



DEEPER WATERS

December 17, 2017, Third Sunday in Advent

First Thessalonians 5:16-24

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

I can still remember the day I learned how to swim. We were visiting at my Aunt and Uncle's house. They had a pool in their backyard so it was always a treat to go and see them in the summertime. After several summers of clinging to the edge of the pool and wading in the shallow end, I finally got up some courage. I let go of the side of the pool and somehow by simultaneously kicking my legs and flailing my arms I propelled myself across the pool. I was so excited. I could swim! And perhaps even more importantly I could now be in the deep end of the pool where all the adults were. It was one of those boundary-crossing, liberating moments like when you get your driver's license, or move out of your parents' home. The deep waters were the place to be!

Well, today's lesson from First Thessalonians will place us in deep waters as well. At first blush it is pretty straightforward. Paul is telling us a bunch of stuff to do and not do. "Rejoice always!" "Pray without ceasing!" "Give thanks!" "Do not quench the Spirit." "Do not despise the words of the prophets." One scholar notes that this section of the text "is sometimes labeled "Paul's shotgun paraenesis" because Paul quickly fires off one round of imperatives after another."¹

But the expectations Paul is placing upon us are so high that instead of spurring us to action they almost have the reverse effect. If a doctor tells us we need to lose 10 pounds we can give some serious thought about how we can do that.

If a doctor tells us we need to lose 100 pounds, who can even begin to consider doing that? Rejoice always? Pray without ceasing? Really? If you ask me to pray



more often or rejoice on a more regular basis, I will try my best. But always and without ceasing? My neurotic brain has way too much going on to commit to anything that all-consuming that does not focus on me and my own insecurities. Besides, let's be honest, every moment of every day does not present itself to us as a gift worthy of rejoicing. We butt heads with someone at work and have a moment of frustration. Yet another natural disaster brings devastation and the harrowing aftermath fills us with weary resignation regarding the overwhelming suffering in our world. Yet another terrorist attack fills us with dread and angst. A sleepless night worrying over our children's grades leaves us cranky and worried. Let alone the series of endless petty distractions and annoyances that keep us from continually humming "Kumbaya."

Advent is a season filled with expectations about how God's saving presence in Jesus Christ can transform who we are. But other than daydreaming about some future new-and-improved version of ourselves, this text seems to offer less to us than we might need in this season.

However, I don't think this list of apparently overwhelming exhortations is directed at some inaccessible, future-perfect version of ourselves. I think Paul is speaking to exactly where we are right now in our jumbled, imperfect and hectic lives. I also do not think Paul has the expectation that every word upon our lips in every moment of the day will be one of praise or prayer.

Paul is swimming in deeper waters than our outward, visible behaviors. And Paul is calling us to live in a deeper place than most of us currently inhabit. Most of us have our daily existence dominated by the events that occur throughout our days. If we have a great new idea at the office, find a twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk, and the kids bring home As from school, we call it a good day and we are in a good mood. We are grateful for the life we have been given and might even offer a prayer of thanksgiving to our God. But if a big deal falls apart at work, we get stuck in midtown traffic on the way home, and the kids have the flu, we call it bad day and we are in a bad mood. We do not feel all that grateful for our lives and we are not all that eager to offer thanks to God or anyone for anything.



We all know there is no way to stop having good and bad days. Like waves crashing on the shore, even the best of lives go up and down on a regular basis. The scholar Abraham Smith describes this metaphor and then references the theologian Paul Tillich's call to find a home in the "depth of existence."² In the deep waters there is not so much to and fro. There is not so much aggressive change and chaos at play. There is a stillness to be found that does not deny the choppy waters above but has found a calm and quiet place beneath them.

So much of what dominates our mood, our orientation to the world, revolves around what occurs on the surface of our lives. We become imprisoned to the context of the moment. It can be exhausting to be held under the control of every little twist and turn of the day. It can also be detrimental to our spiritual life. The poet Christian Wiman writes, "How does one remember God, reach for God, realize God in the midst of one's life if one is constantly being overwhelmed by that life?"³

We need to get out of the shallow end of the pool and find our way to deeper waters. We need to dig beneath our surface identities and circumstances to the core of who we are and what we have. In Advent we are called to watch closely for the arrival of God's saving presence in our midst. But first we need to figure out in which direction to turn. It is a question of orientation. Orientation is about two things: knowing where we are and knowing where we wish to be headed.

When I was growing up I was a Boy Scout. I spent my share of time in the middle of the woods with a compass and a map engaging in orientation. I have to tell you, I was never very good at it. And to this day I am still not very good at it.

My wife, Marta, always knows exactly where we are. When I lose her in a bookstore I know I will find her wherever the maps are. She loves to know exactly where she is all of the time. I never need GPS in the car if Marta is with me. And that is a very good thing because I can just never work up much enthusiasm for paying attention to exactly where I am.



But I am able to recognize how often my location is found captive to the ups and downs of my day. I do have a passionate desire to do a better job of orienting myself toward this deeper place, to this depth of existence. And that deep place I am hungering to turn toward is found in the final two verses of our text this morning. *“May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”*

I have a photo that hangs in the hallway outside of my apartment. It is actually two photos interposed one upon the other. The photo in the center is of Sixth Avenue in all of its hustle and bustle glory. It is classic New York center of the world stuff. But there is another photo that encircles that one in its entirety. It is of the inside of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. And in the juxtaposition all of Sixth Avenue fits in the center aisle of the cathedral. The caption at the bottom of the dual photograph is “We live under a vast canopy woven by the ages.”

In this Advent season we find ourselves living simultaneously in the already and the not yet. We look back on an event that occurred two thousand years ago when God chose to take on human form and sacrifice everything to demonstrate a boundless love for us that exceeds every boundary that keeps us from the divine. And we look forward to the ways in which Christ returns in our midst, continually bringing us God’s saving love.

If we are willing to look beyond the surface, the fleeting ups and downs of our days we find ourselves, deep down nestled between God’s saving actions of the past and the saving actions that will continue to occur into all of our futures. We are being cradled, “spirit, soul, and body” by the one whose promises stand as guarantees. You made a mistake at the office?

The God of peace has sanctified you. In other words you have been drawn up into the very holiness of God where every wound, and imperfection is washed away. Feeling unappreciated at home?



The God of peace has sanctified you. In other words since before you were born, to today, and on through eternity you are ensconced in an unconditional love beyond measure. Worried about what is to come for you and for those whom you love?

The God of peace has sanctified us all. In other words we belong deeply and completely to God, and in that destination we will always find a home.

If all that is true, and it is, how can we not rejoice always? Perhaps we cannot spend every day with a permanent smile, and a song for Jesus in our heart. When a cab hurtles through a puddle and we end up soaked with spray a few other fine words may be found upon our lips. But for every up and down we can recognize that all of it is contained within a much larger framework. “We live under a vast canopy woven by the ages.” And the weaver of that canopy is Jesus Christ, the God of peace. We have indeed been sanctified, perfectly healed, perfectly loved, perfectly claimed by our God.

And the drama that consumes so much of our emotional energy is the proverbial tempest in a teapot. Work may be a hassle, spouses might get on our nerves, Christmas cookies may burn...but spirit, soul, and body, we are enveloped by our faithful God of Peace. Everything else is small potatoes. So let's turn and swim toward those deeper waters of the divine. Rejoice. Always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Smith, Abraham, *The New Interpreter's Bible: vol. XI*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000, p. 731.

2 Smith, p. 734.

3 Wiman, Christian, *My Bright Abyss*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013, p. 87.