

Come Before Winter
II Timothy 4:9-18, 22
First Presbyterian Church
November 1, 2020

Introduction to the Reading

New Testament scholars believe that these may be among the last words Paul wrote. Paul wrote a total sixteen letters... among those, thirteen are to churches... and three are addressed to specific persons. And of those three, two are written to Timothy. I mentioned in my Pastor's Note this week that this passage reveals a side of Paul we rarely see and may not know even existed... because at this point, Paul is not the "super apostle" travelling around planting churches... he's not shooting off forceful letters to congregations in Philippi or Corinth or Galatia. No, here Paul writes in a moment so unique that we may feel we have invaded an intimate conversation that is not ours to hear... it's almost like we're reading his private diary. And I'm quite sure Paul never dreamed we would be reading and preaching on these words more than 2,000 years later. Which begs the question – why did the church keep this? When the church was gathering scriptures to inspire and shape and guide its life together, why did they keep this? Here Paul is writing from prison in Rome... and I invite you to listen for God's word to the church and to you.

⁴In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. ⁶As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

⁹Do your best to come to me soon, ¹⁰for Dee-mas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. ¹²I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. ¹⁴Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. ¹⁵You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

¹⁶At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! ¹⁷But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So, I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. ²²The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

Sermon

Rev. Clarence McCartney was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. In 1905, about the time this sanctuary was dedicated, he preached a sermon he titled “Come Before Winter.” He preached it again the next year... and the year after that... and the year after that... every fall for 40 years.¹ “Come Before Winter” was a sermon that had to do with time... with what the Bible says about time... and especially about the times in life when we should not put off until tomorrow the important things we need to do today. What’s being lifted up here is the truth that there are some moments in our lives that come and go and come again. And there are other moments, once they pass, we don’t get them back. That’s today’s sermon in a nutshell.

Timothy was the son of a Greek father and Jewish mother. His mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois, became devout Christians. And they worked hard to pass their faith on to young Timothy. Eventually, Paul called on Timothy to help him plant and build churches... and for years Timothy was Paul’s trusted companion on missionary journeys all across Asia Minor. Sometimes Timothy would stay behind to help strengthen a church while Paul moved on to plant another one... other times he would go with him. Timothy was younger than Paul and Paul WAS his spiritual father... yet Timothy was perhaps Paul’s closest friend. You can hear the affection as Paul describes him as “my true child in faith”² and “my beloved son.”³ “I thank God for you. I constantly remember you in my prayers. I long to see you.”⁴ That is Timothy.

Paul, of course, is the “super apostle” of the earliest church... without him, we Gentiles might not know Jesus. Brilliant... articulate... tenacious... Paul was a rising star in the party of the Pharisees. Yet, once he met Jesus... or more accurately, once Jesus met him... Paul’s life was hard. He was harassed by the Romans and judged by the Jewish leaders. He was shipwrecked, persecuted, beaten... he was imprisoned more than once. But Paul never wavered. He stood strong in his unshakable confidence in the Lordship of Jesus Christ... and in the mission Christ had given him to do.

Yet, as you heard a moment ago, writing from prison in Rome, this is not the unshakable hero of the faith. Instead, it is a man who is vulnerable and in deep need. “Do your best to come to me before winter,” he writes. “The time of my departure has come. It will not be long. And when you come bring my cloak. It’s cold in this cell... and I don’t think I will survive another winter in this prison.

And bring the books, he says... probably referring to the Old Testament — the Bible of his day. Maybe he wanted to read again about Daniel in the lion’s den. Maybe Paul wanted to remember Moses leading the slaves out of Egypt. Maybe he would draw strength from the story of Samson or find comfort in the suffering of Jeremiah. He knew God’s prophets were not immune to suffering... and when we are suffering, it helps to know we are not alone. Maybe he needed the psalms to sing through the long, cold nights in prison. “Bring my books,” he writes.

¹ Dr. Clarence McCartney, Clyde Fant, Jr., William E. Pinson, Jr., “Come Before Winter,” *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971). Many pastors have preached sermons based on Dr. McCartney’s original sermon. In this sermon I have drawn from sermons by Dr. Frank Harrington and Dr. Tom Are, Jr. I believe Dr. Harrington preached a version of “Come Before Winter” for 37 continuous years.

² 1 Timothy 1:2

³ 2 Timothy 1:2

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:3-4

And above all, bring me the parchments. Parchments may have been very early Christian writings; the recorded words of Jesus; collected stories of his ministry. Maybe Paul wanted to read again about John the Baptist... he knew what prison was like. Maybe he wanted to read about Jesus in those last hours and his lonely walk to the cross... he knew what it was like to be abandoned. "Bring the parchments," he asks.

But even more than the cloak... even more than the books and parchments... Paul longs to be with his friend on last time. "Do your best to come before winter. I need to see you one last time." You can hear his utter heartbreak: "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me... Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. So, do your best to come before winter." You see, the great "apostle" needs a pastor... the great Christian leader needs a friend... he needs Timothy to come to him NOW... before winter.

But Timothy was busy with the Lord's work in Ephesus. There were meetings to attend... folks to visit... sermons to write... people to serve. Was he supposed to just drop all of that and come? Maybe he got out his calendar and made a list of all he needed to do. The leaves were turning, but winter was still a ways off. He would get it all done and go as soon as things slowed down. It's what we all do sometimes. We put off important things because of all the little urgent things stretched out before us. We act like that guy in Harry Chapin's song "Cats in the Cradle:" My child arrived just the other day; he came to the world in the usual way. But there were planes to catch and bills to pay; he learned to walk while I was away." We put off important things... and when we do, sometimes the weather catches us by surprise.

Especially, in that part of the world, where travel by sea was always dangerous, but it was especially treacherous between November and April. Paul knew he had exhausted all his legal appeals and his execution was looming. He knew he might not survive another winter in Caesar's dungeon. And he ALSO knew there would be a day when the ships on the Mediterranean would be harbored for the winter. All of which explains the urgency in his words: "Do try to be here before winter, my son. Bring my old cloak... bring my book and parchments... get Mark and come to me soon."

Well, the question everyone asks is: Did Timothy do it? Did he go? And if so, did he get there before winter? Was there a great reunion as Timothy, Mark and Luke surround Paul with the comfort of their friendship before the end? Did Paul once again pour over the scriptures and parchments and find nourishment for this soul? Was he warmed by his familiar old cloak as the winter chill set in?

We don't know. What we do know is that in his original sermon back in 1905, Clarence McCartney imagines there was some sort of delay in Ephesus. We all know it happens... life happens... and when Timothy finally got away and rushed down to the harbor, the ice had already set in — no more boats until spring. "Come back then," they told him. So, all winter long, Timothy worried and prayed that Paul was OK — that he wasn't too cold without his cloak; that his mind was occupied even without his books and parchments. Because there had been no more letters from Paul... and Timothy didn't know.

Well, Dr. McCartney imagines that when in the spring, Timothy finally got to Rome... he went immediately to the prison and was brushed aside by a guard. When he asked about the prisoner Paul he was told to get away, there was no such prisoner! And then, McCartney paints this powerful scene as Timothy frantically searched for members of the church: "Are you Timothy?" one of them asked when he finally found them.

“Don’t you know Paul was beheaded last December on the Appian Way? Don’t you know that every time the jailer put the key in the door of his cell, Paul thought it was you? As a matter of fact, his last message was for you. ‘Give my love to Timothy, my beloved son in faith, when he comes.’”

Well, I hope it didn’t happen like that. I hope Timothy realized that time matters... and that there are moments in our lives that, once they pass, we don’t get them back. I hope you and I realize this as well: There was forgiveness that needed to be extended, and we meant to, but... There was a wrong that needed to be made right again and we intended to get around to it, but... There was that promise we really meant to keep, but... There was a growing distance with someone we love, and we really meant to close the gap, but...

The story is told of a popular American speaker who was addressing a large audience one day... and after receiving a standing ovation he said, “I have a little time to respond to questions if you have any.” There was a lengthy and rather embarrassing silence until finally, near the back of the room a woman stood up and she said, “What time is it?” She wasn’t talking about the hands of a clock or the numbers on a watch. She was talking about what time is it in a world pressed by actions of unspeakable violence... when great scandal and division hangs over the highest offices in the land... when innocent children are denied a chance to succeed because we fail to provide them what they need... when the planet continues to warm and the storms and wild continue to rage and seas continue to rise. There are moments that, once they pass, we never get them back.

Paul asked Timothy to come. That couldn’t have been easy for him... he knew what important work Timothy was doing... and I imagine that Paul, like us, didn’t want to be a burden. But Paul did ask — because more than anything, he needed Timothy — he needed his son in the faith, his pastor, his friend. So, Timothy dropped everything. He grabbed Mark and gathered up Paul’s special belongings and hurried down to the harbor. He caught the first boat to Rome... and when he arrived, he said, “Paul, I’m here. It’s going to be all right now, I’m here.”

I hope that’s what happened. I know you do as well. But the church kept this letter - and frequently returns to this letter... not to speculate on what Timothy did. The church kept this letter... because our faith is wise about time. We know that too often winter comes, and we missed what we should have been about. So, may our prayer this day be that of the psalmist: “Teach us, God, to number our days, that we may gain a wise heart.”⁵

Charge

Friends, there are times in our lives that come and go and come again... and there are times when once they pass, we don’t get them back. If I were Timothy, would I have gone? Would you have gone? Of course, as we sit here today Paul is not asking for us to come before winter. Instead, it is Jesus himself who is saying “Come before winter.” Come, extend forgiveness! Come, right that wrong! Come, keep your promise! Come, repair the breach! Thomas Merton once wrote: “A true encounter with Christ liberates something in us. A power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life. A resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change.” Christ offers all of that to you and to me. Will you “come before winter?”

⁵ Psalm 90:12