Proper 28A; 25th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.15.26

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.

Matthew 25:14-30
"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (651)

The problem with the hymn we're about to sing, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, is that there's almost never an appropriate time for it–and yet it's a great song. It's very singable, the tune. But it's too powerful–the text. It comes to us from a specific moment, and yet it has come to embolden many moments, come over its one hundred fifty year history to justify things as widely different in America as solidarity in the labor movement and an imperial invasion of Cuba in 1898. It has energized many momentous attempts at setting things right, "right" being a very flexible concept, a quality very much in the eyes of the beholder.

As for what moment it was actually meant to serve, Julia Ward Howe wrote it "in a single blaze of inspiration" in 1861. So it was described in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in a short article from last summer. And they would know over at *The Atlantic*. They were the ones to publish it first, in 1862, printing the full text on the magazine's cover, a new text for an old battle march, *John Brown's Body*.

The former, as you might know, celebrates the raid in Harper's Ferry, Virginia that John Brown staged in 1859. Hoping to launch a slave revolt, Brown failed at this, but he would end up, it's widely said, to have sparked the whole Civil War. Though eleven armed abolitionists were killed at Harper's Ferry, seven were captured and later put to death, and five escaped, it was also the last time the U.S. armed forces would be set to protect the institution of American slavery, and the last time the likes of Robert E. Lee would fight for the republic. The next time that general would see a battlefield, he'd be fighting for the newly formed Confederacy and the U.S. Army would be on the side of abolition.

Ms. Howe, for her part, in 1861 found herself at a soldier's encampment in Washington D.C. when the search for a new national anthem was afoot, which coincided with the abolitionists among the Republic gaining steam. Having come from Massachusetts with her husband and a number of northern dignitaries, she heard the soldiers in the encampment singing *John Brown's Body*, and was taken with the idea that this familiar march could use a new text.

Versed as she was (and most others were) in the biblical images of the prophecy of Isaiah and the Revelation to John, she called on these to set the fight to end American slavery in the larger context of God's aim that all creation be free. And she ended up with a song so powerful it's only really rightly sung just before it was actual fact that, as God died to make us holy, so we "must die to make men free."

The article from this summer states it well: "It is stirring in its driving tune, but unsettling in its vision of sanctified violence." Just so, tragically, this was what had to happen in the American so-called "Civil" War–that many, many, many people were made to die in order that others might be free. And if we ever wish for such righteous urgency to seize upon us again, we do so out of terrible folly and to our own peril, violence felt both dangerous and glorious, dangerous and divine.

The thing is, scripture itself puts us on that knife's edge of violence understood as both dangerous and divine.

This is at no time more the case than at the end of the church year, where we find ourselves today, on the second-to-last Sunday of the old year and readying ourselves for the new. At this hinge-point in the liturgical calendar, always ending in November, and always beginning in late November or early December, this puts us at the moments in the gospels when things have come to an end, a terrible, terrifying, violent end, which only thus breaks ground for something new.

You have to break ground for something new.

You have to *break* ground for something new.

The Thessalonians find themselves on the far side of that break, Paul's writing to the Thessalonians coming the soonest after that perceived break. This is the earliest letter we have of Paul's, probably written around the year 49 or 50.

It might surprise you to learn that the books of the New Testament were written after Jesus had lived and died and lived again. Though the gospels especially seem like eye-witness accounts, they're not. The earliest of them, Mark, was probably written around the year 70, which is 40 years after Jesus lived among us, while Matthew and Luke were written around the year 80, and John comes to us from late in the 1st century or even early in the second. The letters, though reading less like eye-witness accounts, come to us (many of them) from earlier than this. But even these post-date Jesus' life among us. And the earliest among these is 1st Thessalonians, Paul's first letter to the churches in Thessalonica and the earliest letter of Paul that we have.

It might surprise to you learn that the earliest written mention of Jesus, his having come, his having gone, his having come again and then gone again, and what all that might mean for a world that continues to turn, and a history that continues to play out comes to us from about fifteen years after all that, a long time, fifteen years. Really, it might disappoint you to learn that so much time passed between the event, and all the many events within the Event, and the eventual written witnessing of it: fifteen years.

But once you get used to the perhaps discomfitting fact that no one was writing alongside Jesus' living, in spite of what the gospels might read like; and once you really consider what radical change the Christ event pressed upon the world, and our understanding of the world, and our imagining of the cosmos and our place in it, and our relationship with the God who'd long been confessed as Creator but now must also be conceived of as one of us, having come in the flesh among us to live among us and to die as one of us, you see that fifteen years isn't actually all that long a time. To have so radical a change of mind, individually (people one by one) and collectively (whole cultures informed by this event, this indeed advent), to have to so radically reimagine how this whole thing works, how God is in relation to God's creation, how the creation is in relation to itself, whence it comes and where it's heading, then you realize fifteen is actually but a dawn, a beginning yet breaking unto day.

This break, this glorious break, this discomfitting and even terrifying break: God *had* been in God's heaven and all had been right with the world (sort of, not really, right with the world) but now this separation between the two had broken down. Had broken through?

And so we see the churches in Thessalonica, as reflected in what Paul had to write to them: that they were yet in a state of expectation of what's to come (next? again?) while also beginning to settle back into regular time. God had broken into the house of the creation, born into its bearings his eternal being, the God of all time and indeed beyond time, into one mere being, Jesus of Nazareth. God had done this after 1500 years of walking with God's chosen people, giving them a Law by which to live and a governance (less than perfect) by which to keep order and to stay true to the aim of justice and righteousness, lovingkindness and care for the downtrodden–until time was ripe and God would be born into the world so to be a light unto the world.

And then that newborn God grew into a man.

And then that man was crucified.

He died.

He was buried.

But then he rose from the grave, and walked among his friends again. He ate, even. He walked and talked.

But then he left again, taken up while a spirit came down.

And so…

And so…

something would come next.

Right?

I mean, something would happen next.

It can't just be that he came and went and came again and went again.

There would have to be a coming again.

Haven't we established a pattern here?

It's become something of an embarrassment that the Christian faith started off with such apocalyptic expectation. It's become something of an embarrassment that people in the earliest years of this new faith were so wildly wrong about what would come next, that Jesus would come next, or the end of history would come next, that the rip in the firmament that God coming to the world surely suggested, this rip, this tear: it would stay torn, ushering something in or making possible an exit out. Really, we of this now two thousand year old faith might be asked to feel embarrassed by our earliest hopes and our

now defeated settling back into time, our expectations dashed, our indeed arrogant, self-regarding expectations dashed. As Emily Litella was often made to say, Gilda Radner's character on long ago Saturday Night Live: "Nevermind."

I reject this demand for embarrassment, just as I reject all such demands of history. That the people of the past know what we of the present know, that the people of the past imagine and experience the world just as we do now, understand how long time will feel, how slowly or how quickly its passage will come to seem, and how what changes it brings might play out and have their impact: these are all facile engagements with history.

The fact is, if you ask me, the people whom the apostle Paul of the first century knew and loved and gathered into congregations had been, just like he himself, jerked around quite a lot by the cosmos, and therefore they deserve some time to find their footing in a world cast anew and to recalibrate their keeping time amidst a history that had come to fullness in a single moment–Jesus raised and come out of the tomb–and then stretched back slow to reimagine all that happened as bringing to fullness that moment while rejoining ordinary time, going forward day by day, week by week, month by month, and so on to forever.

I reject such mean imagining of what it must have felt like to be alive at the time when the curtain had been torn in two, just after God was in his heaven and all on earth was rightly left to go about its business. No more.

So here we are with the Thessalonians, trying to come to terms, trying to calibrate and to anticipate rightly. So here we are, and here's what to do: if nothing else, keep awake. If nothing else, stay ready, with the armor of love on, a breastplate of faithfulness, a helmut of hope, things for safe defense but nothing for aggressive offence, things that make the slings and arrows of history less injurious while you wait, wait for God who is coming, while you watch, watch for eternal glory to arrive in time that you be taken somehow into beyond time.

This, so when history breaks in two, you're not swallowed by its maw. This, so when there cleaves a chasm between yesterday and tomorrow you're not any less trusting that God arrives today and God arrives forever, God for whom now and forever are but different names for the same thing–so live now as you hope to live forever, live now as you trust God

will have all live forever. Live in grace for the sake of universal glory now, as forever, if though now is but a dim version of forever.

Because,

don't tell me that you're someone who knows your master to be a harsh man.

Don't tell me you think this whole life of faith is a matter of doing what your "master" doesn't want to do himself, reaping where he's too lazy to do so himself, planting where she's on vacation from having to do herself.

Don't tell me your expectations for the God who came to the world and left the world and empowered the world to live by God's same present grace did so all just as if to watch slaves do the work while he sits on the porch sipping sweet tea.

If that's the god you expect, then that might be the god you get. If that's how you imagine God's creation to have been made and God's work of love to be commissioned for doing, then that will be the world you get, where the work of love is rather but toil, the work of grace is but something you need to be conscripted into doing.

Don't tell me that's how you understand this whole project that is the church in the world.

But if it is, if it is how you understand this whole project that is the church in the world, then shame on the church for teaching you wrong. Shame on the church for being mean with its treasure, being stingy about what Jesus left us to be magnanimous about. Shame on the church for being such stingy stewards of its treasure, preaching a harsh god.

This parable is about the church. Coming as it does at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, it has us with Jesus as he's nearing the end of his earthly life. In Jerusalem now, in the Temple, he is but a couple days away from his last supper and so he is as of now fully imagining his own end, his own leaving, and his disciples going on without him. He is as of now imagining them without his manifest presence, without his manifest teaching and leading and guiding and correcting. He would be leaving, they would be on their own, and they were called together to be the church. Unlike in every other of the four Gospels in the Bible, only here in Matthew do we hear of such a thing as the church, the *ekklesia*, the

assembly that would be gathered with the full intent of continuing together in the Jesus way.

This parable is about the church. This, Jesus tells as he imagines entrusting onto these mere people a treasure that's beyond measure. We hear of one slave receiving one talent, which is a lot of money, about a decade's income for the average American household. We hear of another slave who received two talents, income for two decades. We hear of a third slave who received five talents, which amount to, for the purpose of this story, a gajillion dollars. The point isn't the amount of the treasure. The point is the unquestionable fact that this is treasure–and, something to be treasured, it also requires rightful stewardship. Jesus, like the master of this parable, would be going away, and the question that haunted him as of now was, how would his friends do in his absence? Would they be safe in this world and would they be wise in this world–faithful, gracious, awake to the advent of God ever doing a new thing? Really, how would they do with the treasure they'd been given?

And how are *we* doing with the treasure *we've* been given?

We're lucky ducks, in many ways. We don't live at a hinge point in history. The ground beneath us doesn't cleave with violence. Though as a country and society we're fascinated by violence and things among are suffused with violence, it's tamped down in most real ways, the United States of America something one church member from long ago called the world's biggest gated community.

On the other hand, when violence is more a current than an occurrence, it's easy to get comfortable with it, to get used to it; and it's easy to be lulled to sleep that this is just the way things are and, after all, it's not so bad for me. What's more, when violence is more notional than actual, more imagined than felt, it's also weirdly appealing, something that looks so cool in movies so wouldn't it be even cooler to have it arrive on our doorstep, something we *had* to do, something that would prove our courage and strength?

This is the temptation of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. So stirring a song, it might move us to wish it were more relevant for us. Wouldn't it be cool if *we ourselves* were to die to make men free? Wouldn't it be cool if we ourselves were to see the coming of the Lord and to be able to join in so divine a battle?

We just had an electoral revolution. That's what some scholars of politics are calling it. An electoral revolution: it follows the same in Hungary earlier in the year, which followed the same in Poland in 2023. A growing illiberalism, a mounting authoritarianism, with all its corruption and incompetence and scapegoating, was met with massive presence at the polls, people peacefully voting for leaders who were themselves changing the conversation, making it about government performance, public services, and democratic renewal. And the moment has not yet passed. It remains to be seen how the transfer of power will go. But the possibility that there might be so much change, and possibly even transformation, without any violence: wow.

This will disappoint only those who seemed too gleeful in their predictions of second civil war. This will disappoint only those who misguidedly wish that *The Battle Hymn* might be relevant again, rather than something we sing as an historical document as much as anything. Not a battle cry once again, this an act of humble remembrance and a rousing to wakeful hope

That the coming one is who will save

That the coming on feels to bring be breaking in, *breaking* in

That this breaking and cleaving is a test of our mettle

That this glorious, terrifying advent brings

A baby.

Something, some*one*, to love and nurture and treasure and hold safe, to watch grow and to fiercely make sure the growth.

Watch out. Love is coming. It will change everything. But quietly.

Thanks be to God.