

“Children of Light”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 12, 2017

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Two months ago, I chose this scripture lesson to preach on. Originally, it was supposed to be for next Sunday, as I had planned to be off this weekend. But when Kim shared that she could not be here next weekend for us to celebrate her ministry with us, Lisa and I swapped Sundays, and I ended up preaching on this text today.

I don't believe that was a coincidence or an accident.

“‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them . . . 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 . . .”

I have to confess something. When I first heard the news that there had been a shooting in a church in Texas last Sunday, I didn't treat it any differently than the rest of the news I heard a week ago. I wasn't shocked. I wasn't outraged. I wasn't horrified.

I was numb. I was immune to the tragedy that had taken place. In Paul's words, I had “fallen asleep as others do,” and had not grasped the full scope of what took place in a worship space – like this one – seven days ago.

Since then, I've asked myself why I fell asleep. Why did I not have an immediate emotional reaction to this senseless act of violence that occurred in a space that was supposed to be full of praise and peace and joy to God?

Honestly, there are no good reasons why I fell asleep. They are mere excuses. “The unending media saturation of our world.” “Privately giving thanks it didn't happen to me or someone I know.” “There's so much going on in my own life, I do not have the time to get involved or invested.” Do any of these sound familiar to you?

When we fall asleep to the terrors and darkness of this world, we are failing to remember the claim God has made on our lives. When we are seduced into rationalizing our way out of accountability and action, we forget that God has made us children of light for a purpose and a reason. We are not children of the night or of darkness; we are children of the light and of the day.

I have to admit what woke me from my sleep more readily was on a completely different issue. There has been wave after wave of sexual harassment claims in the entertainment industry recently, from Harvey Weinstein to Kevin Spacey to Louis C K and others. And it points to a much wider and pervasive problem in society, where women do not feel safe in their work environments because of unwarranted sexual advances by men.

Last month, in response to these allegations, one actress encouraged women to write on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram the phrase “Me Too,” if they themselves have been the victim of an unwanted sexual advance. This was a re-

birth of a previous movement to empower women through empathy and support. And the response was overwhelming. What woke me from my sleep of indifference was seeing so many women who I loved and cared for, my family and friends, posting “Me Too” in their social media feeds. It broke the silence and the taboo of sexual harassment, and brought to light something that has for much too long lived in the darkness of the night.

There is so much in our world that can cause us to slip blinders over our eyes and our hearts, and we fail to acknowledge the hurt and pain and injustice right before us. We ourselves go through so much uncertainty and anxiety, that we turn inward and fail to trust in the mercy and grace that God has granted in Jesus Christ.

When Paul writes this letter to the church in Thessalonica, he is writing to a group of believers who are more than a generation past Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Paul speaks of waiting for Jesus’ return like a thief who comes in the night – it is a day which can come at any moment (5:2). But more than anxious anticipation, Paul is writing to a group that is weary from waiting. John Cole writes: *Paul’s argument has a lot more to do with sustenance and perseverance long after the urgency of Christ’s return seems to have worn out. It is much more likely that Paul’s admonition has less to do with the fact of Christ’ return than it does with the weariness with its delay and misunderstanding about its purpose for believers racked with uncertainty and fear. In other words, Paul raises these issues more for encouragement than for some mountain-top revelation or scared-straight faith commitment* (John Cole, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 304*).

I can relate to being weary from waiting. Maybe you can relate, as well. I am weary of waiting for peace amid the violence of this world. I am weary of waiting for justice amid the injustices of this world. I am weary of waiting for change amid the status quo of this world. I am weary of waiting for wholeness amid the brokenness of this world.

Amid our weary waiting, and the weary waiting of the Thessalonians, Paul speaks words of encouragement and hope. “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 . . . 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” (5:4, 8-10).

And, as Cole says: *Even more reassuring are Paul’s concluding words, which remind us that we are not alone. In verse 11, he (states): “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” The best evidence believers have of the assurance of God’s forgiveness and salvation is each other. The promise of Christ’s return sustains and upbuilds the church in whatever circumstance it finds itself. God has given us two great gifts for sustaining our faith in the midst of hardship: the promise of Christ’s return and the mutual encouragement of the community of faith. According to Paul, we can step out into eternity on these two realities* (ibid, 306).

In the midst of our weariness, our anxiety, our challenges, we are forever reminded of this gift we've been given: the gift of faith which exists in community with one another. We are called children of the day for a reason: so we might bring light to one another and to this world when we are facing darkness and night. As we read in the Psalms, God reminds us all "To be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

But this reassurance and promise cannot be to simply stay in our comfort and be passive children of light. One of the great 20th-century theologians, Karl Barth, wrote on this passage in his Church Dogmatics, and he stated that Christians need to be continually reawakened. As he puts it, "*We cannot, therefore, define Christians simply as those who are awake while the rest sleep, but more cautiously as those who . . . constantly stand in need of reawakening from the sleep of all kinds of errors and fantasies and falsehoods.*" In fact, the command in 1 Thessalonians to "keep awake" is directed specifically at Christians and is a call, Barth argues, echoing from the Garden of Gethsemane, where the disciples slept instead of watching and waiting with Christ . . . "Christians are roused," Barth says, awakened with a purpose and drive in order "to move forward to continually new things," to the new thing that the day of Christ, the coming of God, brings (Jennifer McBride, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 304-306*).

We cannot just be reaffirmed and comforted amid the tragedies of this world. We must allow that comfort and reassurance to reawaken us into the children of light God wishes for us to be.

I will confess that I am weary of the phrase, "You're in our thoughts and prayers." I will admit, it is a phrase I have used often in the past, but recently it's not felt like it's enough to say. Thoughts and prayers are meaningful and all that, but eventually we also need to be reawakened to action as children of light. We need our faith to convict us to shine light into the darkest places of poverty, of intolerance, of hatred, of injustice, so that all God's people might know of salvation in Jesus Christ. We must not be afraid to stand up for the voiceless, the wounded, the downtrodden, and help build them up as we build one another up in the community of faith. We must not be afraid to have the hard, difficult conversations with those with whom we disagree, so that we don't fall asleep to the darkness of the night, and build walls between one another which become impenetrable. That is not our calling as children of light.

Two closing thoughts. First, I am the father of two beautiful daughters, and the husband of an amazing wife. And my greatest fear is that any of them would be wounded or harassed in any way that would demean them as children of God, especially by men seeking to exert power or control over them. There is no excuse - no excuse - for any kind of behavior that hints at sexual harassment. And as children of light, we need to be reawakened to provide safe spaces for all people - women and men - to come forward and seek healing and wholeness and peace. We need to awaken from our sleep so that we might bring all into the light of God's day.

Second, I did not grow up with guns around our house. I never went hunting with family or friends, and guns were never in our home. So, I confess that I bring that context with me to the issue of gun violence in our country. I know many of

you do have guns, or use them for hunting or self-defense, and you have training for their safe use and keeping. I deeply respect that, and value your right to have them in your possession.

I would like to have deep, fruitful conversations with those of you who have guns as to how we face the issue of gun violence in our country today. I struggle, as I'm sure we all struggle, with the right to bear arms and the protection of our society from weapons that cause great harm in the hands of individuals who are mentally or emotionally unstable. We need to have those conversations with one another, and not just say our thoughts and prayers are with those who died and their loved ones. As children of the day, we must be reawakened to bring light into the darkness of this world, so that all of God's children might grow fully into the life God has called them to lead.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is a Presbyterian hymn writer, and she wrote the following hymn in response to the church shooting in Texas:

*If we just talk of thoughts and prayers
And don't live out a faith that dares,
And don't take on the ways of death,
Our thoughts and prayers are fleeting breath.*

*If we just dream of what could be
And do not build community,
And do not seek to change our ways,
Our dreams of change are false displays.*

*If we just sing of doing good
And don't walk through our neighborhood
To learn its hope, to ease its pain,
Our talk of good is simply vain.*

*God, may our prayers and dreams and songs
Lead to a faith that takes on wrongs—
That works for peace and justice, too.
Then will our prayers bring joy to you.*

<http://pres-outlook.org/2017/11/hymn-just-talk-thoughts-prayers/>

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.