

Sunday, November 15, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

The Times They Are A-Changin'

INTRODUCTION

If you were with us last week you might remember that we considered the words of the prophet Amos. Amos had the unenviable job to speak directly to the indulgent and idolatrous people in Israel who had completely lost their way and didn't even know it. He was very clear that the anticipated *day of the Lord*, when God returns to vindicate the righteous and judge the wicked, will not be light and joy for them but rather, darkness and disaster. He unceremoniously said, "The times [were] evil" (5:13). Amos taught us that true faith is an action verb that is always expressed through our actions, particularly those actions that concern social justice.

800 years later, the Apostle Paul was working non-stop to establish a radical new religion based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul brought this good news of the Gospel across Asia Minor and Europe. One of the many small churches he planted was in Thessalonica. A small group of Thessalonians became early adopters of the faith. They too quickly became concerned with the prophesied *day of the Lord*. For Amos and then Paul, 800 years later, *the day of the Lord* was still a hot topic. Who doesn't want to see that day? These new converts to Christianity were aching for Christ's return. They sensed a change in the air and eagerly anticipated *the day of the Lord* to come at any moment. But Paul echoes Amos in his letter to them. He warns that, as the times change, and *the day of the Lord*, draws near, it will first begin with great labor pains. Even still, he teaches us that our faith, hope and love of God and care for one another will provide us with the strength, resiliency and endurance to weather all the pain, adversity and struggle.

2000 years later, another poet and prophet appeared to hold up a big mirror, reflecting back to us the times and seasons that are before us even today.

So, let us gaze into this prophetic looking glass as we hear first, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, followed by Sawyer Lawson, singing the words of the modern-day prophet, Bob Dylan, because we all know that the times, they are a-changin'.

SCRIPTURE READING 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be

sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

SONG: *The Times They Are A-Changin'* written by Bob Dylan, performed by Sawyer Lawson

Come gather 'round, people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt

Will be he who has stalled
The battle outside ragin'
Will soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

SERMON

God above us, below us, around us, and in us, as the times continue to change, we thank you for the sacred words of the Prophets, from Amos to Paul to Bob Dylan. May we have ears to hear You and learn to follow faithfully in Your Way. We pray that our hearts and minds would receive insight this morning so that we might truly be Your light in this ever-darkening world. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You our rock and our redeemer. AMEN

It was 1963, when Bob Dylan wrote this now famous anthem. And, the times they *were* a-changin'. The civil rights movement was gaining national momentum. Relentless, non-violent, peaceful protests against immoral Jim Crow laws ignited the cruel wrath of those whose power it threatened. Then, in August of that year, two-hundred and fifty thousand American's came together in perhaps the greatest demonstration for freedom ever assembled in the United States. No, it didn't take place in Concord, I'm talking about the "March on Washington". This was the occasion when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King gave his remarkable, *I have a dream* speech. Maybe some of you were there. Then, just a few weeks later in 1963 the President of the United States was assassinated in front of all of us. We were also embroiled in some kind of war or "conflict" in a place called Viet Nam that began to escalate even though no one really understood what it was about or how far it would go. For many of us, these turbulent times began to erode our faith in government institutions. Our elected legislators and civic leaders appeared ambivalent, deaf and blind to the urgent cry of many for needed change. In some cases, those in power actually took pride in fanning the flames of indignation, segregation and division. I remember watching Governor George Wallace standing with the Alabama state police on the school steps to stop African American students from entering the all-white school. Adding fuel to the fire, our cold war with Russia continued to threaten all of us. I'm sure that many of you remember how, in 1963, the entire fabric of our nation seemed to be unraveling. The future was uncertain and a massive social change was undeniably on the horizon. Something big was in the air and it was both foreboding and yet somehow exciting. It was in 1963 that Bob Dylan penned his enduring anthem of change, *The Times They Are A-changin'*. Sawyer Lawson was not even born, yet he sings it today with a knowing conviction and great understanding. Like all prophets, Bob Dylan poetically reflects back to us the state of a nation that was being torn apart by a far-off war, racial divides and economic injustices. The country was grieving. We were all unified in our confusion and fear, but severely divided about how to best move forward. As you know, change did, in fact, come.

And now, 57 years later, Dylan's anthem calling for change remains a prophetic text. His lyrics still accurately mirror our time! Very few people could deny that we are living in a season of great change. There is a palpable sense in the nation, and the world, that a great shift in our culture is at a critically important tipping point. But which way will it tip?

The world we live in today was unimaginable in 1963 yet our human condition remains the same. Even as we enjoy the very real advantages of our remarkable technology, we are also now learning about the very real terrors imbedded into this same technology. For better and for worse, the times they are a-changin'. 2020 has brought us all into a new awareness of the fragility of our very existence. The pandemic is, even today, reaching staggering record numbers. Global warming continues to intensify daily as hurricanes roar and wild fires rage. And, the strange fruit of our nations original sin still hangs of the tree of systemic racism. Lynching people of color persists, apparently without consequence.

Paradoxically though, all these events highlight an amazing, yet obvious truth. We are inescapably interconnected to all life. Our very existence hangs by a thread that somehow maintains a precarious and delicate balance that relies entirely on our mutual interdependence. The effects of climate change and rapid spread of CORONA virus have both demonstrated, beyond any doubt, that we are all connected and desperately reliant on one another.

Like Dylan's lyrics 50 + years ago, Paul's words to the Thessalonians two-thousand years ago also echo through time. He writes to them, and to us, so that he might share his joy at seeing how faith, love and hope endure through the struggle. He encourages us to hold fast to our faith in the midst of suffering and uncertainty. These early adopting Christians were working out what it means to follow in the Way of Jesus through horrific public persecution. When things got really tough (and times were really tough for these founding followers) they had to put their faith to the test. How do you actually live as Jesus taught in the "real world"? From where do you find the strength to love your enemy? How do you really forgive those who you think don't deserve to be forgiven? How do you love those who refuse to love you back?

Paul encourages them first by acknowledging that their pain and suffering was real. He likens the turbulent and uncertain times to labor pains. The birthing of something new will always involve the turmoil of labor pains. But then he quickly reminds them, and us, of this mind-blowing reality,

You, beloved, he writes, are not in darkness...you are children of the light and children of the day... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined you for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul says that this is where we find the strength and tip the balance; we love, we forgive, and we hold on to hope.

Today, at this very hour, every one of us knows that the times they are a-changin', and change is never easy. We are already weary, restless and skittish about the long dark winter ahead. In times and seasons like this, we really need to take hold of our faith like it's a COVID 19 vaccine approved by Anthony Fouci. We need to lean into our faith in a God who always rescues, forever redeems and steadfastly restores. As God's beloved, you have an amazing power pulsing inside you, coaxing out a tangible and real faith that chooses to trade in wrath and resentment for humility and love. Filled with such grace and goodness we then naturally pour out grace and goodness with lavish abandon to this aching and needy world.

As God's beloved, we are somehow able to see a longer view, a view on the far side of the short-sighted tyranny of the daily news cycle and the fraudulent urgency of temporal circumstances that consume all our energy and rob all our joy. To really live, filled to the brim, with Christ's unbridled love and grace, allows us to see a wider horizon. We can actually see a vibrant and joyous hope for the future. It is this point of view that propels us through the struggles and pains of labor and births new life. Paul emphatically tells us today that faith, love and hope is what endures.

Back in the early 60's, during the racial and social tensions of the day, the first black dean of Boston University, Howard Thurman, encouraged an anxious and grieving nation. He wrote,

When the spirit moves into the depths of the Great Silence, the world weariness is washed away and blurred vision is once again prepared for the focus of the long view where seeking and finding are so united that failure and frustration, real though they are, are no longer felt to be

ultimately real. Here the Presence of God is sensed as an all-pervasive aliveness which materializes into concreteness of communion: the reality of prayer.¹

People of God, as we prayerfully navigate the unknown terrain ahead, we can only know that the times will continue to change, for better and for worse. There will always be a time of darkness that gives way to the light and then back again. Joy always dances with sorrow; dashed expectations always pave a way for reinvention. That big wheel keeps on turning.

But this is the good news of the Gospel...through it all, as we ride this rickety roller coaster of life, God continually invites us to take up an alternative way, a way is often a harder, but the Way of Jesus is truly the ultimate reality. And isn't that what we really seek. The Way of Jesus reorders the chaos and brings us to an "all-pervasive aliveness." To follow in the Way of Jesus, as the struggling Thessalonian church did, is to find that you are so wrapped up in "the Presence of God" that nothing, absolutely nothing but that can consume your life. All God needs to liberate your soul is your consent. All the world needs is your consent and commitment to love, to forgive, and to hold onto hope. Nothing more. And then we will know the beauty of Thy peace. AMEN

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1961), 112.