benefit of being subsumed by the empire, that they would bring "*Pacem et Securitas*"—*peace and security*. Paul's concern was that the church in Thessalonica, the community that he was preaching too, could far too easily settle back into the comfortable but unreliable promises and patterns of the world and lose sight of the promises of God and the patterns of life to which God had called them.

Paul was so concerned about that happening that, even though he says at the beginning of our reading for today, "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you," (1 Thessalonians 5:1) he proceeds to write, what translates into English as 216 words about it, reminding them to stay focused, to be ready, to live in certain ways, aware, alert, sober, not to take breaks from their living out of their faith, and to live in community where they can encourage one another and build each other up in faith, love, and hope, as, he says, they are already doing.

Paul's message isn't one of critique, but encouragement, not to change everything about what they're doing, but for them to be conscientious about staying together and staying on the right path, so that they aren't taken by surprise when the day of the Lord arrives.

I kind of live by my calendar. Colored coded, online, detailed, with alerts and alarms and reminders. And I kind of live by my to-do lists, one for home and one for work, both pages long, detailed, also with a color-coding system, that helps me keep up with everything. And yet, in spite of the systems that I use to keep myself organized, to keep my family, to keep our church humming along, still, it took a stranger's overheard comment for me really to absorb the major holiday sneaking up on me, like a thief in the night.

But here's what I know. I wouldn't have missed Thanksgiving altogether. Eventually I would have read my calendar more effectively and counted the days. But before that, my Thanksgiving celebrating community would have gotten my attention. Would have, in fact, actually said to me, "What are we doing for Thanksgiving? Can you believe that it's just a week away?" I know that that would have happened, because in fact, that's what did happen. Before I mentioned my newfound ability to read a calendar and absorb the proximity of Thanksgiving, my sister called me and said, "We need a plan." So, now there is one. Apparently, at least this year, I need a community to keep me focused on the fact that time marches on.

What Paul makes clear in our reading for today, is that, as Christians, we need a community so that we don't lose track of the hope of our faith, the hope of Jesus' return and the life that we live in Jesus now. If we don't have that community to encourage each other and build each other up, we can get focused on different promises, on different hopes, and miss the really important stuff, the stuff that we are called to as Christians, to live in faith, to share God's love, and to speak to the world of the mercy of God, which destines us, not for wrath, but for salvation.

We are called together to be that community for one another and today we welcome Patricia, Pat, Kelly, Parker, and Brooks, into that community, where we can help each other trust in God's promises, where together we can stay awake and alert to God's call, where we can share God's love with one another and God's world, and where we can live in God's light, and watch together, for the great and glorious day of the Lord. Amen.