

SERMON TITLE: “Children of Light”

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week there were two conferences in our city.

A group called “Amazing Facts Ministries put on one conference. I received a poster for this event both at home and here at the church.

It was a red poster with a sinister looking multi-headed creature emerging from the sea, and a sultry woman with a cross around her neck and a chalice in her hands, and contained these words: **“Unlocking the Prophecy Code”**

Here’s a sampling of the topics:

*Discover the secret to unlocking the ancient prophecies of Revelation which reveal an approaching global cataclysmic crisis
- How close are we? You can be a survivor!*

*Learn what's next on Revelation's prophetic time clock. The most spectacular ancient prophecy is about to unfold before the entire world!
Don't be Left Behind!*

Discover the mysterious power behind the Beast of Revelation 13. Is Antichrist alive today? Bible prophecy will not make sense unless you know these amazing facts!

The Stage is set for the greatest deception of human history? Billions will be deceived! Revelation reveals the truth, and the TRUTH will set you FREE!

About a kilometer down the road, another conference was taking place.

The posters for this conference weren’t nearly as exciting—they were brown and plain, and had a picture of shield on the front beside the heading, **“I Can’t Believe in A God Who Would Do That!: How to Respond to the Problem of God and Evil.”**

This conference was more academic in tone, as Dr. John Stackhouse from Regent College in Vancouver led participants through three nights of examining the relationship between God and evil/suffering.

On one level, you could hardly imagine two more different types of conferences.

The first one used sensationalistic headlines and a “spectacular multimedia presentation” to “unlock the mysterious symbols of Bible prophecy.” I did not attend these sessions, but my guess is that they offered a combination of wildly speculative eschatology and “creative” interpretation of a few carefully chosen parts of the Bible.

The second conference brought in a distinguished professor from a respected academic institution to talk about an issue that is difficult on a number of different levels—intellectually, rationally, and personally.

The problem of what bad things are doing in a world governed by a good God is probably one of the most significant ones that many of us face. It is responsible for many people abandoning faith; it is a significant obstacle for some in coming to faith in the first place. It is a challenge for even the most faithful of believers.

It’s easy—at least for me—to disdain the first conference and praise the second. The first one makes people paranoid and confused, it teaches them to read the bible incorrectly, and it paints everyone and everything in the world in stark black and white terms. Good vs. evil. Darkness vs. light. In vs. out. Truth vs. deception. Saved vs. left behind.

The second one is right up my alley—rational, reflective, relevant. It is an attempt to help people conceptualize a difficult issue and have intelligent conversations with others, and remove unnecessary obstacles to following Jesus.

Two very different conferences with very different views about God, human beings, and the world.

And yet, these two very different conferences share a common feature as well.

Both conferences dealt with unseen realities, unanswered questions.

Both conferences addressed the human desire to know what God is doing in the world right now. Both conferences addressed hopes and fears about the future and how God will be victorious over all that works against goodness and justice and peace.

Will good win over evil? Does the Bible offer hope for us during evil times? How?
When is God going to fix this mess?

While I would obviously not evaluate the *content* of these two conferences in the same way, they both represent attempts to peer behind the veil—to take what we do know, what we have been shown, what we do hope for, and figure out what we don’t know, what we have not been shown.

Two thousand and eleven years after Christ, we are still anxious to look behind the veil.

Our text this morning shows us that the same thing is going on mere decades after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Most scholars agree that Paul's' first letter to the church in Thessalonica is the earliest New Testament document written—probably 20-30 years after Jesus. 1 Thessalonians thus gives us a glimpse into the life of one of the first Christian communities in existence.

And, we see that, like the good folks at Amazing Facts Ministries, there is a lot of speculation about the return of Christ.

This is obvious from Paul's' first lines in this passage, and from the way he almost trips over himself in his attempts to remind the Thessalonians that they already *know* that the day of the Lord will be a surprise, and that their task is one of readiness.

N.T. Wright puts it somewhat amusingly in *After You Believe*:

Yes, all right. Paul has well and truly mixed his metaphors here. You should stay awake in case a thief tries to burgle your house. You need to wake up because it's nearly morning. And, for good measure, the woman is going into labor, so you mustn't get drunk, but should put on your armor...

It's like Paul is raiding around in his cupboard full of metaphors to convince the Thessalonians that rather than obsessing about what they don't know and can't know (and have been *told* they can't know—cf. Mark 13:32-37) they ought to simply be awake and alert.

Paul does two important things in this passage:

1. He reminds his hearers that the day of the Lord will come as a surprise, so there is no use agonizing over dates and times
2. He reminds his hearers that the proper response to not *knowing* as much as we would like to know is to live according to what we *do* know.

It's remarkable how frequently we see this approach in Scripture.

It is especially true with Jesus. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, for example, an expert in the law asks Jesus a series of knowledge questions ("What is the greatest commandment?" "Who is my neighbour?" In other words, "Who fits into the category of 'people I have to love?'").

But rather than getting the data he wants, the expert in the law gets a task: love God and love people—even, or especially, those you would be least inclined to love (Samaritans).

Paul does the same thing here. He turns what appears to be a question about knowledge—the day of the Lord, and when it will come—into an answer about action—how followers of Jesus ought to live in the context of knowing less than they would like.

Many of you are familiar with Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the New Testament called *The Message*. I like how he renders 1 Thess. 5:4-8:

⁴⁻⁸But friends, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. People sleep at night and get drunk at night. But not us! Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.

I can think of few better images than Peterson’s description of “sleepwalking” to describe our culture.

We are a culture of sleepwalkers

We are lulled to sleep by a consumeristic culture that tells us that life is about acquiring things and defining ourselves by what we own.

We are lulled to sleep by an enormous and resourceful media industry devoted to keeping us constantly distracted and entertained.

We are lulled to sleep by a culture that convinces us that the endless technological devices we have will make us more connected, and that substitutes the sharing of trivial bites of information for meaningful human interaction.

We are lulled to sleep by a culture that exalts youth and physical beauty at the expense of wisdom.

We are lulled to sleep even in the church when we forget that our reason for existing is not primarily to facilitate social interaction or to run programs or balance budgets, but to know and worship the risen Christ and to make him known in word and in deed.

Sleepwalkers have lost their sense of what the purpose of life is. For sleepwalkers, there is no prize to keep your eye on, no goal for life, no standard by which to evaluate whether a life is well-lived or not.

The Greek word for this is *telos* and it has to do with the proper end of a thing.

The *telos* of a carrot seed is a carrot; the *telos* of an acorn is an oak tree.

The *telos* of a human being is not a sleepwalker but one who is fully alive—alert, sober, full of faith, love, and the hope that comes with being united with Christ. The *telos* of a human being is a life lived in proper relationship to God, others, and the created world.

The solution for Paul is quite simple. In a culture of sleepwalkers, we are to be alert, sober, and ready.

The day of the Lord holds no fear for followers of Jesus and we are freed from obsessing endlessly about it.

Our lives are to be characterized by:

- **Faith**—a conviction that God is trustworthy to accomplish what he says he will accomplish
- **Love**: the Greek word is the well-known *agape*, which represents God's kind of love—divine, unconditional, self-sacrificing, active, volitional, and thoughtful
- **The hope of salvation**: one day, God will renew and redeem human beings and the world he loves.

Faith, hope, and love. These are three common virtues repeated often by Paul throughout his letters.

In the ancient world where Paul wrote these words, there were thought to be four cardinal virtues. Aristotle described these as: courage, temperance, justice, and prudence.

The one who cultivated these virtues would be heroic in battle, stoic and restrained in the face of suffering.

Paul's three virtues incorporate the classic four of the Greek world, but transcend them. The goal is not a heroic individual but a community of people who submit to one another in love, and who are united in their common cause of participating in God's purposes for the world.

Children of the light live differently than the sleepwalkers all around them because they know the *telos*—the end, the goal, the purpose of human existence.

I'm going to close with a story. This story comes from, of all things, a commentary on the book of Revelation:

The story is told of a group of seminary students and a janitor. The students were, for a season, playing basketball in a nearby high school gym. While they played, the janitor, who had graciously allowed the seminarians to use the gym after hours, would borrow one of their Bibles and spend the hour reading it.

One day, one of the young men asked the janitor, "What have you been reading in the Bible?" "Revelation," he replied. The seminarian chuckled, "Yeah, right." "No, really," said the janitor. Having heard one of his professors say that no one really understands the strange book, the seminarian asked, "Do you understand what you have been reading?" "Oh, yes," replied the now smiling janitor.

Chuckling again, the seminarian asked, almost sarcastically, "Well then, tell me what it means." The janitor looked to his right and then to his left, leaned into the seminarian's ear and whispered, "It means that Jesus is gonna win.

Jesus is gonna win. That's the big picture.

We will not know the roadmap for Jesus' return. We will not figure out the logical puzzle of how evil and suffering fit into God's good plan for the world.

But if we know the big picture of God's victory over sin and death and evil, we are freed to live according to that new reality. We are freed to live as children of the light, children of the day, even while the night is still a part of our experience.

In another letter to another church, Paul writes these words (Philippians 2:14-16):

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." **Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life.**

Paul and his metaphors... children of the light, children of the day, stars in the sky...

The point in all of these metaphors is the same. In the midst of a sleepwalking world, you are to be different. You are to show the way. Your lives are to give evidence of the *telos* of a human life.

May God help us to live wide-awake lives of faith, love, and the hope of salvation.

Amen.