

“Through Uncertainty” based on 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Dec. 17, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

The city of Thessalonica was a key city in the ancient world. It was at the crossroads between Rome to the West and Byzantium (now Istanbul) to the East. It was a free city in the Roman Empire, which meant it had special rights and privileges. It served as the capital of a Roman district within the province of Macedonia. It was arguably the most important city in the region, more important than the home of Alexander the Great just 30 miles away. And in the portion of letter which we read from today, the city is in crisis.

Just recently before its writing, two men caused a major disturbance in the city. They were accused of sedition for allegedly questioning the authority of the emperor. The men fled, but many in the city were swayed by their teachings, and they continued to proclaim this new king. They were persecuted, punished, imprisoned, and even killed for their alleged treason. Yet despite the attacks, the people continued, drawing more and more into their ranks. It was an unprecedented crisis for the city, and Rome’s response was to declare “Peace,” the peace that comes by the sword.

Of course, the two men were the Apostles Paul and Silas, and the rival king they proclaimed was Jesus. They had gone to Thessalonica and spent three weeks preaching in the local synagogue, when finally, some of the Jewish leaders who were not convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, threw them out and reported them to Rome. They declared that Paul and Silas had caused trouble across the world, and they objected to them defying Caesar’s decrees. They objected to their saying there is another king who is Jesus.

The crowds and the authorities were agitated, but they could not find Paul or Silas. So, others were arrested and later released, but it didn’t end there. We know from Paul’s letters that the persecution continued and earlier in the letter, Paul writes that he always remembers their faithful work, labor of love, and their patience of hope in the Lord Jesus the Messiah, before God our Father, Paul acknowledges that they suffered, endured tribulation, on this account. But he says that they did so with the joy of the Holy Spirit. They were an example then for others in the region to follow in their faith. Paul recalls his own ministry there as a nurse and a father, with Silas and others to nurture the faith of the Thessalonians.

Toward the end, he takes a shot at the empire and its local sympathizers making accusations. He tells the church that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, but don’t worry, you’re daylight people. You’re prepared for it. The ones who need to fear, he says, are those who say, ‘Peace and Security.’ The Romans loved the slogan, ‘Pax et Securitas,’ declaring with certainty, the peace and security achieved by one means only – dominant military might whose peace and security was secured by might, ranging from a little brutality, pushing people around, to crucifixion, all to keep dissidents in line.

The two letters of Paul to the church at Thessalonica should be an important reminder to us. They are a reminder that human beings have always been subject to seeing this world as in crisis. We have always flocked to those who speak with certainty about how to fix the world. Throughout our history, we say, “this is a problem, we must do something.” And throughout history, someone responds, “Hey this is something. We must do it now, or else!”

They build support by spreading fear among the people, and trying to implement their something, at all costs, even if the so-called solution makes things worse. We see this happen in the Jewish leaders attacking Paul for not acknowledging Caesar, when they themselves were not required to do so. Yet, they're upset Paul isn't doing it?

You see, in this first letter, Paul is addressing how others see the church coming of age as a crisis. He is comforting the Christians in Thessalonica in the face of persecution. In the second letter, he addresses the Christians who now proclaim a crisis themselves, because for them, the persecutions have continued, so, with certainty they say that the day of the Lord is already here. We missed it. Some even refuse to work, figuring the world is going to end any minute now so who cares. What do I have to do?

But Paul reminds them that Jesus will deal with the evil, and that they are to remain faithful regardless, by trusting, rather than being tossed about. There are a lot of crisis mongers spreading lies then and still today. Paul is upset some are even spreading lies in his name.

Today, there are many who speak with certainty about what is needed to address this crisis, that crisis, or another one over there. We have no shortage of prophets of doom who spread fear in order to gain power for themselves. They want us to feel uncertain about the future so that in turn they can offer us, the certainty of their solution, their policy, and their agenda.

I'm not going to name any specific crisis right now, but in your mind, as soon as you start thinking of one that is used by your opponents, I want you to start thinking that there might be some on your side of any issue as well. This is because there is plenty of crisis and lots of catastrophists all around us. They make prediction after prediction to justify anything, when by any measure of statistics that we can use, apart from the hope we have and the pervasiveness of media, this world we live in today is safer, more prosperous, and better equipped to do the work of fixing problems than ever before in history.

The historian Tom Holland even points out that the turning point was the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the movement of his followers. He notes that the world has become exponentially a better place since then.

This does not mean that things are perfect. No, there are many problems still in this world that are very, very real. But it does mean that we do not need to face these problems with fear and fighting. Instead, we can meet these problems with confidence and collaboration, to identify the ways we could do better, and we must.

We can address these issues not with some pre-conceived solutions that we think are certain to solve the problem, but to embrace the uncertainty, love one another instead and trust God to be with us. We are to be bold enough to recognize that reconciliation with – and not the defeat of – our opponents, is the way to solve problems.

Notice what Paul says to people persecuted because of they are proclaiming Jesus as Lord: He says to warn or admonish the unruly, meaning those who want to have their own way. He says to comfort or encourage the weak minded, meaning those who are unsure of their own identity and prone to identify with someone else's. He says support the weak, meaning those without strength to stand up for themselves.

Finally, he says be patient with all – yes, everyone, even those with whom you may disagree. He adds: See that no one repays evil with evil. The word translated evil here is one of two words for evil in this reading. In this spot, it's a malicious evil, an intentional evil, a chosen evil. Whereas later in the letter he says, to let go of every form of evil, using a word for evil, that is evil caused by misery. It's the bad things we do when we are hurt and hurt others.

Paul says to pursue what is good in one another and toward all people you encounter. It reminds me of the Roman Catholic Counter Reformer Ignatius of Loyola who in the midst of the fights of the Reformation advised his Jesuits to always interpret their opponents favorably, I don't know how well their track record was in this, but Ignatius says that that fails, then try and try again, until you can agree with them in some way.

And now we see Paul offering the same advice, saying, "At all times – rejoice," or as I like to translate it now – choose joy. He says to pray, or communicate with God, whether in prayer, worship, or service. He says to do this without ceasing, meaning in everything we do. And in all things, even hard times, what anyone labels as a crisis as the next great threat to our existence, he says to give thanks because in giving thanks we are in God's will in Christ.

Beloved, our themes for this week are the traditional Joy, and in our series, uncertainty. Here, we see Paul telling the people to rejoice or choose joy in times of uncertainty. This is not some Pollyanna ignorance of the problems they face, or even our own problems. No, it is a recognition that faith means that we do the best we can to help, all while trusting that ultimately God is in control.

There are many peddlers of certainty out there – in both the secular and religious world. But the certainty they offer – whether it's saying that if you pray in this way or another, then God will give you what you want. In the secular world, it's when they say that a particular policy will certainly fix this particular problem in the world. They are not offering certainty of anything, except the certainty of obtaining power over you. They do this by unleashing the unruly, scaring the weak-minded, and pushing down the weak to make them the latest scapegoat. They claim their own authority to peace and security.

Instead, we are a people of faith – which means we hope for the things we cannot see, and we trust God, offering our allegiance to Christ as our King – without certainty. This does not mean we throw up our hands and stop working for good. No, that is what Paul objects to in the second letter to Thessalonica. Rather it means that when we face what people might tell us is a crisis, what people call an unprecedented threat to our way of life, and we recognize that God is in control.

It reminds me of the second Grinch movie with Jim Carrey when Cindy Lou Who enters his cave and he screams in her face and says things meant to scare her, but she stands there smiling because she knows she has nothing to fear. That's what we are called to be, knowing that God is with us as we strive in the way Cindy Lou Who did for reconciliation, and the joy that comes from it. There is no certainty in this, but we have faith that God will be with us.

In trusting in a sovereign God, we are empowered to advocate for the needs we see in our world, because our trust is in a Creator God, not humanity. We trust in God whom we believe came down to us, sending the Son, the Word, fully one with the Father, by which all things were created, to share in our limited humanity. One with God, he was born a baby in a manger to be one with us, in a world which was then full of its own share of crisis.

He was killed by Roman and Judean leaders who were certain, that by exerting their power, order would be maintained. But the powers of sin and death could not win. He died for us, and he also rose again for us, ascending for us, sending the Holy Spirit, to live in and among us here. All of this, so that we might be empowered to serve in his ministry of reconciliation.

Beloved, the child we will celebrate on Christmas said he came to serve, not to be served. So, we do what we can to solve the problems of this world by serving, without certainty. We don't know if our specific actions will solve the problem we see, but instead, we trust our actions are in service to the God who will solve the problem.

When we seek reconciliation while advocating for a cause, we are forced to be humble, to share in the solution, and where two or more ideas might clash, we can do as Paul said, pursuing good in one another, to find our way together.

Our faith is not reliable because it provides us with certainty, but because it frees us to move beyond the need for certainty and be reliable ourselves in being faithful to do the best we can. We repent of our mistakes, and then we try, try, try again. We know that that through our uncertainty, God is always with us. Choose joy, my sisters and brothers. Pray in your words and deeds always. and in all things, give thanks, for this is God's will in Christ for you. Amen.