

## Sermon for November 15th, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

A race of aliens visits earth one day. They come in peace and surprisingly, they speak English. Obviously, all of the heads of government and religious leaders want to speak to the aliens so they set up a meeting with our new visitors.

When it's the Pope's turn, he asks: "Do you know about our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?"

"You mean JC?", responds the alien. "Yeah, we know him! He's the greatest, isn't he? He swings by every year to make sure that we are doing ok".

Surprised, the pope follows up with: "He visits every year?! It's been over two millennia and we're still waiting for his SECOND coming!"

The alien sees that the pope has become irate at this fact and starts trying to rationalize. "Maybe he likes our chocolate better than yours?" The pope retorts "Chocolates? What are you talking about? What does that have to do with anything?" The alien says "Yea, when he first visited our planet we gave him a huge box of chocolates!" "Why? What did you guys do?"

Paul was writing to the community in Thessalonica likely around 51 CE. This may, in fact, be one of his first letters. He spends a lot of time talking about the return of Christ in this letter. In the early days of the church it was a widely held belief that Jesus was going to be back any minute. The focus was on being ready, no matter what or when.

This reading gives us the hint of Advent that is on our horizon. The season in which we spend our time mulling over the themes of waiting and Christ's return - which doesn't feel like it will be any minute for us, or does it?

There is more chatter online about the possibility of apocalypse than normal, all due to drama of the pandemic. Though a good portion of this chatter is in jest - Zombies being top of the list, some of it is serious.

The return of Christ, variously referred to as the Day of God, The Return of the Son of Man or the Apocalypse refers to a time that isn't just the literal return of the bodily form of Jesus, but rather, a time of "uncovering", of revelation of God in our midst spiritually.

In fact, the etymology of apocalypse is simply that "apo" means "un"...."kalupsis" means "to cover".

When the day of God arrives, all things are uncovered. The truth is revealed. What was hidden is brought into the light.

Be ready, Paul advises, for this will happen when you are unaware.

It is always happening, even now.

Think of the ways in which God has used this current crisis to appear in our midst and open our eyes to the Kingdom in new ways.

To the slowing down of the economy which has allowed pollution to diminish and the night sky to become more brilliant. The ways in which not being able to meet and be church in the usual ways has pushed us to care for our neighbours more practically, more immediately.

Like the church in Winnipeg, no longer able to meet in person gave each small group \$1000 to minister to the poor in their neighbourhoods. One of those small groups, which my Aunt is a part of, listened to the needs of a nursing home in their neighbourhood. The staff have been working daily without a day off for over three weeks and the residents, many poor, sit alone in their rooms without technology even to distract them. Their small group is sending pizza to the staff on night and evening shifts this weekend and bought 25 clock radios which they've preset with Winnipeg stations so they can be delivered and plugged in and allow some distraction and company to the residents.

God's love is uncovered in these ways and God comes into our midst.

Paul, in this passage, teaches the church of Thessalonica how they are to "be" in the meantime. He uses Roman military language because he knows this is what they would be familiar with being a major Roman capital of that time.

Put on the breast plate of faith and love, the helmet of the hope of salvation.

In other words, dress every day in the protective gear of faith and love. Hold onto what you know, no matter what you see. And love. Always err on the side of love. Wrap your brain, your mind, your thinking in the hope of what is yet not fulfilled but truly promised. The hope that Jesus is the one who rules, who is true and who has the last word. Not the Roman Emperor, not corrupt religious leaders, not the Trumps, Bidens or Trudeau's of this world, not the false god of the economy.

As we look to the difficult days of this winter, to the possibility of church and other places shutting down, we hear these words of Paul in new ways. And we are not only encouraged but indeed challenged to hold fast to them. To believe and hope and know that the coming of God into this world is real. In the here and now, in small but real ways. And in the time to come, fully and beyond our imagination.

So we put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of our hope in the salvation of Christ alone. And, as Paul concludes this passage,

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

In this way we uncover God's love for each other and find the hope that will light our way through whatever is coming in the next weeks and months.

Thanks be to God.