

“What the Future Holds”  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Does anyone here remember who wrote these words?  
“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

William Faulkner, that’s right.  
What did he mean by that?  
You know what he meant by that.

Our past can very easily become our present.  
It shapes us. It defines us.  
It catches us by surprise.

Now...this isn’t always a BAD thing.

Shortly after our first child was born, Grandma and Grandpa came to visit. And our son was crying, so I was trying to console him, comfort him, get him to fall asleep.

I rocked him, swayed him, I started singing to him—I’ll let you absorb the shock of that statement, yes, I was singing to my child...maybe it was the fact that I was singing to him that was making him cry, who knows.

But my dad looked stunned.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked my dad.

“What you just sang, and that rocking that you’re doing—I used to do that with you, I used to rock you that way and sing that to you when you were his age.”

When I was his age?  
Our son was only a few months old at the time.  
Which means I was only a few months old at the time that my  
father was singing to me.

I have no memory of my dad doing that with me.

Or did that experience get buried so deep within me, that 35 years  
later when I became a father, it showed up?

The past is never dead.  
It's not even past.

I remember years ago, in another church, one of the hymns for that  
Sunday was "How Can I Keep from Singing?"

Do you know that hymn?  
Wonderful hymn.  
We had just hired a new Director of Music at that church.  
And much to my surprise, I saw her scoot out of the sanctuary as  
the hymn began.

She returned right after it was over.  
After worship, she came up to me.  
Apologized to me.  
Told me that that was the hymn they sang at her sister's funeral.  
And she's never been able to make it through that hymn since her  
sister's funeral.

I told her no apology was necessary.

I get it. You get it.  
The past is not dead. It's not even past.

Now...I'd like for you to put Faulkner's words in your back pocket. I'll ask you to pull them out again in a bit, but for now, put them in your back pocket, and let's turn our attention to the Apostle Paul.

Today, Paul is writing not about the past, but about the future.

“For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.”

What's Paul talking about here?

He's talking about the Day of the Lord.

The Promised Day of God.

That's our topic for today.

It's a topic that runs like a thread through the entire New Testament.

The Gospel writers talk about it.

The book of Revelation is very focused on it.

And so are the letters of the Apostle Paul.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest letter we have from the hand of Paul—probably written in the early 50s. He's writing to a congregation that has experienced hardship and persecution.

And he wants to encourage them.

He wants to give them hope.

And he does so by reminding them that Jesus will come again.

Not just reminding them.

But describing it for them.

He says that Jesus will return, it will be in their lifetime, and in his lifetime, that he and they and Jesus and the dead in Christ will all be “caught up in the clouds together.”

It’s pretty vivid stuff!

Now is that what happened?

No.

Because Jesus did not return in his lifetime.

We don’t know for sure how Paul’s life came to an end.

Many scholars believe it took place in Rome, at the hands of the Roman authorities.

But what’s fascinating to me about this text is not so much that Paul got his future wrong. What’s fascinating is that over the course of his ministry, Paul’s thoughts about the future CHANGED.

Our topic today is the Day of the Lord.

The Promised Day of God.

It can be a perplexing topic.

A confusing topic.

And even if you and I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about this particular topic, we do spend time thinking about the future.

And so did Paul.

You see, in his letter to the Romans, which is probably the last letter we have from the hand of Paul, you can hear him wrestling with the reality that his future was not turning out like he had planned.

He writes:

“...if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how

to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

Do you hear the difference, between those words and the first text I read to you?

By the time Paul writes to the Romans, he’s a bit more seasoned. He’s experienced more hardship. More difficulty.

What’s fascinating is that it doesn’t drive him to despair—that the future hasn’t turned out like he had planned. Instead, it gives him a different kind of HOPE.

In Romans, his hope has changed. It’s become bigger, broader, deeper.

He doesn’t just speak about what’s going to happen to him or to the church.

He talks about God’s entire creation.

“For the creation waits with eager longing...” Paul writes. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...” Paul says.

In other words, Paul’s faith in God and his hope for God’s future...it changed.

It matured. It grew...all because things didn’t go the way he thought his future would go.

Let’s pause right there.

Has that kind of thing ever happened to you?  
 You faced some disappointment, some hardship.  
 The future didn't turn out like you had planned.

And even though you may have questioned God, you may have  
 cried out to God, you may have shaken your fist in anger at God...your  
 faith and hope in God—it did not die.

It did not shrivel.  
 It changed...and it matured.

Has that ever happened to you?

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I'm reminded of a story about The Reverend Dr. Samuel DeWitt  
 Proctor.

Dr. Proctor was a minister, educator, and humanitarian.  
 He was President of North Carolina A&T University.  
 He was pastor of an 18,000-member Baptist Church in Harlem.

Recipient of 45 honorary degrees in his life,  
 he was in high demand as a preacher and speaker.

Late in his life, he was asked to preach at Duke Chapel one  
 Sunday. Dr. Proctor was known for his incisive insight and careful  
 analysis of Biblical texts.

But on this Sunday, that's not what he offered up.

After reading the text for the morning, he just started talking about  
 his life:

*"Growing up, I always wanted a red Buick convertible."*

He told about growing up in Norfolk, Virginia, and how he began to work in the Norfolk Navy Yard as a young man. He did well, and was the first African-American in management at the Navy Yard.

As he began to rise through the ranks,  
he had his heart set on *that red Buick convertible*.

Not only the car, he said, but *a three-piece red silk suit* to go along with it!

Well, about this time, he began to feel a call to ministry. As he worked through this, he faced TWIN challenges: First, those around him were saying he shouldn't derail his career at the Navy Yard.

*"You are helping your people,"* he was told.  
*"You are a role model!"*  
*"You are a trail blazer—people are counting on you!"*

He was told, very bluntly, that he would RUIN his life if he went into the ministry.

Second, there was the matter of what he had already set his heart on: his future was supposed to include *a red Buick convertible*.

So Dr. Proctor is going on and on about all this.

About the Navy Yard, and silk suits, and red convertibles...after about 20 minutes, even his biggest admirers were wondering where he was going with it all.

Just then, he looked right at that packed sanctuary and he said:

***"I NEVER owned a red Buick convertible.***

*I wanted one—God knows how I wanted one.”*

And then Dr. Proctor SMILED, as he said with joy:

*“God help you...if YOU are ever met by Jesus.”*

And he sat down.<sup>1</sup>

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Do you see what we’re getting at here?

Just like Paul did not get to say—  
this is what my future will hold...

Just like Dr. Proctor did not get to say—  
this is what my future will hold...

Neither do we.

But while Paul did not know the WHEN or the WHAT or the HOW about his future, there was one thing that he got absolutely right.

And that’s the WHO.  
According to Paul, the future belongs to God.

That’s what the Day of the Lord is all about.  
And Paul’s claim is ASTONISHING.

He says that God’s future is more powerful than our past.

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<sup>1</sup> As told by Will Willimon in his sermon at the Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis, MN, May, 2014.



“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old life is gone, a new life has begun.”

So...let's return to those words I asked you to put in the back of your pocket.

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

Pull those words out of your back pocket, and set them beside you in the pew, and just leave them here to be cleaned up by the ushers after you exit the sanctuary today.

Because the past may not be dead.  
But it's NOT more powerful than God.

And that means something for how we live our lives today.

The Presbyterian pastor Tom Are, he puts it like this:  
We are to spend each day **living toward God's Promised Day**.

Have you ever seen someone do that?

It's a remarkable thing when followers of Jesus let God's Promised Day shape and define who they are today...especially when today isn't going like we had planned.

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I heard recently about a church in Asheville doing it.

I don't know this church.  
But I know the pastor of this church.

Not too long ago, I heard her describe what happened after Hurricane Helene devastated the community where she serves as a pastor.

THE GRIEF, she said, was OVERWHELMING.

And then she described what worship was like when everyone gathered together on Sunday morning.

You know what she said?  
 She said she had never heard her church sing like that before.  
 The hymns of the faith...never heard them sing those hymns like that before.

In the sadness and sorrow of that moment.  
 With courage and hope in the living God, in that moment.

I submit that that congregation, at that moment, was living toward God's Promised Day.

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Look, I know we've dipped our toes into a confusing topic today.

The Day of the Lord.  
 God's great and glorious Day.

Is that what the future holds?  
 Yes.  
 I believe that's true.

I also believe that day is not limited by time and confined to the future. It's something you might catch your own glimpse of...when you serve someone this week, or forgive someone this week, or treat a stranger like a long-lost friend this week.

Let me put it as simply as I can.

How many of you know, after these 6-plus years together, how many of you know that I'm a Yankees fan?

Good grief, is it really possible that not every hand is in the air?

I hope that in the not-too-distant future, my beloved Yankees will win their 28<sup>th</sup> World Championship.

I don't know if they will.  
I don't know what the future holds.

But here's something I do know:  
That's not my greatest hope.

What I really hope is that the next time life pulls the rug out from under you, and your future doesn't turn out like you had planned, I hope you'll remember WHO.

Who holds your future.  
And who holds you.

And I hope you'll keep living—  
each and every day,  
with your eyes peeled and pointed—  
toward the Promised Day of God.

Amen.