

LABOR OF LOVE  
Psalm 130    1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5  
Lexington Presbyterian Church  
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READINGS

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
- 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
- 3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
- 4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
- 5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
- 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.
- 7 O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.
- 8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

NT (p.191)

- 1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
- 2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly
- 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you,
- 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

Johnsy had been ill for some time and could not seem to shake it. The doctor said, "it was up to her now." Her neighbor Behrman, an artist, had been at her side during most of the illness, nursing her with tea and sympathy, but he felt powerless to help her. As the long fall wore on, Johnsy watched the ivy vine on the wall outside her window lose one leaf after another. She came to believe that when the last leaf fell off the vine, she too would die. But as the days passed, she finally began to feel better, and stubbornly the leaf failed to fall. However, Behrman had come down with pneumonia, and could not visit her anymore. It was not until after Johnsy recovered and after Behrman's funeral that she realized that he had gone out in a storm to paint the last leaf on the wall. In that act of love, he had contracted pneumonia and died.

Many would expect this twist of plot from the short story writer, O. Henry. This story and *The Gift of the Magi* are favorites of mine. Both stories involve instances of self-giving that become costlier than first imagined.

It is not always easy to gauge the cost of our actions. Sometimes we think we are doing something quite expected and mundane, only to find out the others involved found it quite extraordinary. And then there are time when we go to great lengths to arrange something grand, only to be disappointed in the final effect.

Such might be the case with Paul and the church of the Thessalonians. Paul had a strategic plan for carrying the gospel all over Macedonia and even to Rome. The problem is that he got thrown in jail a lot. But that didn't stop his letter writing. In fact, this letter is one of the few undisputed letters of Paul and probably the earliest. So, he hadn't been thrown in jail yet, but he was on the move. He had not stayed long in Thessalonica, a large seaport city, perhaps as short as three weeks. He had not been able to go back, so he sent his fellow traveler Timothy to them to help encourage them. However, Timothy's report was so encouraging that Paul immediately wanted to write to them to express his joy at their faithfulness.

And not just their faithfulness, but their love and hope also. We see these three words elsewhere in the writings of Paul, specifically in 1 Corinthians 13, but in a different order; faith, hope and love. Also, in this letter the words come with descriptive phrases: "work of faith," "labor of love," and "steadfastness of hope." Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase translation in *The Message* uses the "patience of hope."

Life, at the time before Jesus started his ministry, was a mostly hopeless existence. The Roman rule was oppressive with corruption and extortion at every corner. Slavery was rampant and those who had the least were the most victimized. Then Jesus came preaching the gospel, the Good News, of belief in the one God, the living and true God, offering salvation and eternal life. To those beleaguered crowds, it was like flowing water in the middle of the desert. And the reason? His words offered hope where there was no hope. Jesus included the very least of these, as well as those who were mighty but lost. Anyone who believed and would repent, gained a wholeness and worth in the words of Jesus. People were able to see joy beyond their meager existence. Life took on new meaning and worth.

What Jesus offered was hope. But the hope that Jesus brought was counter-cultural. It flew in the face of those who had power over the people. Hope in Jesus threatened the status quo. Hope undermined the hold that held people to a joyless existence.

There is a scene in the first movie of the *Hunger Games*. This is a story where young people are selected from each division of the country to see who can survive in a "competitive game," to the death. The heroine Katniss inspires her fellow survivor early on that they can win this, without falling to the level of destruction that others use. Those in power watch all the unfolding events. The Manager (played by Donald Sutherland) pulls his assistant aside with these words of warning. "A little hope is a good thing. Too much hope is dangerous."

This was also the thinking of those in power in Jerusalem during the Passover in 33 A.D. The hope that Jesus taught could easily lead to insurrection; not by military power but through the power of hope and love. They didn't know how to stop or combat the power that Jesus brought, so they did the only thing they could. They killed him.

But as we know, that didn't stop him. In this letter to the Thessalonians, Paul acknowledges that as this new understanding of love and hope grows, there are those who still want to stop it. The persecution persisted for centuries, but the kind of love and hope that the gospel brings, simply can't be stopped.

So, work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness or patience of hope. We just sang a hymn, Live into Hope by Jane Parker Huber. "Live into hope of captives freed, of sight regained, the end of greed. The oppressed shall be the first to see, the year of God's own jubilee!"

What does "living into hope" mean to you, to us? Paul says to the people receiving this letter, "God has put God's hand on you for a very special reason." Our first understanding of that leads us to a life of carrying the good news of our lives and the blessings we have to those who need joy. Paul is thankful that the gospel has taken hold of the Thessalonians to the extent that they are caring for the least of these, that they understand the stewardship of riches and how they care for the poor and needy. That is what is making Paul's heart glad.

Living into hope means loving to the point of giving all of yourself. It means considering others before yourself. It is doing senseless acts of compassion for another, such as painting the last leaf on the wall, regardless of the risk.

And so too, in a myriad of ways, can we be good stewards of all the blessings we have been given and the great responsibility to faithfully live out that hope given to us through the working of the Holy Spirit from the true and living God. Let us look first to the oppressed, the blind, the poor, the homeless, the hungry. Through this labor of love – and I know it takes work to stay on this path – we are given full release to celebrate our faith, our hope, our joy and our peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.