

“Earnest Hope”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

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The last time we saw each other we were celebrating the ‘fellowship of the saints’... no, not the New Orleans variety, but ones MUCH more ‘praiseworthy’... the ‘saints’ of the Welsh and LC congregations. As I said then, it was only appropriate that the previous ‘high holy day’ to that worship service 3 weeks ago was “All Saints Day.” (You know, the day after Halloween... which is ‘revered’ MUCH more so than the following day’s observance). And now, BOOM... here we are at the first Sunday of Advent. That 4-week time of preparation for Christmas.

But wait. Didn’t another ‘holiday’... another ‘holy day’... come in between? THANKSGIVING! Oh yeah, that’s right! If you watched any TV, or saw any newspaper ads, or went into any stores, it might be easy to forget that there IS a special day that comes *between* Halloween and Christmas. And aside from the *economic* reasons that Thanksgiving gets ‘short shrift’ compared to its more ‘lucrative’ counterparts, I think one reason that it gets overlooked is that the notion of ‘giving thanks’ is just not as important to us as it once was. Our ‘hurried lives’ too often seem to leave little room for a simple ‘thank you’... to God, or one another. Rather than have an ‘attitude of gratitude,’ too often instead we have a ‘perspective of invective.’ In our caustic social environment these days, I fear that it is much easier to be ‘hateful’ than ‘grateful’...

And so, in an effort to be reminded of how important it is to (we are to) be a **people of ‘Thanks-LIVING’**... leading everyday lives that reflect our gratitude for the BOUNTY of BLESSINGS bestowed upon us by God... today we will look at our two Scriptures through the lens of giving THANKS. Just as the day of ‘Thanksgiving’ lies between ‘All Saints Day’ and this first Sunday of Advent... on which we lit the candle of HOPE... let us look both back and ahead. Giving thanks

for 'all the saints' of faith of the past... and for the coming of the only 'pure' saint, Jesus Christ. Jesus... who came into the world some 2000 years ago... comes into our hearts today... and will one day come again into our world in glory. Let us consider how both those 'saints' and the 'Savior' give us an **"Earnest Hope.**

As we read the passage from the Gospel of Luke, how many of you could resonate with the second verse: **"People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world"** (Luke 21:26)? How many of you 'know people' who are fearful, anxious, feeling weak or 'faint' about all that **"is coming upon the world"**? MANY of our friends and family look at the pain and suffering, the violence committed by one human being on another... be it around the world, or around the corner... and are downright FRIGHTFUL about the FUTURE of our 'NOT-so-'civil-ization.' Heck, even that 'close relative' we look at in the MIRROR can be filled with worry for our world...

And if someone is a non-believer, it can really be a struggle to believe in a God who can seemingly let this world 'go to hell in a handbasket.' The problem with our societies is NOT, however, the One who truly has "the whole world in His hands." But rather, with the ones that He has allowed to 'hold the basket.' US! That whole 'free will' thing? Sounds great in principle. But one must always be careful what is asked for. When we find that our own abilities to handle the challenges of everyday living are too great, it is sure easy to have **"hearts weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life."** (Luke 21:34) And while we all are all too familiar with words like 'drunkenness' and 'worries,' that more archaic term of 'dissipation' more simply means 'wasteful expenditures'... like time and money... used on 'self indulgence.' Which applies to a LOT that we do in our North American Culture...

Whether you believe that the end of the age will come with God's judgment in the hands of His Son, Jesus... or at the hands of a human criminal or extremist terrorist... or that your life will simply end in a pine box or earthen jar... how can we best prepared for the 'advent' of our life's conclusion? What can we count on in a world of UNCERTAINTY that will give us a certain, sure, '**earnest hope?**'

In spending time with my younger relations this past two weeks, I am going to challenge you with an acronym that comes from a favorite cartoon of our youngest granddaughter, Caroline Porter. (b-day: Laura Landreneau!). I want you to become a member of the "**P.A.W. Patrol.**" And while it may seem odd for us 'grown ups' to borrow from a children's cartoon, we might recall that Christ Himself says to come to Him with the faith of a little child. For to Such as these belongs the Kingdom of Heaven... for which we certainly need to be THANKFUL!

Beginning with the first letter, "P," To be a people of "earnest hope" we must be a people of **PRAYER**. *"So that your hearts are not weighed down with... the worries of this life,"* Jesus said that you and I should be "**PRAYING that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.**" (Luke 21:36)

While I was away this past two weeks on vacation, even though I made great efforts to NOT spend much time on church-related business, it was yet gratifying to be made aware of how church members were caring for one another, lifting up prayers of healing and comfort for those 'friends who stick closer than a brother or sister.' From illness within our own church family, and those 'friends of the family' we care deeply about, to those dealing with imminent or past loss of close family members, we must not lose sight of the importance to

others that they are being PRAYED for. That their names are being lifted before Almighty God for the strength to stand up before all that is taking place in their lives. As I've said before, for me personally, there is nothing more powerful and encouraging for me than to be told by someone that they have been praying for little ol' ME.

That is why I want to continue to encourage you ALL, both actual and virtual worshippers, to share your prayer requests, either electronically or in-person. Your fellow prayer warriors cannot go into battle with and for you unless they have their 'marching orders.' I know full well how 'noble' and 'southernly' it is to 'suffer in silence,' not wanting to burden others with your concerns. But part of our Christian calling is ***"Bear one another's burdens."*** (Gal. 6:2). Which we cannot do unless we KNOW them. We might learn from the theme song of that cartoon, which my 4 yo granddaughter certainly was happy to share with anyone who would listen: "Paw Patrol, Paw Patrol, Whenever you're in trouble, We'll be there on the double." People need to know that when they are in trouble, we will be there 'on the double'... to offer PRAYER... to offer HOPE.

Which brings me to the second letter of our 'P-A-W' acronym for Advent preparedness, "A." ***"ALERT."*** Jesus exhorted His followers to ***"Be on guard... be ALERT at all times."*** (Luke 21:34, 36) This certainly applies to our interpersonal relationships we just spoke of. To be 'alert' to what is going on in the lives of others, and to pray for their immediate needs. But in a much more 'eternal' sense, we especially need to be alert to what is going on in our own lives, and in our larger communities, SPIRITUALLY.

When Jesus spoke of folks 'fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,' He was NOT exaggerating, trying to 'create' some false

sense of 'IN-security.' We NEED to have a healthy respect for the judgment that is coming upon the world! He clearly says we **"WILL see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory."** (Luke 21:27) I hope that all of you in this room (and the hearing of my voice) believe this. But since most EVERY church still has room in its sanctuaries for more, I know that there are a lot of folks who do NOT have a strong conviction about Jesus. Not just that he's coming AGAIN, but that He came at ALL!

But He DID. And He will a SECOND time. And He says to one-and-all, **"Be on guard so that... that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. Be alert at all times..."** Jesus came that ALL might have life... BUT that all will not choose to follow Him. He implores those who WILL to **"stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."** (Luke 21:28). Be alert to those in your life who have their heads 'down,' who need to stand up for the Lord; PRAY that they be given the strength to escape all that will take place in the endtimes...

And finally, my fellow 'PAW Patrol' members, we need to be a people of the 'W'... the **WORD**. As Jesus said, **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my WORDS will not pass away."** (Luke 21:33) From Isaiah in the O.T.... **"the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the WORD of our God endures forever"** (40:8) ... to Peter in the New... **"the WORD of the Lord remains forever"** (1 Peter 1:25)... God testifies to the everlasting importance of the Holy Scriptures.

The question is, how do WE attest to the importance of the Bible in our everyday lives. How is God's Word preparing us for the coming of Christ? How prominent a place does the study of the Scriptures occupy in the way we live our life? This season of Advent, I challenge you to consider how you might 'ramp up'

your 'scholarship' of this Holy Book. Advent Study. Devotional time. Small group study. ***"You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word."*** (Ps. 33:18)

And so, as we reflect on this most recent 'holy-day' of Thanksgiving, may we be mindful of how it is NOT to be a single day observance... like so many others... but one that is reflected in our everyday life. How we are to be a people of 'Thanks-LIVING.' Living Proof of the blessings God has bestowed on us in the past, and those yet to be experienced in the future. May those words of Paul apply to BOTH those **human saints** that have impacted our lives in the past, present, and future, as well as **our Lord and Savior**, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow:

"How can I thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that I feel because of you? I pray earnestly to see you face-to-face; may the Father and Son direct my way to you, as we abound in love for one another." (1 Thess 3:9)

Pray for the coming of Jesus. The One who has promised to return for those He loves... AND who is here, even now, in our present day struggles to bring hope out of despair. In PRAYER... In staying ALERT... in study of God's WORD... may we be part of God's 'Paw Patrol.' Not a cartoon, but a real-life 'expeditionary group' of another 'feline': "The Lion of Judah." JESUS. The One who IS our 'Earnest Hope.'

CALL TO CONFESSION: In the words of Jesus we will soon read, He said, "Do not let your hearts be weighed down by the sins and worries of this life, but watch and pray for the grace of God, who will save you in your time of trial." Mindful of all the sin and worries that weigh us down, and with confidence in God's mercy, let us depend on that grace from the One who saves us. Please join me as we confess our sin... first together, and then in silence. Let us pray...

ASSURANCE OF PARDON: God's mercy and steadfast love endure, strengthening our hearts and overcoming our fears.

God will remove every obstacle that keeps us from being the body of Christ, whose Spirit will, in the words of Paul, make us 'abound in love for one another and for all'...

Benediction:

Go into the world awake to the signs of God's invitations to new life.

Know that the reign of Christ draws nearer with each right action we choose.

Amen.

Question for Reflection: Even in the midst of trouble and turmoil, God allows us glimpses of the kingdom to come. What signs of promise do you see that bolster your hope in a new heaven and a new earth?

"Vividly IMAGINE... Ardently DESIRE... Sincerely BELIEVE... Enthusiastically ACT...

It must certainly come to pass." "HOLD THE ROPE!"

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁵ "There will be SIGNS in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ **People will faint from fear** and foreboding of **what is coming** upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, **stand up** and **raise your heads**, because **your redemption is drawing near.**"

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the **fig tree** and **ALL the trees**; ³⁰ as soon as they **sprout leaves** you can see for yourselves and know that **summer is already near**. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, **this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place**. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Exhortation to Watch

³⁴ “**Be on guard** so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the **worries of this life**, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ **Be alert at all times, praying** that you may have the **strength to escape** all these things that will take place, and to **stand** before the Son of Man.”

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the JOY that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day **we pray most earnestly** that we may **see you face to face** and **restore whatever is lacking in your faith**.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And **may the Lord make you increase** and **abound in love for one another and for all**, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so **strengthen your hearts in holiness** that you may be **blameless** before our God and Father at the **coming of our Lord Jesus** with all his saints.