



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Nov. 19, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Beloved"

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (NRSV)

5:1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.

5:2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

5:3 When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

5:4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief;

5:5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

5:6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober;

5:7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.

5:8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

5:9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

“Beloved”

My former professor of pastoral theology Robert Dykstra tells an interesting story in his most recent book *Finding Ourselves Lost*.¹

He writes of Joshua Bell, who was one of the leading classical violinists in the world in the early 2000s. On a spring day in Washington D.C., Joshua Bell played what he judged to be six of the most beautiful violin pieces ever written. He played them on a violin valued at \$3.5 million. And he did it alone in a busy subway station, wearing baggy jeans and t-shirt. At a concert hall, the night before, where Bell played in the symphony, seats sold for hundreds of dollars, but here, this incognito performance was free to anyone who happened to pass by.

Bell performance was an experiment – would passersby hear this transcendent music in their hurry to catch a subway? As *The Washington Post* put it the next day, “In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?”

Turns out, the answer is no. Bell and a nearby reporter counted over a thousand people passing by. Of those, only seven stopped to listen. Would you have stopped? I’d like to think I would, but if I’m being honest with myself, I know I wouldn’t. I go from point A to point B in my life, not taking the time to stop and hear the music. I mean, don’t we all have places to be?

The one characteristic Bell found among those who stopped: the majority were children. Overwhelmingly, children were those who had time and curiosity enough to hear the music.

But you and I, get busy. We get stressed. Where have you felt stress this week?

After all, we’ve got to get those kids through the car line before they get marked tardy again.

We’ve got to make it for another meeting, another meeting, another meeting. This company isn’t going to run itself, after all.

And of course, we’ve all got our worries. Have you seen what they are doing to each other on the news? Truth be told, I can get so in my head most days, worry, stress. I can get so in my head with my own survival. I walk right past beautiful

¹ I found this story and the quotes in Robert C. Dykstra, *Finding Ourselves Lost: Ministry in the Age of Overwhelm* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 46-48.

music, beautiful sunrises, cherished friends, beloved community. I walk past them every day. What did you walk past this week?

Beloved...you are all children of light and children of the day, Paul writes to the Thessalonians. It sounds like he is trying to remind them.²

In the letter, Paul seems to be responding to a question the Thessalonians asked him. Perhaps in another letter lost to history, they seem to be asking, ‘When will the Lord return?’

But that question doesn’t really interest Paul:

You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. In other words, you can’t predict the unexpected.

He’s more interested in a question under the question. ‘When will the Lord return?’ That’s a question about anxiety, about security.

Many of you have heard the term *Pax Romana*, or the Peace of Rome. The Roman Empire promised peace, promised security, under imperial protection, enforced, of course, by force. Rome would conquer its neighbors, squash dissent, crucify insubordinates – that was Roman Peace.

But Christ followers in Thessalonica were told to put their trust, their security, not in Rome, but in Christ. And can you imagine, how anxious that must have made them. If we’re supposed to trust Christ, then, when on earth is he coming back, Paul?

Paul’s answer, is that Rome has it backwards. He says:

*When **they** say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them...But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day.*

This is a passage of reassurance, reminding the church of the love of God, a love that will not leave your side. In fact, most contemporary scholars believe v. 8 is mistranslated in the NRSV, which I read today. The NRSV says,

² In the following exegesis of the passage, I am indebted to Beverly Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 69-79.

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

The NRSV reads it as a command: *Put on the breastplate of faith*. But in the Greek, it's in the past tense. It's better translated:

*Since we belong to the day, let us be [sober], armed as we [already] are with faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*³

In other words, you don't have to look around for faith, hope, and love. You already have them; they are gifts of God. Remember, Paul is saying, remember you are beloved.

v. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We've all already got it.
We just forget about it.

This love, this assurance, this peace, they are like a song, constantly playing in a crowded subway. We've only got to turn our ears to hear.

But, again, if I'm being honest, I don't turn my ears. More often, I'm tempted by the Roman type of peace. The peace of 'might makes right.' And 'more means secure.' And 'achievement will be my salvation.'

That's the type of peace you have to force and work for.

That's the type of peace that is anything but peace.

It makes you forget you're beloved.

It makes you feel like you're never good enough.

Beloved...you are all children of light and children of the day. If only we could hear that song.

On Wednesday of last week, the church staff had an interesting conversation during our weekly meeting about whether or not it is appropriate for the church to sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" during Advent this year. It's a question Presbyterian

³ This is a paraphrase of the translation from Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 249.

churches have been having around the country. I know, because pastors have been talking about it online for weeks. It's a question of the first stanza:

*O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here*

What do those words mean, we asked, when the modern state of Israel is at war with its neighbors? Justifiably so, of course, but with the collateral damage to the people of Gaza, how do we sing that song, with those images on the news every day?

What is Israel captive to, after all? Certainly, the hostility, antisemitism, and terrorism of its neighbors. But also, what about its own militarism?

I know, that's an easy thing for me to say, an easy, superior finger to point, here in the safety and security of my own country, with its own military, the largest in the world, its own economy that keeps on churning and churning and churning.

The better question to ask is: What are we captive to?
What am I captive to?

The staff, as you can imagine, had a diversity of views on this subject. Hardly anyone yelled at each other. Peter may have stood on the table at one point to make his point, but that's hardly unusual; it happens in most staff meetings. Everyone had great ideas.

After thinking about it for some time, here is where I landed: we need that song this year, because of all the ways we are captive today, for all the ways we yearn this year, for Emmanuel.

We need that song, because of all the ways we fail to hear the song, the song of God reminding us that we are beloved.

Beloved...you are all children of light and children of the day.
It sounds like Paul is trying to remind them of their belovedness.
What will it take, to remind us?

William Styron was a southern writer who died in the early 2000s. He is often seen as the successor of Hemingway and Faulkner. He would write these brooding, melancholic novels, like his early book *Lie Down in Darkness*.

Pastoral theologian Donald Capps, recounts that in William Styron's memoir, *Darkness Visible*, he tells a story of his own dark night of the soul.⁴ Styron himself dealt often with clinical depression and this was a night deep in that depression. On that dark night, Styron was watching a movie, where a character was walking up the hallway of a music conservatory, and as he passed a room, a beautiful voice sang Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody*. And hearing that song, in that movie, William Styron thought of his mother, who would sing that very song to him as a boy. That moment didn't draw him out of his depression completely, but he remembered, nonetheless, in that moment that he was beloved. That he was beloved.

Where have you heard the song that reminds you that you are beloved?

Every week, we come to this place, and we sing these hymns. We hear this beautiful choir. We read these scriptures. We say these prayers.

And, yes, sometimes, it feels like we are going through the motions.

And yes, certainly, sometimes, the heaviness of the week may make it so you can hardly find your voice.

When you can hardly find your voice, listen. See if you can hear the person next to you, singing. See if you can hear in their voice that song of faith, hope, and love.

And it's even more subtle than that. It's the greeting from someone in the narthex. It's the smile a teacher directs toward child in a Sunday school room. It's the way a family scootches over to make room for you in the pew, happy to see your face.

In all these ways, we hear, and we carry, the message that in Christ, all are beloved, that you are beloved.

Each of us is Joshua Bell, playing that beautiful violin in the crowded subway station. A lonely voice in a crowded street, everyone trying to find or earn security in a world of scarcity.

⁴ I found this story in Donald Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 44.

As a church collectively on Sunday, and then each of us also throughout the week, we play the music of faith with our lives. We play it for a world, so weighed down, so desperately in need to hear that all are beloved.

And we play it for each other. Because, each of us too, can find ourselves as one of those busy subway commuters, trying to get from point A to point B, working ourselves to the bone in a world where love seems in short supply.

Some days you help play the music.
Some days, you need to strain your ears to hear it.

It is a song that the church carries, but it does not come from us. It comes from God. It a gift from God.

Reminding us, *Beloved. Beloved. You are all children of light and children of the day. You are beloved.* And that is where we find our security.

Amen.