**Sermon for November 19, 2023 “Together 24/7” 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.*

The cursing people are right outside my office door, making it hard to concentrate. The smell of pot is fully bloomed in my office although I had nothing to do with producing that smell. Despite my attempted prayers, as I turn to my sermon writing with resentment and frustration coursing through my veins, I take seriously the words of St. Paul - *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you.* He is right, right on the money for late in 2023, a season of discontent in the land, as season of disgusting living in our towns, a time of international tension and frustration. A perfect time for God to step in and just firehose all of this out of existence, but I’m not holding my breath. Paul may have been expecting the day of the Lord anytime now, but not me. We have to live with this dysfunction until we find ways to heal it because we have all contributed, in ways big and tiny, to its cancerous spread.

He goes on to re-assert that the return of Christ will come like a thief in the night, unexpected, unheralded, but not undeserved. And then he shifts the mood, making it more personal and less apocalyptic, personalizing it for his beloved congregation in Thessaloniki, reminding them that they are swept *up* in this but not really *part* of it, that they are *in* the world, but not *of* the world, as the desert Fathers would someday so eloquently describe. And he sets before his readers a choice, then and now and forever: we can be people of the day, or people of the night. We choose to become children of the light, or children of the darkness.

His measuring stick for our choices is a surprising one; he couches the evidence of our choice for either light or darkness as *sobriety*, as being sober. In our modern world the definition of sobriety has expanded beyond the original by quite a margin, but in Paul’s day, he was familiar with the Latin adjective, *sobrius*, defined as *"not drunk, temperate, moderate, sensible, moderate in desires or actions, habitually temperate, restrained, and even calm, quiet, and not overcome by emotion.* And while we moderns use sobriety primarily in connection to our world’s endless list of intoxicants, the original meaning had less to do with external substances and more to do with inner substance. He encourages the Christians of every age to be sober, as in temperate and moderate and sensible and restrained.

The children of darkness outside my office door are in full roil now, shouting and arguing, swearing and coughing from the exertion. Pot smokers cough a lot. But based on the evidence of our morning cleanups around here, marijuana is not remotely the only intoxicant in play outside that door, contributing to the overall lack of sobriety one would expect of those who have chosen the darkness rather than the light. Oh, I know, I sound pretty accusatory this morning, and possibly even dismissive of the medical urgencies of addiction. But I cannot truly believe that God would create whole categories of people who are chemically guaranteed to fail in their lives any more than I can believe the nonsense that gay and lesbian people would be fine if they were just celibate, or that women really are the weaker gender, or that some of us are predestined for damnation, and that nothing can be done about that. I cannot reconcile my understanding of God’s love and grace and redemptive reach with this distorted notion that God assigns trials and torments and tests. I don’t buy it, and the biblical evidence is scanty, too. We are not victims here, unless victimhood is our chosen way. What we are, my friends, is gifted with the awesome ability to choose our lives, and the frightening reality of having to live with the consequences of our choices.

*But since* we *belong to the day,* Paul continues, *let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.* We have heard this little set of his favorite virtues in other letters, most frequently in his writings to the church at Corinth. But unlike that tender passage that has graced nearly every wedding ceremony ever, here Paul reminds us that this earthly life is sometimes like a battlefield, and that our survival depends on protection and prudent safety. Faith and love guarding our vital organs, and the hope of salvation crowning our head, to protect us from the assault, not only from the children of darkness, but from our own mistaken choices and habits. It is a battle, I’m afraid, but the enemy isn’t always out there someplace.

And now, finally, the best part, the most urgent reminder: *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.* How many of the children of darkness remain there because they authentically believe they are supposed to stay there, that the God of fury and judgment and wrath hates them for their choices, and will never, ever forgive them, so why even try? Even worse, they assume that the children of light, often inappropriately full of fury and judgment and wrath, will never forgive, never accept, never assist, never allow them to come into the light. How sad is that, that we consign people forever to the punishment of their choices, as if we run out of choices in this life, as if we ourselves haven’t stumbled in the darkness on our way into the light.

The shouting has calmed down outside my office door, although the pot smell is stronger. Just eight feet from me are cold, wet, drug-addled children of darkness, with no respect for this building or its imparted holiness because they are purely ignorant of living in the light. This promise of Jesus, arms embracing, choices reframing, forgiveness proclaiming, they do not grab that promise because they have not seen it enacted with enough force to believe its truth. And the most distressing thing to me is that most of them are homeless, not only in the usual sense, but spiritually as well. Living with Jesus 24/7/365 is not in their minds or hearts, and therefore holiness does not inform their choices. We who have bought into this comforting imagery have largely taken Paul’s advice about living lives of sobriety; I can look around this room and see great evidence of sensible, moderate, restrained, thoughtful children of God who choose light every time we possibly can, and retreat from darkness when we stumble there. And this is in stark contrast to the survival mode of the streets, where every advantage must be pressed and every situation turned towards acquiring another hit, another bite of food, another bottle of the cheapest rot-gut booze. Lying, cheating, manipulating, every day, what other choice is there?

Our world talks a lot about culture wars: rich and poor, educated and illiterate, elitist and salt of the earth, but the Church has the real key to unlock the dystopian horror that fills our hearts with pain and our minds with resentment. The solving of life together on earth is not ultimately about culture or education or privilege or wealth, although those can make things smoother. What is needful is a society that teaches not only healthy choosing skills, but a society that offers guidance and redemption to those whose choices lean ever towards the unhealthy. You see, we do not just *choose*, one day when we are 14 years old, for darkness or light. Whether we live with healthy sobriety or destructive intemperance, we claim those lifestyles as a result of hundreds of thousands of choices, every moment, every day, our whole life through. We are, all, the aggregate of our choices, my friends. Let’s make good ones. Amen.