

Don't You Believe It!

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Introduction

I really enjoy listening to people talk about the things on their bucket lists, especially those exotic vacations they someday would like to take. Karen always wanted to see the Northern Lights, so a few years ago we were privileged to take a trip to Iceland where we did indeed see them. The other day she handed me a travel brochure that had come in the mail. On it was a picture of little cottages on a isthmus extending into the crystal blue waters off the island of Fiji. It is a beautiful picture. Someday, maybe someday we will get there.

My bucket list is more...odd. For example, I have always wanted to go to Cumbria, England so that I can attend the annual World's Biggest Liar competition. It is held every November. Contestants come from all around the world to participate. Each contestant is given five minutes to tell the biggest and most convincing lie that he/she can. According to the rules, politicians and lawyers are banned from competing because they lie for a living. Only amateur liars need apply.

Doesn't that sound like great fun?

I thought about that competition when I read one of the statements in the Zephaniah passage. Perhaps it stood out to you as well.

The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad. (Zephaniah 1:12)

What a whopper that one is! I think I might be able to win that worldwide competition with that. But it is a lie! Don't you believe it! It is a prominent lie that permeates our world.

- Sometimes it shows up in the form of a question: "Why would a loving God sit back and allow that tragedy to happen?"
- Sometimes it shows up as a statement of despair: "I just don't think God cares about my situation."

This lie paints a picture of God who is distant and uninvolved in the course of human events. It wants you to believe that God has stepped by from His role as the sovereign Lord of the universe and allowed humans to run the show. Worse yet, God comes across as someone who is powerless against the forces of the devil and all his evil minions.

It is a lie that is easy to believe when things are not going your way. Or at least, they are not going the way you think they should. It is even easier to believe when you are surrounded by others who think the same way.

And, frankly, it is easy to believe in the world we are living in today when it seems that everything is out of control and being guided by no one.

The book of 1 Thessalonians speaks to a discouraged congregation, a congregation that was living in the middle of severe persecution and suffering. This congregation had begun to question whether God was really in control. Listen, you can hear their cries:

If God is God, if Jesus is who He claimed to be, why is all of this stuff happening?

When discouragement levels are high, even the saints of God are susceptible to believing the lies spun to us by the devil, likes like the one identified in Zephaniah.

The writer of 1 Thessalonians challenges this church to take four action to counter the lies around them, actions that would be good ones for the church today to take in the midst of the current chaos.

ACTION #1: STAY SOBER

Verse 8:

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober ... (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

The writer uses that terminology to contrast two kinds of behavior. In the previous verse he talks about people who do sinful thing, like getting drunk, prefer the cover of darkness. On the other hand are those who prefer to live in the light. Those are the sober ones.

The issue here is not alcohol, and the call of the writer is not toward total abstinence. It is however a call to stop living under a cloud of despair and darkness. You are people of God!

In the cartoon strip Lil Abner, there was a recurring named Joe Btfspik. Al Capp, the creator of Lil Abner, said that the correct way to pronounce that last name was by making a raspberry sound (which I won't attempt into the microphone today). Joe lived his whole life under a rain cloud. He followed him wherever he went, creating gloom and despair for everyone he met.

That's not the picture of one who follows Jesus. No, sober-minded believers have a calm, sane outlook on life. They are not complacent, but neither are they frustrated and afraid.

- They hear the tragic news of the day, yet don't lose heart.
- They experience the difficulties of life, but don't not give up.
- They know that both the present and the future are secure in God's hands so they are able to live their lives each day calmly and obediently.

Their outlook comes from their uplook.

ACTION #2: GET DRESSED

Also verse 8:

Put on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

Faith, hope and love. We know those three terms well, most memorably from the last verse of 1 Corinthians 13:

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

We also know well the imagery of the armor of God. Review Ephesians 6 if you want to refresh your memory.

Here those three characteristics as the best way to protect yourself from the lies that surround you.

- Faith and love are like a breastplate that covers the heart (the things you feel).
- Hope is like a sturdy helmet that protects your mind (the things you think).

When I came to this point in my sermon preparation, I paused to read several real life stories about police officers whose lives have been saved because they were wearing Kevlar vests. It is a fascinating piece of equipment.

- That is the same teaching that accompanies the armor of God. If you wear, you will be protected from the lies of the enemy.

But you have to put it on. You have to get dressed. It becomes a matter of the will to get up each morning and say:

- I am going to cover my heart with faith in God and love for God's people. Nothing will penetrate that.
- I am going to cover my head with the helmet of hope. My thoughts will be guided by the Holy Spirit. Nothing will penetrate that.

ACTION #3: RECEIVE SALVATION

Verse 9:

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:9)

Another translation of this verse reads like this:

God didn't set us up for an angry rejection but for salvation by our Master, Jesus Christ. He died for us, a death that triggered life. Whether we're awake with the living or asleep with the dead, we're alive with him! (1 Thessalonians 5:9, MSG)

The idea here is to take full possession of your status as one of the redeemed. You have been saved by the grace of God ... now own it! It is yours!

In a world of craziness, Christians are the place of refuge. We are the ones who see beyond the problems to the God who is in control behind the scenes. We know that there is nothing happening around us that comes as a surprise to God.

The simple little chorus we learned in Sunday School reminds us:

He's got the whole world in His hands ...

And best of all ...

*He's got you and me, brother, in His hands,
He's got you and me, sister, in His hands ...*

That is a place of wonderful assurance, and should spur us on toward standing firm for the Gospel even in the midst of craziness.

ACTION #4: ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER

Verse 11:

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

John Kevin Hines is one of a handful of people who have survived an attempted suicide jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. He claims to have told himself that if any one of the people he rubbed shoulders with on the way to the bridge noticed he was distraught, and asked him what was wrong, he wouldn't jump. That's all it would have taken- another human being to acknowledge his existence. No one did. On his way down he got a hold on his life and asked God for a second chance, which is miraculously what he got, or we never would have heard how he was a smile away from death.

I am thankful for the card ministry of this church. It is a wonderful way for this congregation to be an encouragement to its members and to those we have never met.

But it is not the only way.

- Acknowledging someone's very existence is a wonderful first step.
- Listening to them when they have something to say.
- It's applying the "Cheers" theme song ...

*Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.
Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.
Wouldn't you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,*

*our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows Your name.*

We talk a lot around this church about building relationships with people and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your interactions. It is one of the hallmarks of the church. And it is an action we can take to counter the Big Lie that God isn't doing anything in the world.

APPLICATION

The Scriptures make it very clear that the devil is the "father of lies."

When he (the devil) lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

Don't you believe him! You know better!

It is up to us to communicate the truth.

Amen.