

Broth and Blessings  
A Sermon preached by  
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St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Kamloops  
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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

<sup>2</sup>We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly <sup>3</sup>remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, <sup>5</sup>because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

<sup>6</sup>And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <sup>9</sup>For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <sup>10</sup>and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

- I must confess that I wrote these reflections at my desk here at St. Andrew's Hall while eating a delicious Turkey sandwich leftover from our Thanksgiving meal offered to residents last weekend. Normally, we have a large seated meal for over 150 people with a huge buffet of turkey, potatoes, stuffing and farm fresh vegetables. Our wonderful chaplain Rev. Sumarme Goble leads a thanksgiving service after dinner and for so many of our students from overseas, it is their first experience of a North American thanksgiving festival.
- This year, with Covid-19, we could not gather as usual in community and instead Sumarme cooked up some turkey and we made sandwiches to hand out to residents while wearing masks and gloves. It was one of those leftover sandwiches I was enjoying while writing today's sermon. Thanksgiving was different this year at St. Andrew's Hall, and I imagine it was different in your house as well.
- Oh no doubt there were some of the usual touchstones, turkey and the trimmings, perhaps a handful of family while other chairs that normally would be filled sat vacant. And I imagine this week many of your kitchens had a beautiful aroma as you boiled up the left-over turkey bones to make a beautiful broth. The week after Thanksgiving is also an opportunity to simmer in the grace and gratitude that we expressed last weekend in the midst of a difficult and troubled world.

- When asked to preach today I had a look at the lectionary readings for this Sunday and was pleased to see Paul's opening remarks to the church in Thessalonica that are focused on thanksgiving.
- I was last in Thessaloniki two years ago when my wife Laura and I led a pilgrimage tour for Presbyterians (more fun than it sounds!) in the footsteps of Paul that took us across Turkey, Greece and ended in Rome where Paul was martyred. Thessaloniki is about 500 km north of Athens, is the second largest city in Greece and today is a bustling seaport famous for its 15<sup>th</sup> Century White Tower.
- Our group was moving west, having visited Philippi earlier and held a worship service reading the famous story of Paul and Silas imprisoned singing hymns and converting the jailer's family, as well as visiting the traditional site of where Paul met Lydia, the businesswoman with a penchant for purple clothing. Since Paul was a tentmaker to pay the bills for his evangelistic ministry, it is believed by some scholars that Lydia was crucial in helping to introduce Paul by letter to the various guilds along the way. First stop after Philippi – Thessaloniki or Thessalonica as it is called in the Bible. Today, the greater Thessaloniki area has a population of over a million, but almost like Greater Vancouver has 3 million and the city of Vancouver only a little over 600,000, it is interesting to note that today Thessaloniki proper has a population of a little over 300,000. When Paul visited the city two thousand years ago there were 200,000 inhabitants.
- As we read in the Book of Acts Chapter 17 Paul and Silas arrive in the city and start to preach about the resurrection of Jesus. Paul, a faithful Jew and Torah scholar, would begin by proclaiming the resurrection in the local Synagogue, if rejected from there, or as in Athens later in this same Chapter from Acts he doesn't gain ground he would proclaim the resurrection in the marketplace while working or in philosophical debate spaces. In Thessalonica, Paul at first receives a warm welcome both from the Jewish community and a large number of pagan Greeks, including Scripture notes "prominent women" but after week three of proclaiming Jesus as Lord some have had enough. A mob forms and seeks to harm Paul and Silas. One of the new converts named Jason who was likely hosting Paul and Silas covers for them as they make an escape from the city headed to Berea further east. From there Paul heads to Athens and has Silas and Timothy remain for a time in the area to continue their ministry. From Corinth, just west of Athens and a far more important city than Athens in that day, Paul dictates a letter to the small, embryonic community of Christian faith forming in Thessalonica.
- How welcome Paul's words must have been to these new believers in Christ, who from the very start had experienced persecution for their faith. At times, unable to meet together for fear of their health, uncertain about the future.
- Friends, we too live in uncertain times. We are now onto our eighth month of a global pandemic that has fundamentally changed so much of how we live our lives. We too have been frightened to gather, and even when we do it is different than before.

- It can be easy to be shaken and uncertain about the future. Theologian Andy Crouch said recently that part of the trouble is knowing that we are all in a storm, but being uncertain whether it is in his words a blizzard that is intense and lasts a little while, winter – in this for a season, or a little ice age, in which everything is changed permanently as a result.
- How does this time feel for you? How are you experiencing the storm?
- Whether in church or society, we are all asking these questions about the uncertain and fearful time we find ourselves in. So, how to respond?
- Paul sends this letter to the little church in Thessalonica and pours out blessing upon the Christians in the city who he knew in person only a short while. Paul reminds them that he, and his missionary friends, remember them regularly in prayer – their work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, endurance inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Paul encourages them by reminding them that the message they heard, the truth they have given their lives over to, is not just simply human words but the power of the Holy Spirit. As evidence of this Paul notes that despite persecution and hardship, they have embraced their new identity as followers of Jesus with joy. This joy, he notes, is also a gift from the Holy Spirit. How could they be joyful otherwise in the circumstances they find themselves in?
- Paul commends them on imitating how they were following Jesus and ultimately imitating Christ. This is a curious phrase. Often something that is imitation is counterfeit. But that is not what Paul means here. To be like someone is a high honour. It's how Rabbis trained their disciples. Disciples didn't just want to learn the head knowledge of the Rabbi – they wanted to be like the Rabbi. To imitate him. Think about the people you've looked up to in your life. You didn't just want to know what they knew. You wanted to be like them – to form your character and habit after them. That's why Princeton Seminary President and Presbyterian minister Craig Barnes has said the question is not What Would Jesus Do? But rather What is Jesus doing right now. We are forming our lives as Christians in response to the power, presence and purpose of the risen, living Lord.
- Moreover, Paul rejoices that their imitation of Christ and the joy with which they live has become their witness to a wider, watching world. He sits in Corinth and notes that all over the Roman province of Macedonia, what we call northern Greece, North Macedonia, parts of Albania and Bulgaria today, as well as southern Greece – Athens and Corinth in the Roman province of Achaia knew of the faithfulness of those new Christians in Thessalonica. Amazing. What a witness. And what are people saying, that despite the hardship these Thessalonian Christians have turned from idols to the living God whom they praise through difficult days.
- My colleague Dr. Darrell Guder reminds us that when reading Scripture, we should ask how did this Bible story originally equip the community of faith for witness, and how does it equip us for witness today? Clearly, the Thessalonians would have been encouraged to

hear not only from Paul, but to hear how their steadfast love of the Lord Jesus was being made known throughout the region. Despite the struggle, God was blessing their work and witness. And how about for us today? Living through a time of pandemic is stressful and worrisome. And yet, we are not the first Christians to face these kinds of challenges. What we do with this time God has given us is critical. We will turn away from God in fear and anger, or will we turn towards God in thanksgiving and gratitude?

- Last weekend, as you celebrated Thanksgiving in the midst of the worst global pandemic in a Century what did you give God thanks for? No doubt many are thankful for the basic provisions of life: health, family, shelter and sustenance of body, mind and soul.
- Growing up on the Canadian prairies our Thanksgiving services would always have the sanctuary crowded with farm fresh produce in from the fields. And no matter what the year, we would always sing in our Thanksgiving services the classic hymn “Now Thank we all our God.” I was struck last week when researching the origins of the hymn, to discover that it was written by Martin Rinckart (1586-1649) who was a minister and musician in Eilenburg outside of Leipzig, Germany during the Thirty Years’ War. The city was full of plague and he was one of the last remaining ministers providing up to fifty funerals a day during the pandemic. And yet, he sat down and wrote:

Now thank we all our God  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom his world rejoices;  
who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.

- He wrote those words 1,500 hundred years after the Thessalonians were recognized for their faithfulness and yet his words of thanksgiving in the midst of difficult times continues in the same vein. How about for us some five hundred years later? Might we add our voices to the communion of saints who sings God’s praise at this very moment, that in these days after thanksgiving, these moments of broth and blessing we too might claim the gift of the Holy Spirit that brings joy in the midst of sorrow? If so, then God is pouring out his love on us even here, even now for the work produced by faith, labour prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope...
- In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.