

Sermon Manuscript: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Let's Watch for Jesus Together

1st Sunday of Advent – November 28, 2021

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. [NIV]

There is a common misconception that many people have about religion. It is kind of a "every man for himself" approach. It's no one else's business what I believe or do with my life. But God gives us quite a different perspective in his word. There are many examples: God called Ezekiel to be a watchman for his people; Jesus said that people would know his disciples by the fact that they would love one another; the Epistles are filled with instructions to admonish and correct one another. In our text for today, Paul shows us an example of this kind of concern. It stems from the fact that we are all looking for the same thing - the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In view of this **Let's watch for Jesus together**. We will do this because our struggle is the same and because our love is for each other.

1. Because Our Struggle Is the Same

1 Thessalonians is probably the first letter that the Apostle Paul wrote. It seems that he wrote it a short time after leaving Thessalonica on his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 17. He himself had been persecuted while he was there and was forced to leave for his own safety together with Silas. The members of the Jewish synagogue there opposed the message about Jesus as the Messiah that they were bringing. So he wrote a letter shortly after he had been forced to flee. He was looking to get information about how the believers were doing in Thessalonica after he had been forced to leave so abruptly. He wanted to know how these newborn Christians were holding up under conditions of persecution. Paul was a watchman writing out of concern for the immediate struggle of his fellow believers. He shows his concern for them and their faith in the Savior.

What happened in Thessalonica was a struggle that is only part of a larger struggle for souls that has gone on throughout the history of the Church in all parts of the world.

On the one side is Jesus who would rule hearts by faith and give us eternal life. On the other side is Satan who would steal all believers away from Christ with his lies and deceptions. In the middle of this great struggle is the prize of the souls of the people of this world. Satan looks to strike a blow against God by tearing away as many of God's creatures as possible. It's all-out war!

This struggle is still our struggle while we wait for Jesus to come again. Satan is at work in each of us to turn our attention away from our watch for Christ. He would lull us to sleep like a guard standing his post in the wee hours of the morning. Tired eyes wait the sunrise and all too easily can droop shut. Like the foolish virgins, we can let our oil run out and our lamps flicker and die for lack of care. Satan may use persecution to turn us from Christ. But more likely he lulls us with the world's interests and affections. He wears us down with all the temptations the world's attitudes put in front of us. Why should we put so much effort in to resisting the world's ways of doing things? When someone wrongs us, why not just give in to hate? When the advertisers tell us we need the latest smart phone or an ever-larger television, why not get it even if it means debt we can't afford? When the bills come due, why not grumble and complain or worry and fret that we don't have what we want? When we see a brother or sister in need, why should I give up mine so they can be helped? This is the way the devil works on us, lulling us into the careless ways of the world and luring us away from the truth of our Savior. And he works hardest on those who are closest to him. That's us sitting right here. So when you feel the pinch of temptation, realize what Satan is up to. Don't let yourself be deceived. But also remember that Jesus still and always wants us to be his. Jesus came and has defeated the devil and sin. He has brought us out of our night of wandering lost and condemned by our sins into the new dawn of complete forgiveness. And we look for his coming again to bring us final liberty from the struggle.

One of the ways that he keeps us as his is by giving us each other. That's what we see in Paul as he writes with concern for his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica. And it's what we have here in our beloved Immanuel. The Lord knows we have a struggle to fight against the devil and all his schemes to lull us and lure us and lead us away. But we also know that about ourselves and each other. We share the same struggle against the devil and the world. And we also fight that struggle together. We have gathered here to provide a place where Jesus' Word is preached and the Sacraments are provided. We gather together to encourage each other with our prayers and our presence. We support one another in love and even in correction when necessary. All of this is Christ's way of working through us to help one another in the struggle against the corrosive effects of temptation and sin. We fight in this struggle and have Jesus' help every step of the way. So let us always remember that we are not alone in this struggle. We have the powerful aid of our Savior. And he has also given us each other

to help in the fight. We watch for Jesus together because our struggle is the same and because our love is for each other.

2. Because Our Love Is for Each Other

Paul's love for the Thessalonians showed itself in his concern for them. As he writes to them here, you can hear the longing he has to be with them. He felt that he had not had enough time with them because of his hasty need to flee. He didn't think he had been able to prepare them sufficiently for the struggle that he knew they would be facing. And so he does the best thing he knows how to do. He writes to them to encourage them. You can hear the love he has for them pouring out of his words: *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?* [verse 9] He longs to return to them in order to complete the instruction he had begun with them. *Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.* [verse 10] He prayed for them night and day. He wanted to be with them again. But he also wanted them to continue to grow in their love of each other. In this love they would find the mutual Christian support that they needed and that Paul himself couldn't provide at that time because of his forced absence. His ultimate desire for them is seen in the last verse of our text when Paul says: *May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.* [verse 13] He wants them to be ready for the day that Jesus finally does come again so that they will stand free from all sin for Jesus' sake. Paul couldn't be with his Thessalonian brothers and sisters but he wanted them to watch for Jesus together with each other. He is like the Savior himself. Paul is an "under-shepherd" of Christ who shares the Good Shepherd's concern for the salvation of souls.

Paul's love not only was concerned about the welfare of his fellow believers in Thessalonica. He also rejoiced in the success they knew through Christ as well. He was filled with joy because they had not fallen victims to the persecution they were facing. It was this joy that moved him to action on their behalf. And that joy expressed itself in giving thanks to God who has showered his grace on the believers in Thessalonica. This is the same joy that our Savior has over one sinner who repents. As Jesus said concerning a lost sheep, *"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."* [Luke 15:7]

In Jesus and in Paul we see how it is to be for all of us while we wait for Jesus to return. We need to get past the "every man for himself" idea of religion. We can't say, "I've got my beliefs and you have yours. We won't talk about religious things." The things of faith are too important to be left un-discussed and unattended. Jesus could have left us hanging. He could have said, "They're on their own." But his love and concern for us

moved him to leave heaven and come to save us. As our Lord he came near by entering our world. He humbled himself to save us. He gave himself for us. Paul knew this about himself. He remembered that day on the road to Damascus. He confessed to Timothy: *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy.* [1 Timothy 1:13] In view of this mercy he had seen, he now was filled with love and concern for others.

We have been shown the same mercy. We have often wandered like the sheep Ezekiel describes: *(We) wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill.* [Ezekiel 34:6] But we have been snatched from the fire by Jesus. And Jude instructs us to do the same for one another: *But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy.* [Jude 20-23]

While we wait for Jesus to return, let us be about the work of caring for one another because our love is for one another as we have known the love of Christ for us. Let us be willing to humble ourselves in service to each other as Christ has humbled himself for us. Let us show this love by our concern for each other. Make it our priority to share the love of Christ with each other, especially our brothers and sisters here in our congregation. This may mean correction when it's required. But such correction will always be done in love. This is an everyday thing when we correct our child's bad choices of language or encourage a spouse to come to church with us or remember to stop and offer that prayer of thanks before we begin our meals. It also means that we will be willing to accept the correction that comes from a brother or sister. We will receive such admonition with a humble and repentant heart when we need it. Don't be defensive or get angry. Instead be grateful because such concern shows a truly Christ-like love.

Like Paul let us also demonstrate our love for each other in joy. Rejoice to see the growth of ourselves and others in faith as we are all fed together in the pasture of God's Word and Sacraments. Rejoice, when from that food, comes the fruits of faith that serve our Lord and each other in love, in whatever form those fruit may come. Rejoice in the opportunities the Lord gives us to love and serve others and gratefully accept such service when it comes our way. And mostly rejoice to see lives lived for the Lord out of thanks for his gracious gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation.

In this way let us help each other to be on constant watch together until our Lord Jesus comes. Our struggle is the same and we are filled with the Savior's love for each other. So let's watch for Jesus together. Amen.