

24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 19, 2017
I Thessalonians 5:1-13
The Rev. Carenda Baker

The ancient Hebrew and the Greek New Testament Scriptures tell us that the road to hope begins with a holy Creator God who makes promises. A promise to birth new life. A promise to one day bring about the state of total “all rightness” with the world, total deep peace. In Hebrew the word is “*shalom*”. A promise of holy power and presence in the midst of everything that is terribly wrong with this world. The Bible begins with such great promises.

Within those first three chapters of the book of Genesis, the crown of creation – the first man and woman who represent such great promise make choices and take action that leads to pain and heartbreak for both themselves and God. Pain caused by fear, by choosing not to trust God. Pain caused by pride and relying on self and bumping up against the limits of human wisdom. This is the pain of alienation, of turning away from God’s goodness and light to do things on our own.

As the Divine dance between God and God’s people unfolds in Scripture, over and over we hear and read stories that show God’s power – power to create, to pardon and heal, to save, to bring life out of death, to provide when and where no provision is to be found, to make a way when there is no human way forward.

Always on that road to hope there is Holy presence. God is with us and for us. God’s final word is not detachment or abandonment of creation, but eternally committed attachment, “steadfast faithfulness”. God does not give up on humanity in its lostness, but empties God’s self in persistent sacrificial love that is always searching for us.

The Christian believers in the church at Thessalonica had been taught all these things. They knew the story, how it began with God’s promises, the sad reality of human sin and pain. Divine power always available to enlighten, transform, and produce in them holiness and sustain right relationships. And in all times, God’s abiding, faithful presence.

Those early Christians lived with the promise that their future was secure because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. They clung with hope to the promise that one day soon Jesus would come again. *But what to do in the meantime?* The waiting was hard. No one knew when Jesus would come again – not even Jesus himself could tell the disciples the exact date and time. So how *were* they to live in the meantime, in the present? If they became overly focused on Jesus’ coming again, there was real danger

of their withdrawing from life, so focused on Jesus' return and heavenly things to come that they would be no earthly good as witnesses to new life in Christ right now in the present. Withdrawal from the challenges of this earthly life is not an option for followers of Jesus. Engagement. Challenge. Learning. Failing and falling. Accepting God's grace and forgiveness and getting back up, resuming the walk of hope with Christ, believing that God's dream of shalom will one day become complete reality. This is the work of committed disciples.

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians to stay awake and alert. They needed to be aware, to see clearly and understand the times in which they were living. They needed to identify the things around and within them which could discourage and distract. They needed to actively pick up and put on daily that protective yet vulnerable looking attire of faith, love, and hope. And Paul reminds them it is crucial that they be grounded in life in community – not for the sake of their own individual holiness, but for the support, encouragement, and building up of each other in practicing mutual encouragement and care.

Paul charges them to live what they know to be true, to be who they are in Christ, to claim fully their baptismal identity. Sons and daughters of light and day, they have no need to fear the enemies of God who flourish in secret and darkness and prowl and threaten to devour. Keep the faith and carry on, Paul was saying. You are armed with faith and love to guard your heart, and you wear the helmet of the hope of salvation which will guard your mind. Stay in Christ. Stay in the light. Stay in community.

Since our return this past Wednesday from the pilgrimage to Israel, I have been reflecting on these earthly and spiritual realities of promise, pain, power, and presence. We left Chambersburg with a very full itinerary before us - a list of places we expected and were eager to see. We were promised the assistance of a local and knowledgeable guide whom we could trust to safely lead and teach us. I believe that going on pilgrimage means being led to the place of our own resurrection. In other words, I expected this pilgrimage would change me, and probably change each of us. Surely, this trip was full of promise.

It didn't take long to see and hear the human realities of grief, pain, and suffering endured in this land called "holy" over thousands of years. The history of the people of Israel is very complicated and complex. Large portions of the land and the city of Jerusalem have been invaded and taken over by outside forces at least fifteen times – including by Persians, Babylonians, Romans, the crusaders of Christendom, Muslims, Turks, Brits. The three Abrahamic faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam - all call the city of Jerusalem their home. Our guide Adina who is Israeli did not go with us

into Bethlehem, because Bethlehem is considered Palestinian territory. It would not be safe for her to be there. The sites most holy to Christians historically have had different groups overseeing them – Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians. There has been conflict and competition between Christian groups over who would be in control of these precious sites. This doesn't sound very Christian does it?

We spent time visiting Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. We stood in front of the Western Wall, side by side with others, touching it, praying there, putting our written petitions in the cracks of this, the only remaining wall of the 2nd temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. One can only join the psalmist and cry out, "How long, O Lord?" How long will the alienation, the pain and enmity, the injustice and destruction last? We prayed throughout the trip for the peace of Jerusalem. We prayed several times the prayer from the Book of Common Prayer "For the Human Family" – that God would take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts, that God would break down the walls that separate us and unite us in bonds of love to accomplish God's purposes" (p.815, #3). We prayed for shalom, the deep everlasting peace for all God's creation.

And power. To visit the Holy Land is to experience what has been called "the fifth gospel", the revelation of God in the geography and topography of the land itself. Stones, rocks, sand, and salt. Desert, wilderness, mountains, caves, lakes, rivers, and streams. The power of the physical landscape adds a whole new dimension to what one understands and experiences in Holy Scripture. Layers of evidence there also tell the story of human power – power to build and create, as well as tear down and destroy.

In some places that positive holy energy, that Divine power was palpable. God's power to change, transform, heal, to shower goodness on the earth. We felt the power of "hearing and inwardly digesting Holy Scripture" as we read together stories. The story of the Annunciation. Jesus' healing the man lame for thirty-eight years at the pools of Bethesda. Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. After his death and resurrection, Jesus' cooking breakfast for the disciples on the beach along the Sea of Galilee in Tabgha. And there, Jesus forgiving Peter, and calling him once again to "follow me".

We experienced the power of the sacraments at sacred places. Reaffirming our baptismal promises and sharing Eucharist by the Jordan River. Offering healing prayers and anointing with oil at the pools of Bethesda. Celebrating a final Eucharist near the Garden Tomb. God's power is real. We heard, saw, smelled, tasted and touched it for ourselves.

And blessedly, there was also the gift of presence. I most often experienced the gift of God's presence through simple daily interactions with others. Like our bus driver Amnon's skillful driving and his graciously providing bottles of water for us each day as we traveled. In our guide Adina's passion for archaeology and sharing the history of her people and country, in her own engaging and respectful way being an ambassador of peace and reconciliation, a bridge-builder. Frequently there were hands outstretched to help one of our group navigate steep steps or offer an arm to steady another walking across ancient and uneven stones. Each of us had particular experiences that broke open our hearts to God's real and living presence.

The first place this happened for me was on our visit to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the place marking Gabriel's visit to Mary with the news that God's plan of salvation included her bearing Jesus into the world. I was moved to tears hearing the story from the gospel of Luke read just outside the entrance of the church. Once inside, though there were many visitors, the atmosphere was hushed and very reverent. Many people knelt or sat to pray, people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and languages. Beautiful Byzantine artwork adorned the walls. That church was truly alive with the holy presence of God's Spirit. I didn't want to leave. Though the first chapter of the gospel of John says the Word *was made flesh*, the truth is that the Word *IS* made flesh - over and over and over again. God, present in the flesh today, comes to us in the loving hearts, hands, words and actions of others.

PROMISE. PAIN. POWER. PRESENCE. These are the gifts and the mysteries the Christian believers in Thessalonica experienced following the risen Lord. They claimed the truth for themselves, as do we, every time we share the Eucharist and proclaim "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

Our Chambersburg pilgrimage group in Israel saw and experienced the remnants of two to five thousand years of history in that land called holy. Woven through this ancient human-Divine story are God's life-giving promises. The reality of human pain and Divine compassion. The power of the Holy One to pour out goodness and healing on us and the whole world. God's eternal loving presence to sustain us as we walk the road of hope, living into eternal life day by day, here and now.

So what are we *to do* in the meantime? Keep the faith friends, and carry on. We have been taught, and we know all these things. We just need to be reminded - we are not alone. Each of us can take the hand of another to hold, comfort, support, encourage and continue together this amazing journey with the One true, faithful living God.

So reclaim for yourselves today the blessed truth: We are the sons and daughters of the day and of light, witnesses to the grace and mercy of God, bearers of good news.

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Thanks be to God! And in the meantime, friends, whatever is happening around us, let us keep the faith and carry on, led by the redeeming love and light of Christ. Amen.