

## Beloved by the Lord

Last week, our image from Thessalonians encouraged us to look up in the sky. This week, it seems, the sky is falling. It's amazing how quickly any of us, all of us, can go from feeling like Superman to running around in a blind panic like Henny Penny. Speaking for myself, I can tell you that there are days I start out feeling on top of the world and end up like feeling the world is on top of me and vice versa. Really, it's all too easy sometimes for me to flip from serene confidence to despair. A quarrel with my daughter, a project that comes unraveled, a problem that I thought was solved recurring and I can find myself doing the human equivalent of rushing around with my shoulders hunched up over my head squawking, "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

I know, of course that I really should rely on the power of our Loving Creator to guide me through problems but it is sometimes hard to remember that amidst the negative noise of the Spirit of Chaos and Fear which so often controls our culture. All around us, the voices of fear shout louder and louder. "The stock market is down – you're going to lose all your savings! The wrong party is in power – they're going to make the situation worse! *Those* people are moving into your town – your property values are going to go down! The Taliban is on the loose – our culture is at stake! Terrorists are everywhere – be afraid! Your teeth aren't white enough -- your clothes aren't clean enough -- you don't have the right car – you don't drink Diet Coke – you don't smell good – Be Afraid! Be Very Afraid!!" The Lutheran scholar and pastor Audrey West sums it up nicely: "In the current day, 24/7 news coverage readily provokes a similar sense of alarm, focusing as it typically does on the bad news of the moment. Pollution, poverty, economic collapse, domestic violence, war: headlines and news feeds carry these catastrophes directly to living rooms and breakfast tables. Coupled with the turn of a millennium (or even a decade), such upheaval leads many to ask, 'Is this the end of the world?'"

One antidote to such eschatological panic is the common sense yet hopeful approach espoused by my spouse. When I indulge myself in the occasional fit of "Woe is me! The sky is falling!", she is likely to pat me on the head and say, "It'll all be OK in the end. If it's not OK, it's not the end." If you asked her about this bit of homespun-sounding philosophy, she might or might not be able to remember where she picked up the exact wording but I suspect that she'd tell you that behind the words are the spirit of her lifelong faith in a loving God. The passages of Scripture we've heard so far this morning, plus at least one more of the lectionary suggestions for the day, bear out her willingness to rest easy in the love of God who is with us, who is on our side, whose love will not let us go. It's easy to be laid back when you've got someone to lean on. Let's take a look at the promises of God in these verses and see if we can't find an antidote for the Henny Penny squawking in the world around us.

Tradition tells us that the author of our Psalm this morning was the greatest of Israel's kings, David. Despite his greatness and his favor with God, David's life was not without trouble. As a young man, he was forced to run for his life from Saul, the king whom he'd served with loyalty and distinction. Perhaps it was this circumstance that caused him to ask for God's protection. As an older man, he was on the run again, this time from a rebellion led by his son Absalom. It may have been during that episode that this Psalm was composed. Or, David may have written this prayer when he was simply overwhelmed with the reality of running a kingdom, of keeping his family happy, of keeping his people safe and satisfied. But if we don't know the exact circumstances of the Psalm's writing, we can certainly identify with the feeling of being

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overwhelmed with troubles. I hope as we read the Call to Worship together this morning that we also could all identify with the certainty David held in the power of God's love and the certainty of God's protection when it is sought. It seems to me that the message of the Bible over and over again is that God loves us and stands by us when we are in need.

Listen again to the wonderful language of the Psalm, in an older version: "Keep me as the apple of thy eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings..." I had forgotten, until I looked it up again, that the phrase, "the apple of the eye," is an old English one, dating back at least to the writings of King Alfred at the end of the ninth century. In Alfred's day, the pupil of the eye was thought to be a solid object and was called the apple, the apple being the most common globular object known to most folk. In those days before corrective lenses, guide dogs, Braille and the Americans with Disabilities Act, blindness was an especially terrible fate and the operative part of the eye would be protected as dearly as life itself. We're still protective of our sight today, despite those advances. To hold someone as precious as the apple of the eye was to say that they were as important to you as sight, as important as life. In Hebrew, as in Greek, Latin and Arabic, the term used translates literally as "little man," *pupillum* in Latin, from which we get our word, pupil. If you are close enough to someone to look carefully into their pupil, you will see your own reflection, a "little man" or "little woman," if you will.

Both the Hebrew and the English translation tell us a great deal about the relationship of God with God's people. God is not subject to eye injury or blindness but we understand how carefully God protects and cares for us with this metaphor. We who call on the name of God, who identify ourselves as people of God's new covenant in Jesus, now claim the promises that God made to God's people of the old covenant. We can say, like the descendants of Jacob, that we are as important to Yahweh as our sight is to us. We have the assurance, like Israel, that God hovers over us like a mother eagle with her chicks; that we rest under the shelter of God's wings, and that when we surmount daily toil and trouble; it is on the eagle's wings of God's Spirit. When we realize that we are the little men and women reflected in the eye of God, we must also realize how close God is to us and how intimate God desires our relationship to be. I don't know about you, but if someone is going to be close enough to my face to see their reflection in my eye, they'd better have a darn good reason. I'm protective of my personal space. But the writer of Psalm 17 says that God's going to get inside our personal space. When we are in relationship with God, we are as "close together as bride and groom."

The Old Testament reading for today is from one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, the Book of the prophet Haggai. While the troubles facing the Psalmist are lost to us, the Book of Haggai is very specific as to the problem being addressed. Some of the people of Judah led away into exile by the Babylonians and their descendents have returned to Jerusalem under the suffrage of their new overlord, King Cyrus of Persia, and have done their best to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. But, as related in the Book of Ezra, they have faced opposition and their resources are few. Now the work is done but instead of rejoicing, the workers gather and weep at what they see as a pitiful substitute for the glorious Temple built by Solomon. "...the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ... take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

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There have been times in my own life, Lord knows, when I have set forth on a project that I believe to be inspired, if not by God then at least by my own best intentions. I have begun full of hopes and dreams, positive that my efforts will bear fruit and will help people and bring glory to God and honor to God's people and maybe just a little recognition for me as well. All too often, alas, I have ended with the taste of my own failure or inadequacy in my mouth like ashes. But perhaps I am the only one here who has had such an experience? If, as I suspect, though, we have all been brought up short by our own shortcomings, then the word of God through Haggai is for us, too. If we look at our situations and say, like the Children of Israel looking at the Second Temple, "It's never going to be as good as it was," then we can take comfort as they did in God's promise to be with us. If the juxtaposition of our past and our present brings out the Henny Penny panic in us and we are tempted to run around and squawk, "The sky is falling," then we should hear this word that Haggai brought from our ever-present, ever-faithful God: "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts." Our prosperity may not come in the ways that the world recognizes as prosperity but surely those of us who wait on the Lord will renew our strength and be blessed with all the riches of God's Spirit – the "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" about which Paul would later write to the Galatians.

Speaking of Brother Paul, that brings us back to the letter written by Paul and Silas to the church at Thessalonica. We also know a bit about what was causing their "Chicken Little" panic. Some element at the Thessalonian church was clearly obsessed with the subject of the End Times, not unlike some Christians today. We know this because the topic takes up quite a bit of both letters to this group and, as Charlie Scalise often reminds us, if it wasn't a problem, the Biblical authors wouldn't have written about it. Again, the Thessalonians would have done well to listen to my wife: "It'll all be OK in the end. If it isn't OK, it isn't the end." But they were afraid, based on rumors started by someone who'd forged a letter in Paul's name, that Jesus had in fact already come again and that they'd missed it. Call it the "Left Behind" syndrome, about nineteen hundred and forty years before Tim LaHaye started writing about it. In the beginning of chapter two of Second Thessalonians, Paul tells them "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed." After all, he writes, you are beloved by the Lord.

Beloved by the Lord – what a wealth of promise and hope is contained in that short phrase. How can we fear anything, from acorns to atom bombs, when we know that we are beloved by the Lord? God's love is stronger than death, we know from the witness of the Scriptures. Psalm 139 asks of God, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Jesus was raised from the dead and promises the same for us. God's love knows no boundaries, no ending. James Boyce, Professor of New Testament and Greek at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, writes of the Thessalonians, "Whatever rumors may shake their day, the one thing that these Christians—like us who have our own versions of the rumors—need to remember is that in whatever comes, they are "beloved ones" (the perfect tense of the participle "beloved" here would suggest this love is a "done deal," established firmly, and not about to be shifted or undone)." God has chosen us as the apple of God's eye, a love "established firmly." What have we, the beloved by the Creator, to fear from anything that any creature may do or threaten?

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If we are, in one metaphor, the apple of God's eye, Paul reminds us that we, the church, are also chosen by God as the first fruits for salvation. This may sound a bit odd to us, the idea that we, separated from the Thessalonians by almost two thousand years, are also God's first fruits. But the fact is that God's people function as the first fruits of salvation in every generation. From Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel to Moses and Aaron and Miriam to Peter and Mary Magdalene and Paul and Timothy and each one of us, all of those who are the witnesses of and bearers of God's love and promise to the world hold up that love and promise to our neighbors and friends who have not yet encountered the reality of the Living God. God takes us to Godself on the behalf of all the world and sends us out to bless all the world. As the late F.F. Bruce, one of the last century's great New Testament scholars, has written about the concept of first fruits in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, "If some are chosen for special blessing, it is in order that others may be blessed through them and with them. This is a constant feature in the pattern of divine election throughout the Bible story, from Abraham onward. Those who are chosen constitute the firstfruits, bearing the promise of a rich harvest to come." We, the beloved by the Lord, are now called to carry the great message of God's love and forgiveness to the rest of the world.

"So then, brothers and sisters," write Paul and Silas, "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter." One of the ways that I find myself infected by the Henny Penny spirit of our age is in my tendency to continually be in a rush. There is always more to do than I can get done, always another meeting to attend, another committee to join, another book to read, another thing to be done. I may not squawk as I run but some part of me undoubtedly believes that the sky will fall if I don't run fast enough. The apostles writing to the Thessalonians get me right where I live. "Rubbish!" I hear Paul cry, "Stand firm! Hold fast!" Don't be in such a bloody hurry, in other words, to assume that it all depends on you. Wait on the Lord.

Annette Brownlee, writing on this passage for "The Lectionary Commentary," puts it this way: "The image of standing firm is rich, especially when our instinct is to do battle, to take on whatever forces assault the gospel. Paul's call to stand firm is a test of our confidence both in Christ's victory and that we do and will participate in his glory. To stand firm calls us not to take things into our own hands, but to rest on our confidence that they are in Christ's pierced hands..." The Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson concurs: "We are busy people who are accustomed to finding answers and solving our problems ourselves. We are intellectually inclined with a growing sense of self-reliance that says we must do for ourselves and is at times suspicious of community and support from others. How then do we embrace this challenge to stand firm when a part of the challenge invites us to look to God and have faith in God in all things?"

I don't know about y'all, but it is a tremendous relief to me to be reminded that I don't have to do everything, that it's not all up to me but that the God who made the Universe watches over it and loves it still and that more to the point that same God knows and loves me and you and you and you and all of the creatures on this beautiful and very good planet. The sky isn't going to fall because God put it there and through the mystery of physics keeps it hanging above us. The forces of evil and chaos and fear aren't going to win because God holds us all in God's love and God is greater than all else. We are called to participate in the ongoing work of creation, in the

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redemption of this world and all of its peoples but it's not up to us. The Crucified One has paid the price for all and through him we obtain the gracious favor of God and the glory of children of the Father and Mother of all.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. Amen.