

True Vigilance

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another sermon on the web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the March 4, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Rev. Dan Gifford delivered his message from the Book of 1 Thessalonians, the 5th chapter, verses 1 to 11.

The title of the message is, True Vigilance. Well, on Wednesday, we began Lent with a bang marked by an earthquake.

And it may also have been to mark the vestry meeting at St. John's as well. But either way, we have a wake-up call that something big has happened. And it has to do with our church and with Lent.

[1 : 18] But even more than that, all the newspapers the next day were filled with reports of being ready, which is very good for this reading that you're looking at right now. Many people got together earthquake kits.

We were reminded of what to do during an earthquake. And an assessment of building readiness of many buildings in Vancouver was made by one newspaper yesterday. And it didn't look too good.

So disaster plans were publicized. And the big question this week has been, well, besides where were you when the earthquake hit, which I think I heard about 50 times on Thursday, the big question has been, what if the big one hit?

Would we be ready? And this is exactly what the problem for the people in Thessalonica was about, except it wasn't an earthquake. It was the day of the Lord that they were thinking about.

Evidently, Paul, during his first visit to Thessalonica, taught about the day of the Lord when Jesus would come in glory. And if he had talked about this, he would have explained that it is the same day of the Lord that the Old Testament had spoken about, that the prophets had foretold.

[2 : 25] It would be a day of judgment. And the prophet Joel said it would be a terrible and great day of the Lord. And so the big question was, if it's such a terrible and great day, how can we be ready for it?

This was a wake-up call to learn that Jesus was all about the day of the Lord, his second coming. Now, the solution of the Thessalonians was to determine, perhaps, what the exact date was that Jesus would return.

And that way, you could really have an intense time of readiness if you knew right when it would be. It wasn't something you could probably sustain for a long time, but it would be something that they could do because they could predict when Jesus would come.

And, you know, we've been doing the same thing ever since. The first sermon I ever preached was on this theme. It was in Advent of 1988. And the Advent readings were about the second coming of Jesus.

And so I remember very clearly books that were out about when Jesus would come again. One Christian book that was called 88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988.

[3 : 30] And they said that it would happen between September 11th and September 13th. That way they weren't given the exact hour of when Jesus would come. Well, I preached three months later, and the book had expired about that time.

And so this guy wrote another book about what would happen with more conviction that 1989 was actually the year. And I was really hoping it would happen on Saturday before I preached that first sermon.

But since then, there's been even more books that have predicted when and with what events Jesus would come, you know, especially around the year 2000. And Paul makes short work of this kind of publication.

And he does it for the people of Thessalonians. He does it for us. He says in this passage, in verse 2, that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. And this is the clear teaching of Jesus as well.

He said he would come in an hour when you do not expect him. He compared his own coming to a thief. And the one characteristic of every thief is that they give no advance warning.

[4 : 37] They don't call you and say, I have 88 reasons why I'm going to rob your house next Friday night. And so in one phrase, Paul is saying that all their conjecture about when Jesus would come was a waste of time.

It's a waste of time today as well. And this is a very important teaching of God's Word because Paul is telling us what good use of our time is. He has practical things to say to humanity here.

Because if Jesus comes like a thief, there will be two types of people in the world on that day. And Paul clearly says, there will be those who are shocked and surprised, and there will be those who will be ready.

And I'd like you to turn to verse 3. It describes those who are surprised. It says, when people say there is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.

And this is a frightening verse, not only because it speaks of destruction that will come upon the surprised, destruction that's inevitable, like a baby who will be born if there's a woman in labor, but even more so because we see the beginning of that verse happening every Sunday in many churches.

[5 : 54] It's very common to hear a dangerous false teaching from the pulpit that says, you know, there is no day of the Lord. And church leaders teach that there will be no judgment because that's an exclusive concept.

And it's one that creates anxiety because you talk about the wrath of God, and that's not the type of thing to think about on Sundays. So as a result, many people in many churches have this sense of false peace and security.

And this is a terrible thing to do because they will be surprised. They risk destruction on the day of the Lord. It will be like the earthquake on Wednesday, which came on a beautiful, calm, sunny morning when you would never expect a natural disaster to take place.

And that is what Paul is saying will happen to those who do not know of the day of the Lord. And I'm always hopeful, therefore, of the fact that the creed is right next to the sermon in the Anglican liturgy.

The whole congregation has to contradict this false teaching and say that they do believe that Jesus will come with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

[7 : 09] But you know, verse 4 presents a great contrast to us. It says about those who are ready. It says, But you are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief.

And it's important to know here that the Bible divides the history into two ages. See, the Old Testament teaches that the present age is an age of evil which sometimes is portrayed as a long, dark night.

And the age to come is the second age. It would be the time of the Messiah when the world would be flooded by light. And of course, the Bible teaches that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and that's why Jesus is known as the light of the world.

He brings in this new age. And Matthew says that in Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah. The people living in darkness, the old age, have seen a great light.

So in Jesus, this new era has dawned into the world. But at the same time, the old age has not yet come to an end. So right now, the two ages overlap.

[8 : 14] And that's why John, in 1 John 2.8, says, the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. It's a time of overlap. Unbelievers belong to the old age and are in darkness.

But those who belong to Jesus Christ have been transferred into the new age, into the light. And so when Jesus comes in glory, the overlap will end. And there will only be the age of light.

Darkness will be destroyed. And there will be only the new creation, the kingdom of God. Now, I've got to tell you, I majored in history. And in all of my studies in university, I never saw any teaching about these two ages.

Yet this is the great truth of history. The destiny of every single person who has ever lived is based on which age one belongs to. And that's why for those who do believe in Jesus Christ, there is a profound sense of both joy and responsibility about verse 5, about belonging to that age of light.

It says there that you are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. And the joy about that verse comes in verse 9.

[9 : 28] Because it means that that verse applies to you if you look down on it. It says this, God has not destined you for wrath, as would be the case for those living in darkness, but you are destined for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for you, that whether we wake or sleep, we might live with him.

In other words, because Jesus died on the cross for you, whether you are dead or alive, which is what sleep or awake means in this verse. On the day of the Lord, you will live with him.

You will know him as the one who loved you and died for you on the day of the Lord. So you will see him not only as judge, the one who is bringing the wrath, but also as your Savior who will be with you forever.

So this is a source of incredible joy and true security. But there is also a responsibility that comes with being a child of the light. Basically, Paul says in verses 6 through 8 that if you are a child of the day, you must be prepared, that you must live a life of readiness and alertness.

And that's why he strongly teaches us to be sober and to be like a soldier. And of course, soldiers are characterized by readiness, readiness for battle. To be sober, according to Paul, means to be spiritually aware.

[10 : 49] It's the opposite of being out of focus spiritually. And Paul is teaching us to look at our world and our own situation in the clear light that Jesus is close, that his coming is at hand.

And the truth that we will certainly see Jesus as our judge does put everything we do in perspective. That he is our Savior as well, throws the light on our life.

And this is so important because today much of the thinking that is around you and me is actually spiritually drunk. It is fuzzy and it is disoriented.

It assumes that there's no ultimate judge and that there is no end to this age. And that's why we must be, by prayer and Bible reading, constantly allowing the truth of Jesus' imminent coming to actually shape our lives, to mold us in the way that we think and the way that we act.

And so, being sober in this passage means that the day of the Lord causes us to ask certain kinds of questions of yourself. And they're searching questions. For example, if you knew that you would see Jesus face to face next Friday as a child of light, how would that affect the way that you relate to your husband or your wife or to your co-worker or to your friend?

[12 : 11] How would it affect the way that you're doing business right now, this week? Or how would it affect the time that you spend consciously living for others for the sake of Jesus?

Would your priorities in life change if the imminence of Jesus' coming was clear to you, if you knew that he was coming this week? And in verse 8, Paul pushes his teaching about readiness by telling us to put on armor.

And the interesting thing about this armor is that it is not necessarily designed to withstand the darts of Satan, which it will, and which is talked about in Ephesians, but this is designed to prepare a person to not be surprised on the day of the Lord.

And so he says, put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation. And if you notice, that armor has everything to do with the word of God.

The faith is a trust in Jesus and his promises. It's living your life in dependence upon what Jesus did for you on the cross. And of course, that faith only comes by hearing God's word.

[13 : 20] And the other part of that breastplate is love. And according to Jesus, that means obeying his commandments. It means living your life to please God. And so the best means of readiness is to trust God enough to love him by obeying his word.

And finally, that third bit of armor, the helmet, the hope in salvation, is rejoicing in the truth of God's word that on the day of the Lord you will finally see the salvation that is already yours.

The day of the Lord means that Jesus is your salvation and you will finally see that you will live with him. If you fill your mind with that truth, you'll know why Christians in the Bible have a strong sense of readiness, that they longed for the day of the Lord, they yearned for the coming of Jesus when they would live with him in the new heaven and the new earth.

And that's why a slogan of theirs was, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Come quickly. They were ready because hope in salvation was their helmet. And what all these practical ways to be ready for the day of the Lord have in common is one thing.

They all center one's life in Jesus through the word of God. All these ways of readiness. You see, Paul has taught us to see our lives in the light of soon seeing Jesus as our judge and savior.

[14 : 42] And he's taught us to depend on Jesus' death for you to receive life. He has said to love Jesus by obeying him. And he's said to rejoice in the truth that you will live with Jesus now and in the age to come and nothing can separate you from that relationship, not even death or judgment.

And I think that in a world that really trivializes God and denies any accountability to any higher authority, it can be difficult to be ready in this way, to be watchful.

And that's why Paul says that we're not to be watchful on our own. This whole passage concludes in verse 11 by telling us to encourage one another and to build each other up.

And Paul's not saying here that we're supposed to compliment each other and say nice things about how we look to each other, although that's probably good too. Paul is saying here that we are to encourage each other to live for Jesus who we will all soon see, to live for him as the one that will be your judge and your savior, to strengthen each other when the pressures and very difficult times of life make us lose sight of the reality of Jesus and his closeness to us.

This is a great gift that we give one another. And you know, even in our life here at St. John's, we are not immune to the temptation to lose sight of Jesus in the activities of our church.

[16 : 06] If we're to listen to this passage and this teaching, we should always ask each other whether what we do as a church helps others and ourselves to be ready for the day of the Lord.

Are the priorities of our church, as we make all kinds of plans, are they formed around what works and is comfortable, or are they formed by the fact that Jesus is close and his day is at hand?

It's an important question for us as a church to ask because this passage is telling us that an active church is only useful to God if it is preparing people for the day of the Lord.

And I'd like to close this sermon with some very wise words about the closeness of Jesus coming as our judge and savior. and they're from a sermon of John Henry Newman in the 1830s.

But it's helpful, I think. It says here that up to Christ's coming in the flesh, the course of things, history, ran straight towards that end and it was nearing it by every step.

[17 : 10] But now under the gospel, that course has altered its direction as regards his second coming and it runs not towards the end of it but along it and on the brink of it and is at all times equally near that great event.

which did it run towards it, it would at once run into it. Christ then is ever at our doors. And that's helpful in understanding how close Jesus is as one who comes like a thief in the night because it calls us to actually live for that day, to be motivated and shaped by the day of the Lord.

We are called by this passage to live a life that is characterized by a readiness that hopefully and in fact surely if we are ready makes us completely joyful when Jesus comes again.

May God be our hope of salvation. May he be the one that we love and obey and may he be the one who truly makes us ready by centering our life on Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior and Judge.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

[18 : 42] Amen. Joseph Zora .org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy. We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others.

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