

Sermon Theme: Forever with the Lord
Sermon Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Maybe if you were in charge of worship planning, you might have changed the focus for this Sunday. Talking about death doesn't seem to fit the best when celebrating and recognizing the important and needed work being done with our Lutheran school and Preschool. But the reality is that death isn't a topic that can be avoided. You may have heard it said before that there are two things in life that are always going to happen: death and taxes. If we could, we would avoid both of them. But we know we cannot. But that doesn't change the fact that we can get a little squeamish and feel uncomfortable with the topic of death.

Part of it, I think, is because of how death affects us and our lives. A death can be so abrupt where you didn't have a chance to say good-bye or it's so drawn out that you might wonder why they continue to suffer. It's so final that even when we know it's going to happen, it's hard to wrap our minds around it when someone is just gone. It can seem so cruel, harsh, and almost violent especially when it seems an individual was ripped away from the land of the living and those they love.

Another reason, I think, is because there are all these questions and not a lot of answers when it comes to death. Death is the ultimate unknown. One won't know what death is really like until they have experienced it. But, then you can't really tell anyone. And where those questions remain, doubt can settle in, and fear comes attacking. And so, it's to people like us that Paul writes these words in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul's concern is that this group of people, the Thessalonians, are being misinformed. The issue seems to be that they were afraid that their deceased and dead loved ones were lost forever. From how Paul writes it looks like the line of

thinking was that because someone died before Jesus had returned, they were afraid they were going to miss out on the resurrection and be kind of left in limbo. So they had all these questions about what happens after death and the problem was that the answers they were finding were leading them down a dark path. Society of that day did little to help. Life after death was hopeless in the minds of many of the people in their culture. So all of this fed the fears and doubts of the Thessalonians.

The apostle Paul didn't want the Thessalonians to be misinformed, and he doesn't want you to be either. Understand that there's nothing wrong with having questions. It can be good thing to be curious and to ask questions especially with God's Word so that your knowledge grows. It's good as long as you are finding answers in the right place. But what so often happens is that instead of looking first to God's Word and using God's Word to answer such questions—especially about death—one can be drawn to other things.

Maybe it's because the Bible doesn't answer your questions the way you would like and so you are looking for more. Maybe it's because it sounds nice, it's what you hear in society today, and what the world promotes. You hear that this person was a good person, so something bad shouldn't happen to them when they died. Or you are reassured that even when they did do something bad, they meant well or they made up for it in different ways. Or one's mind is supposed to be put at ease with the number of lives this individual impacted in a positive way. There's hope supposedly in their memory will live on in some shape or form with things that person made or said. There's the thought that they didn't really leave you, but they are still with you.

But how do you know? How can you be sure? Those answers that are supposed to reassure you just lead to more questions. Just because you find an answer that you want to hear doesn't make it the right one. Those answers are appealing because for all too many the alternative is scary. When staring at death, from what we can see with our human eyes is that there is no hope. There is nothing left that can be done. With death, it seems that all hope is gone.

Death was never God's intention; he created mankind to live. But with sin came death to all people. Our human nature recoils at the thought of death, doesn't want to think about it, because it's a constant reminder of how we fail and do not measure up to God's demands. It's a reminder of how things could have been and how everything went wrong. Left to ourselves or answers in the world around us, there is no real hope.

Paul doesn't want to leave us like that. But understand too that the purpose of the Bible isn't to answer every question that we have about life or death. But God in his good and perfect wisdom knows exactly what you need to know and he gives it to you in his Word to give you real hope. And it's from that Word that we learn that our confidence doesn't come from ourselves or what we have accomplished. It doesn't come from the changing culture, thoughts of society today, or even in how strong of a faith one might have. Our confidence is in what faith holds on to. Our hope is not a maybe, but a guarantee clinging to God's Word and promises. Paul writes in v.14 **we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.** Because Jesus died, the debt of sin has been paid for in full. Sin and its stain along with its guilt and shame has been removed from you. There is nothing more that is owed or anything more that is expected. Jesus did it all. When God sees you, he sees Jesus' holiness and perfection as your own. He sees someone who is holy and without sin: a saint.

Not only did Jesus die but God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning. This shows us that God accepted Jesus' payment for sin and reassures us that we too will be raised from the dead. Death has been swallowed up in victory, thanks be to God (1 Corinthians 15:54)! And notice, in these words, death isn't shown as this violent act of someone being ripped away from life, family, and loved ones—even though at times it certainly feels that way. Instead, God's people fall asleep in Jesus. Death has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). Death is not the end for God's people; they fall asleep in this world to live with the Lord in heaven freed from sin, suffering, and sadness.

Those who died before Jesus returned, they did not lose and weren't going to lose out on anything. In fact, Paul explains **we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep (v.15).** And this isn't just how Paul feels about the situation or his own thoughts. No, this is according to the Lord's Word. And because we know this is the Lord's Word, we know this is the truth (John 17:17) built on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:24-27).

And the time will come for those sleeping to wake up. **The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first (v.17).** With a noise that will literally wake the dead, Christ will return. This time he does not come in the lowliness of the manger, but the victorious king commanding his angels to gather his people to him. All people will be raised up when the voice of the archangel will shout and the trumpet call of God will sound

so that all will know and see that the day has come. No one is missing out on this. And those who the Thessalonians thought were lost, your loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus, they will rise first!

But it's not like if you are still alive, that means you will be forgotten or will have to wait a long time for your turn. No, Paul says, **we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (v.17)**. We will be caught up together with them and we will be with the Lord forever. Nothing will take us from him. That victory that is already yours by faith, will be your reality. We won't have to look forward to it any longer, it will have arrived. We will no longer be sinner/saints where sin, death, and the devil still affect us. At that time, with the Lord, sin will tempt you no more. Death will neither take away nor be present. The devil whose head was already crushed will be cast into the depths of hell for all eternity. And we will be with the Lord forever (v.17).

You see, Zion Lutheran School and Preschool isn't only focused on preparing children for life right now. Its focus isn't only about getting one prepared for high school or college or to be a good citizen of society. Yes, we do a great job at those things. But even more importantly, we do not wish children to be misinformed about what happens after this life. We want them to understand that the most important thing in their lives is their relationship with Jesus. We want them to have the hope that we have that because Jesus lives, we too live. We want them to be reassured that those who died—who sleep—in Jesus' name, they already are enjoying the victory of heaven. They are the saints—the holy ones—triumphant.

That's why we want to stay connected to that Word all our lives. That's why we get concerned when someone wanders for some time. Christ can come back at any moment. Therefore, encourage one another with these words—God's Word (v.18). God wants you to be saved; he loves you, that's why he sent his Son. That's why he gives you his Word, so that you are given the correct information, so doubts would be dispelled, so that faith is created and continually strengthened, so that you have the certain of hope of being with the Lord forever. And as we wait for the sound of Christ's command, the shout of the archangel, the trumpet call of God, we pray with God's people, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.