

In the Meantime

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Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that through the proclamation of Your Word, through the reading of Your Word that You would strengthen our faith for these days, that You would inspire us by Your Holy Spirit, that our hope would be secure and that it would overwhelm the circumstances, the doubts, the confusions in our hearts and so bless us this day as we hear from You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In the meantime, as this sermon is recorded, we still don't know who the president will be next year. As this sermon is recorded, we still have no idea if there is an end in sight with this COVID-19 pandemic. It's hard to be hopeful when there's so much uncertainty around us. One of the things I've loved about the scripture, especially lately, is how often I've found, especially in the Psalms, comfort. Comfort in the fact that the Bible speaks to the reality of our lives. Comfort in the fact that the writers of scripture, especially the psalmist, take seriously how we feel, what our reactions are to the world that is around us. And so in our scriptures today, as we come to the end of our church year, we see God addressing us, addressing the distress and uncertainty of our circumstances, addressing our impatience, addressing our tendency to run, our tendency to run ahead, and to, maybe even, run away. But we are called to trust in our Lord Jesus. We are called to believe in the promises He makes because He is faithful. That's our hope. That's our anchor. That's our confidence for tomorrow and for today. So I want us to read and study the Bible and understand how it roots itself in the reality of life. God knows our sin and our brokenness. God's word deals with life as it is, not as we wish it would be. Not even as we think it should be.

When we look at our reading in Psalm 70 today, we see at the beginning and at the end, the distress in the heart of the psalmist. He says, "Hasten, O God, to save me, O Lord; come quickly to help me." He's acknowledging that he needs help. He needs to be rescued from these circumstances in which he finds himself and then, as we come to the end in verse 5 of our reading today, it says, "Yet, I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God." At the beginning of our reading, and at the end of our reading, the psalmist is in a place of need. You could even say a place of desperation and yet in the middle of this psalm, after acknowledging the hardship, the struggle, the persecution, those that are against him, he says this in verse four, "But may all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; may those who love Your salvation always say, 'let God be exalted!' May those who love your rescuing them, your salvation, may they be glad in You. The psalmist's hope was in God, in His faithfulness, in His promise. Our hope is in God, in His faithfulness, and in His promise. And He speaks to the reality of our doubts and fears and uncertainties. He speaks to the reality of the circumstances of our lives in the meantime. While we're yet waiting for Christ to return, for the end of suffering and tears and sorrow. While we're waiting for those things to be no more, ultimately in the kingdom of God. And yet that reality, that struggle that we experience today, it's not new. It's not new to us, even in our own experiences in our journey in life. It's certainly not new to the church and

it's not new to those who the writers of the scripture were addressing. Struggle and hardship are some of the realities of this life in which we live.

Consider Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. What chance did this church have? It was made up of recent converts to Christianity, both Jews and Gentiles. They lacked a full understanding of faith. They struggled under severe persecution. As Paul writes this letter, he addresses the fact that even from the beginning. He told them that it would be difficult. Even from the beginning of sharing the gospel with them, as they came to faith, they understood that they would face opposition. There would be those in the culture around them that would not accept their faith, that would not accept their values, that would challenge them, that would call them, not only silly, but dangerous, and would, in fact, persecute them. Could a church in those circumstances remain faithful? Could a church in those circumstances thrive in spite of a social climate that works against it? Well, they did and the church has, and we have, and we are, and we will because the promise that is ours is a promise that extends to us, not only from the past in Jesus' death and resurrection, but it extends to us out of the future which God holds and He is faithful.

In 1 Thessalonians, we hear in Paul's writings words of encouragement. He was writing to this church that had been oppressed and was struggling. He was writing to Christians who expected that Christ was going to return before then, before now and that they would be spared the hardship in some fashion. In truth, this church in Thessalonica was fearful that some of their loved ones who had already died, who had already experienced death itself would miss out on the coming promise, the coming glory of God. And so in our text today, Paul seems to address this concern about those who have died in the meantime, prior to the fulfillment of this promise that we have in the death and in the resurrection of Jesus. They were beginning to wonder, as we sometimes wonder. Could the naysayers be right? Could this long-delayed return of Jesus, in fact, mean that maybe He's not coming at all or at least, not coming in time for them or those they love? And so we see here, an amazing reassurance for them and for us.

It's rooted in this understanding of dealing with the end of times when Christ will return. That's called the study of eschatology, the study of the end-times. Theologically, it's a branch concerned with the final events in history, in the history of the world, and the history of humankind, a belief concerning death, the end of the world, and ultimately our destiny as humankind. So how does that speak to us? What does the study of eschatology say? Does it matter how it ends if it doesn't end in our lifetime? Does the end matter for what we struggle with today? You see, sometimes, we feel like whatever it is that God has in store in the future, it's just coming too late for us. If it can't address my today, if it can't address the struggles I'm having right now, if it can't speak into my relationships and my circumstances, if it can't speak to the culture that is my life today, your life today, does it matter? Indeed, it does. In fact, many of our Biblical texts, especially those addressing eschatology, addressing the end-time, are written in a form of literature known as apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic literature is a type of writing that the Jewish and early Christians had. The bulk of it stems from the years to 200 BC to about 100 AD. It contains visions or revelations from God

concerning the imminent coming of the end of the age, that is, the end of the present evil age and the final advent, the final coming and revealing of God and His kingdom. Apocalyptic comes from a Greek word called apocalipsis and it really means a revelation or a disclosure, a revealing. If we can see now what the future holds, it changes how we respond today. It, in fact, does impact today. Apocalyptic literature was often written in this creative and unusual and often, for us, hard to understand symbolism, but the people to whom it was written were people who were in an oppressive situation, upheaval for whom there was no light at the end of the tunnel. They couldn't see how things could get better and yet it's written to bring them hope and encouragement. It's written to say, "Look, I know it seems bad right now, but in the end, God will come through. God's got this" and so it was written to give them hope. It was also written so that those who were oppressing them might not understand what was being said and therefore, wouldn't take away that writing that would give them such hope.

There's a lot of diversity in that literature, but it's written with this incredible sense of optimism toward God's predetermined end. I'd like to think of eschatology and apocalyptic literature as telling us that God reaches out of His future, embraces His people, and then brings them out of their darkness and struggle into His reality. It's about God meeting us where we are and taking us to Himself. We have that hope and it is an anchor for our soul, firm and secure, and at the end of this writing, Paul is teaching the believers that not only should they have hope, but that they should encourage one another with this hope. The resurrection of Jesus, the victory over sin and death is ours today because it is ours for our every tomorrow. In that hope, we can live and in that hope, we can speak and in that hope, we can endure these present circumstances and whatever the future might throw at us because God ultimately holds us and holds our future.

We also heard today Jesus himself speaking to that end. The language is not unfamiliar. The language is done in a parable. Jesus teaches the parable of the ten virgins here in Matthew 25. It is Jesus as the bridegroom and us as the bride. This story of the ten virgins has five of them with extra oil, not knowing when He will return and five of them only with the oil that's in the lamp that burns down as they wait and eventually runs out just as He comes. It's rooted, this story and several others in the New Testament, in an understanding of the wedding reality of that day. What would happen is a young man and a young woman would be betrothed. After their betrothal, the young man would go back to his parents' house and he would build an additional room for him and his bride to live in. After he had prepared that place, he would come back to his bride and he would pick her up, together, with friends and family, and celebration. They would journey together back to the place that he had prepared for them and that's where they would live their life together.

We see it described also in John 14, but it's here in this text, there's an anticipation that the bridegroom would come to receive the bride but they have to wait. What are they to do, in the meantime? You see, the five foolish virgins didn't realize how long it would take. They thought there was plenty of oil in the lamp. They thought they had all that they needed to wait out the return of the groom, but they didn't. Sometimes I feel like I don't either. Sometimes I feel that the darkness and the struggle of our lives today, I'm starting to run to the end of the oil in my

lamp. It's starting to become harder to shine and yet the reminder that says indeed the Groom is returning. It's not that He's gotten cold feet. It's not that He's changed his mind. He will come at the right time for us. He will come and we will be able to join Him in that future hope, where there are no more tears, where there is no more sorrow. We can have hope today because of the promised tomorrow and the faithfulness of the One who made that promise.

I don't know about you though. I don't like to wait you may or may not know that Pastor Jonna and I attended the same university. I'll never forget the first time I visited Azusa Pacific University. I was being led around by a student who was a junior. I was a hopeful coming freshman. We went into the cafeteria and others like me who were hopeful coming freshmen were standing in line for food. The junior that was with me, he just walked right past them and walked up to an open space in the window and got food for himself and for me. I thought he was being rude, but it turns out that at Azusa Pacific University, they don't use lines in the cafeteria. They use what's called the scramble system. You look for where there are openings, where there's food you want, and you go and get the food you need and wait until others clear out of the way for the other food that you want. While it seems utterly chaotic, it works immensely well. While our world today may seem incredibly chaotic, God will work it out. God's got this. It seems chaotic to us, but it will work and it will work better than it would work if things happen the way we want them to happen. Now I do sometimes blame Azusa Pacific University for teaching me to be less patient.

What I want to say to you today is we're not asked simply to wait. We're asked to wait in hope. Just as the scripture teaches us. We are not to grieve as those without hope. We are to allow the hope that is in the promise and faithfulness of God to elevate us, to lift our eyes, to lift our chins, to allow us to stand up straight and face the challenges of this life, knowing the faithfulness and love and goodness of our God. Is it easy? Probably not. Are there times we're afraid and desperate? Certainly, I am, but like our psalmist today, perhaps we simply cry out to God for help. Perhaps we simply remind one another that God is each and every day good and worthy of our praise no matter our circumstances. So while we're in this dark, uncertain, frustrating time, we pray for help. We praise God. We pray for help and we walk forward in hope, knowing that our future is secure, knowing that what we have is not just a hope for tomorrow, but a living hope. A living hope that can allow us, even in uncertain times, to put our trust in the One who was ultimately trustworthy, to lean on one another, to be reminded of where our hope is, and, in fact, to recognize that the circumstances of our lives today gives us an incredible opportunity. For we, like Paul, like the other followers of Jesus who wrote the scripture for us in the New Testament, for the followers of God in the New Testament who knew their hope was in Christ, we too can use these words, so that God through His Spirit and through us can encourage others with this hope that will not disappoint. These are hard days, but our tomorrow, it's certain. These are tough days, but you know what? We have Jesus present and in us. We have the Holy Spirit leading and guiding us. We can grow and we can serve and we can serve and encourage one another. Thanks be to God!