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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Dreading the End Times? Fear Not!”

Scripture Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Dear people of God, it is 68 AD and what is left of the decimated Christian community of Rome is breathing a sigh of relief. The news is quickly spreading that the tyrannical Emperor Nero has committed suicide. But the remaining Christians refuse to be lulled into believing that things will be fine for them now. Many of these believers are ethnic Jews and they hear reports that Roman armies are marching toward their beloved city, Jerusalem. That could only mean trouble for their countrymen. But an even more frightening prospect is a rumor accompanying Nero’s death that he will be resurrected in their time.

A new prophecy is being secretly circulated among the Christians. It is simply called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” Many of the prophecies in this book are coded so that if it falls into the hands of enemies, they would not realize that it contains a veiled reference to the triumph of Jesus Christ over pagan Roman rule, especially his victory over the Beast, the Anti-Christ, one who had “received a death-blow, but its mortal

wound had been healed” (Revelation 13:3). The identity of the Beast, the Anti-Christ, was 666. The Christians of Rome all knew to whom this symbolic number referred. It could be only that depraved despot, Nero. Could it be true that Nero, now finally deceased, would return to life? Would the Christian community still need to cringe in fear over this despicable human being, the most cruel man who ever lived?

Since his beloved mentor, the apostle Paul has been executed by Nero, the anonymous writer of what we today call Second Thessalonians seeks to pacify these Christians in the apostle’s name so that they continue living as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. This anonymous writer has heard that quite a few believers, thinking that the Lord’s return is near, have quit their jobs and are just sitting around all day waiting for the end of the world. Such idleness was certainly not what either Jesus or Paul had in mind for them to do while awaiting the Lord’s return. Though the apostle told them in First Thessalonians that the Lord would come as a thief in the night, at any time, they were still expected to prepare for it by remaining steadfast in their labor for the church and God’s kingdom. Christ would not be pleased if, upon his return to earth, he found any of his followers just hanging around doing nothing. That’s not being faithful. That would be showing disrespect to Christ. As he

himself said while he was still on earth, “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then those who believed that they were his followers said, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you”? He answered them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:42-45). Those are the works, among others, that we should be doing, even today. There is no excuse for Christians just hanging around doing nothing. Not in 68 AD and not today.

From the earliest days of the church, Christians have always lived in the expectation that Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, could return at any moment. This wouldn't be like his first appearance, humble and unnoticed in some dark corner of an insignificant town, but a cosmic event that would grab the attention of the whole world, an event that would mark the climax of history on earth. Christ's followers have always believed that when this earth-shattering event took place, they would be gathered together with their Lord, all evil would be destroyed, and God's kingdom would be consummated on earth as all God's people would be

resurrected in glorified bodies, never to die again.

But as the weeks, months, and years went by without anything remotely resembling Christ's return, some of his followers started wondering if they had understood him correctly. This caused a crisis in their faith. By the time of 68 AD, with the main leaders of the Christian Church all martyred, namely, James, Paul, and Peter, how could the church carry on with business as usual? They started wondering if Jesus had forgotten about them? They knew that Paul expected Jesus to return within his lifetime. He was wrong about that. Could he have been wrong about Christ returning altogether?

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, "Jesus was a typical man-- they always say they will call back and they never do." Such was the situation in 68 AD. Some believers were questioning the meaning of Christ's return. Some were challenging the original belief in Christ's return. And some were reinterpreting what Jesus meant and what the leaders of the church taught them about Christ's return.

Already when Paul wrote the original letter to the Thessalonians back in 51 AD, there were some who were saying that those who had died in Christ have missed out on his return. Paul corrects them in that letter by saying that the dead in Christ shall rise first and accompany him upon

his return to earth, so that we should not grieve those who have passed on. They will surely not miss out on Christ's Second Coming. There were others who were saying that Christ's return was only his resurrection of the dead. That's all he meant. Christ rose from the dead on Easter Sunday and that was his return to earth. There will not be another one. Paul spends time correcting those persons as well, insisting that the Lord's return is yet a future event. Still others argued that there is no resurrection, but rather, that Christ's return is only his spiritual presence in their lives, and nothing more is going to happen. Paul spends the most time arguing against that point. The entire 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, 58 verses long, the longest chapter of any of Paul's writings, is one lengthy sustained argument against the view that there is no physical resurrection from the dead that will happen at the end of time.

Nevertheless, what are we supposed to do today, some 2000 years later, with this belief in Christ's return? If it can happen at any time, like a thief in the night, how can there yet be signs that will warn us when it's about to happen? And what are these signs? And what are we supposed to be doing in the meantime?

Talk about the Second Coming of Christ is sort of like the dysfunctional cousin we all have that we dread to invite at Thanksgiving

or Christmas because we know that he'll either get drunk, hit on someone's wife, or say something embarrassing. We don't understand him and we all feel awkward around him, so we try not to draw attention to the fact that he's part of the family. Oh, his name is still mentioned, and he still gets invited to weddings and parties, but we try to keep him in the background and not pay too much attention to him. That's the way that we treat Christ's return, isn't it? We say that we believe that he will come again. We acknowledge in our Sunday liturgies that he will come again. But if we were asked, what do we mean by it, do we have a ready answer?

I know retired clergy who have never preached a single sermon on the return of Christ. So, it seems that it's not just you folks in the pews who have trouble with this belief; the clergy and theologians do also, at least those from mainline and liberal Christian denominations. That's not the case with our evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters. They preach about Christ's return all the time. They've written more books on the Second Coming of Christ and the end times than any other Christian doctrine over the past 50 years. These have been the best-selling Christian books as a whole, such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" series of books.

Why have we conceded the Second Coming to the fundamentalists? Are we really embarrassed by it, or are we embarrassed by the image of those who believe it? You know, the nutcase standing on the street corner shouting that the end of the world is near and how everyone will burn in hell if they're not ready when Christ returns.

Well, that image isn't new. That's exactly what was happening in 68 AD that the writer of 2 Thessalonians is attempting to address. Believers were quitting their jobs and telling everyone that the end of the world would take place any day, so they should just wait on mountaintops for Christ to appear. That's why the writer of this epistle says, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Yes, that's found in the Bible; that's found in this very letter of our Sermon Lesson. That's how bad things were in some Christian communities.

And so, the writer of this letter says, "we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). You know what happens when rumors start flying. A worried and upset congregation leaves no one at ease. Once stories start being spread about what such and such person said, what such and such person did, or any sort of disturbance, then a

congregation can easily become fractured and divided.

That's what was happening to the church in 68 AD. These Christians were being shaken in their faith, which was more threatening to them than any earthquake. Momentous events were occurring: the death of Nero, Galba immediately taking over as Roman Emperor, the Roman Commander Titus setting up camp at Jericho and cutting off escape routes toward Jerusalem, forcing the Jewish people either to escalate the hostilities or surrender. 68 AD was truly an ominous year. And to top it off, the rumor was being believed that Nero would not remain dead, but would return in that generation's lifetime and rise to power as the Anti-Christ. No wonder that many Christians were alarmed. This was not just a mild questioning about how things might turn out, but an upheaval of theological doubt threatening to destroy Christianity as Nero never could. Having clung to the teachings of the apostle Paul while he was alive, these Christians were now fearing that the foundation of their faith was being pulled out from underneath them. They were paralyzed, scared, and uncertain what to believe and how to act. Should they work or wait? Have they already been resurrected to a new life or is it something yet future? Is Christ going to return or not?

We must have ready answers to these questions today. On the one

hand, it's good that we're not like a lot of other Christians who are obsessed about the end times, identifying every major newspaper event as somehow fulfilling a biblical prophecy. But on the other hand, too many of us tend either to ignore any talk about Christ's return or are simply embarrassed by it.

We certainly must hold on to the belief of the Second Coming. After all, we confess this on the first Sunday of every month during Holy Communion, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." This profession is a fundamental summary of our Christian faith. When we recite these words, we're saying that we can now be energized to live in a radically different way in the world because we're sure that Christ will one day return to affirm the value of life on earth. Our faith in the promised return of Jesus Christ is not something we can afford to lose. The apostle Paul didn't avoid teaching about the end, for to him it was a source of encouragement. It should serve as a sense of encouragement to us today also. And so, we certainly shouldn't be just standing around waiting for the rapture. Christians should not be spectators in the unfolding of history. We should be the principal players that make history happen.

But we must be careful and not become preoccupied with trying to

chart the exact timetable of Christ's return and the events leading up to it. We should not speculate that President Obama is the "lawless one" of 2 Thessalonians or that radical Islam is the Beast of Revelation. In their original context, Nero was considered both. Whether there is an additional meaning to those symbols, only God knows. In the meantime, we must continue to do good in Christ's name rather than obsess about the end.

"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" (2 Thessalonians 2:16). Amen.