

The early church was run by letters, or epistles. Just as you or I might have a face-to-face meeting with our church's pastor if we have theological questions, or have something in our lives that we're struggling with and need advice for, the leaders of the early church corresponded with their followers through letters; you see, they were just too far away to be able to pop round the corner to the church office for a chat. Paul, who wrote this letter to the budding church in Thessalonica, (now Thessaloniki) was stationed, so to speak, in Corinth at the time, which is about an 89 hour walk away, according to google maps, so you can see why letters were more efficient.

So Paul writes this letter to the Thessalonians around 53AD-ish. This is just about twenty years after Jesus' death, so many of the people he is writing to were alive at the same time as Jesus, or grew up hearing stories about this rabble-rouser-rabbi who preached love above all else and made friends with prostitutes. Now, let's pause for a minute, because I'd like a show of hands: how many of you have ever either wondered what it would be like to meet Jesus, or have wished that you could go back in time and meet him?

Yeah that's most of us. Just like us, even the Thessalonians who had never had the chance to meet Jesus loved him and would want to meet him if they could. He was their teacher, their brother, the one who proclaimed the kingdom of heaven for the meek and lowly, who invited the little children to come and sit with him. Jesus' resurrection had happened in many of their lifetimes, and they were anxious for him to come back again. It was a pretty condensed timeline, Jesus' life; I mean, he only lived to about 32, the resurrection happened after only three days...ya know I think its reasonable, or at least understandable that the Thessalonians, like much of the early church, thought that Jesus would be back again in their lifetime...but so far, nothing. And they would've

heard about it, if not from Paul than from the empire as the big wigs collectively shouted, “oh no, he’s back!”.

And, well, they were getting impatient. They were anxious. We can see this in Paul’s response; he says to them, “I don’t think, friends, that I need to deal with the question of when all this is going to happen. You know as well as I that the day of Jesus’ coming can’t be posted on our calendars. He won’t call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would. About the time everybody’s walking around complacently, congratulating each other—“We’ve sure got it made! Now we can take it easy!”—suddenly everything will fall apart. It’s going to come as suddenly and inescapably as birth pangs to a pregnant woman”

He then reminds us, “But friends, you’re not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You’re sons of Light, you’re daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let’s not sleepwalk through life like those others” He tells us to “keep our eyes open and be smart”. “Since we’re creatures of the Day, let’s act like it!”

Jesus is coming, Paul says, but since we don’t know when that’s going to be, since we CANT know when that’s going to be, we *always* have to be sober and alert; we *always* have to be awake to the presence of God among us!

So here we are, mid-November, Thanksgiving is almost upon us. But what’s the next biiiiig Jesus-themed holiday that’s coming up? Someone shout it out! Christmas! Yeah! Now I think that Christmas and Easter go together, and not just because they have to do with Jesus but because they’re the two big “SURPRISE! IT’S JESUS!” holidays.

Jesus’ birth and resurrection weren’t on anyone’s calendar. They were unexpected. Mary knew she was going to give birth to the Light of the World, but she didn’t know what day it was gonna

happen- it came on so suddenly they didn't even have time to book a reservation at an inn and had to take shelter in a barn. And maybe this is what Paul was referring to when he said that Jesus will come as suddenly as the labor pains of a pregnant woman.

But now, almost two thousand years later, these events aren't unexpected for us. We know years in advance what day it's gonna happen. Now I know it's not even Thanksgiving yet, and so I'm sure none of you even want to **hear** the word Christmas right now, but bear with me for a little bit. Pretty soon, you're going to start planning Christmas dinner, looking at wishlists, putting up decorations, picking out trees, and so on and so forth and, ya know, sometimes, I think we can get so caught up in preparing for the main event, for Christmas day, for Easter, or in the Thessalonian's case, for Jesus's second coming, that we lose sight of the importance of the time spent waiting.

Paul is telling the Thessalonians; Paul is telling *us* that how we live our lives in the *chronos*, the period of time leading up to the main event, is perhaps more important, or at least just as important, as the *kairos*, the moment of main event itself.

How can we focus on the waiting, though? Isn't waiting, by definition, focusing on a particular future event? How can we make *waiting* more about *being*? Let's look at Christmas, as an example, and I promise this is the last time you'll hear me talk about it until Thanksgiving is over. In the church calendar, the four week period leading up to Christmas is known as Advent. It's so easy to breeze through Advent, with our eyes on the prize; but what if we really took the time to savor the watching, the waiting, the not-really-knowing-when-jesus-is-coming. But, the thing is, we *know* when Christmas will be here, December 25th. This year it's on a Thursday. How do you focus on the waiting when you know when the main event is coming?

Maybe by pretending that you *don't know*. While we can probably let go a little of that anxious feeling that Mary, her family, the wise men, the shepherds might've had awaiting Jesus' birth, and that Thessalonians might have had, waiting for Jesus' return, and you know know the feeling I'm talking about- it's that one your kids get that leads them to keep asking on long car rides, 'Are we there yet? Are we there yet?' ...so while we can let go of that anxiety, we should hold on to the alertness that that kind of anxiety brings up in us. The wise men were so alert to the stars and the constellations, they had a good idea that something *big* was about to happen soon.

And this, ya know, this can be any time of the year, I just happen to be a Christmas junkie, so I used that example, but as Paul reminds us, Jesus can come at *any* moment. We *always* need to be prepared to let God into our lives. We don't know when it's gonna happen, encountering Jesus, but maybe the 'when' isn't the point. You know the cliché that 'it's not the destination, it's the journey? Well friends, I'm here to tell you that it's not the destination, it's the journey. It's not the coming, it's the waiting. The watching and waiting. How is that relevant to our lives, though? In this day and age even most of the Christians who believe that there will be a second coming of Jesus, still agree that it will probably happen a very, very long time from now.

Think of it as an unexpected houseguest- they show up at the door and as you invite them in you apologize saying, "I would've cleaned up a little bit had I known you were coming". Now the prudent among you might be thinking "well if you always keep your house clean you never have to worry about unexpected guests". To which Paul would say, Exactly! When we have the date and time of future visitor's arrival, we don't have to clean the house right away, we can wait until the day before our guest arrives. Now, things might look nice that day for your guest, but up until then you've been living in a messy house. I'm sure you've

guessed by now that in this analogy, the unexpected visitor is Jesus, and the messy house is our lives when we don't live them in the way Jesus has called us to do. And Paul's letter is a way of saying "c'mon people, just keep your house clean- pick up after yourself every day". Paul calls the Thessalonians to bring it back to the here and now, Paul tells *us* to focus on what's going on right now, to be awake. Alert.

What does that mean, though? What does keeping the house clean, being spiritually awake, look like? Well, according to Paul, it's dressing ourselves in faith and love, it's wearing our hope as if it were a helmet as we face life's struggles. He calls us to encourage one another, to build each other up. It's focusing on sharing the gifts that God has given us, the gifts of love, of material resources, of spiritual resources, its behaving like God's children.

Let me tell you a story. Back in the seventies and eighties, there was a Jesuit priest in Argentina, who was best friends with a Rabbi. No this isn't the lead-up to a joke, I promise. The Priest was the head of the local Jesuit order, and was pretty annoyed with the younger Jesuit brothers who had moved to the slums, without permission. Now, he scolded them for their issues with discipline, but not for their impulse to help the poor, and later when he was talking to his friend the Rabbi about this, the Rabbi suggested that he himself move to the slums for a few months and check it out, see why the other members of the order thought it important enough to go live there, whether or not they had permission. The priest took his friend up on his advice, and went. He later said that in those slums he had, a sort of, second conversion. He said "I met Jesus Christ again in the faces of the poor".

So there's an example of Jesus coming to us when we least expect it. This priest, known presently as Pope Francis, followed

Burglar Jesus

Paul's advice to encourage each other and build each other up, and so went to help the poor.....where he met Jesus.

After Jesus' crucifixion, Mary Magdalene clothed herself in faith and love, and ended up meeting Jesus in the garden after his resurrection, when she least expected it. I've even heard parents say that they've encountered God when they first gazed upon the faces of their beloved, beloved newborns. There have been times in my life, particularly when I've gone to the waters edge on beautiful days where the sun is beyond radiant, and it sparkles off the water like glitter, the sky is that intense blue that peeks through the tree leaves when I look up at them, on those days, I encounter God. I feel moved to prayer... gratitude... joy, really. And I think what all those instances have in common is that Father Bergoglio, Mary Magdalene, you, or I, when these moments have happened, its been when we're open to God's presence.

When we're living our lives in a way that invites God in, God enters in.

I know we call church the house of God, but it seems to me that God is too big for any four walls, that God's presence is everywhere in our lives when we're living in the way that Jesus calls us to do, time and time again. We can cultivate these moments. We don't have to wait around for the second coming of Christ to encounter Jesus.