

Come Before Winter
II Timothy 4:9-18, 22
First Presbyterian Church
October 24, 2021

Introduction to the Reading

New Testament scholars believe these may be among the last words Paul ever wrote. They also reveal a side of Paul we rarely see. 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 poignant... that it feels like we have invaded an intimate conversation that is not ours to hear... it’s almost like we’re reading his private diary. And when he wrote these words, I’m quite sure he never dreamed we would be reading and preaching on them more than 2,000 years later. Which begs the question – why did the church keep them? When the church was gathering scriptures to inspire and shape and guide its life together, why did they keep these words? Here Paul is writing from prison in Rome... and I invite you to listen for God’s word to the church and to you.

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. ²¹Do your best to come before winter. 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 our/this sanctuary was built, 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

¹ Dr. Clarence McCartney, Clyde Fant, Jr., William E. Pinson, Jr., “Come Before Winter,” *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching* (Waco, TX: Word Boks, 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.

“Come Before Winter” was a sermon about TIME... 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 should do today. What’s being spoken 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, were converted to the Way and became devout Christians. These extremely faithful women worked hard to pass their faith on to young Timothy... and they did! Because when Timothy was still a young man, Paul called him to help plant and build churches... and for years Timothy served as Paul’s trusted companion on missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor. Sometimes, when Paul moved on to plant another church... Timothy would stay behind to help strengthen the church he just planted. Other times he would go with him.

As I said, 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... courageous... articulate... tenacious... Paul was a rising star in the party of the Pharisees... until he met Jesus... or more accurately, Jesus met him... and from that time on, Paul’s life was HARD. He was harassed by the Romans and judged by the Jews. He was shipwrecked, persecuted, beaten... he was imprisoned more than once. But Paul never wavered... he stood strong in his confidence in the Lord and in the mission, Christ had given him to do.

Yet, as you heard a moment ago... writing from prison in Rome... he is still faithful but feeling abandoned and vulnerable. “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’ll survive another winter. And bring the books, he says... referring to the Old Testament — the Bible of his day. Maybe he wanted to read again about Daniel in the lion’s den. Maybe he 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. Or maybe he just needed the psalms to sing through the long, cold nights in prison. “Yet, above all, bring me the parchments,” he writes. Parchments may have been the early Christian writings; the recorded words of Jesus; collected stories of his ministry. Maybe Paul wanted to read again about John the Baptist who definitely 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.

² 1 Timothy 1:2

³ 2 Timothy 1:2

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:3-4

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 the heartbreak in his voice: “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 like Paul HAD BEEN, Timothy was busy doing 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 “to-do” list. The leaves were turning, but winter was still a ways off. He would get it all done and go just 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. We put off important things... and sometimes the weather catches us by surprise.

Certainly, in that part of the world, where sea travel was always dangerous, but ESPECIALLY treacherous between November and April. Paul knew he had exhausted 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 the parchments... get Mark and come to me soon.” Well, the question everyone asks is: Did he, do it? Did Timothy go? And if so, did he get there before winter? Was there a great reunion as Timothy, Mark, and Luke surround Paul to comfort him at the end? Did Paul have the chance to pour over the scriptures and parchments and find nourishment for this soul? Was he protected and 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 that happens... that life happens... and McCartney imagines that when Timothy finally got away and rushed down to the harbor, the last boat had left – no more boats until spring. “Come back then,” they told him at the dock. 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. Timothy worried... because there had been no more letters from Paul... and he just didn’t know.

Well, Dr. McCartney imagines that when spring arrived, and Timothy finally got to Rome... he went immediately to the prison where Paul was being held. When he asked about the prisoner Paul, he was brushed aside by a guard and 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 and news about Paul: “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:

When forgiveness needs to be extended...
when wrongs need to be righted...
when a promise needs to be kept...
when a relationship needs to be repaired.

There are moments that, once they pass, we never get them back. Paul asked Timothy to come... and I'm thinking 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. And knowing this, 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, but because our faith is wise about time. We know that sometimes we get second chances. We also know that sometimes we don't. 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

⁵ Psalm 90:12