

Our first reading today is from one Thessalonians three verses six through 13. But Timothy has just now come to you, come to us from you and has brought good good news about our faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you, therefore brothers in all our distress and persecution. We were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live. Since you are standing firm in the Lord.

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God? Because of you, night and day, we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your face. Now may our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus cleared the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your heart so that you will be blameless and Holy in the presence of our God and Father.

When our Lord Jesus comes with all His Holiness, this is the word of the Lord. Please stand for the reading of the gospel. Our gospel today is from Luke chapter 21, verses 25 through 33. There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars on the Earth. Nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror apprehensive of what is coming on the world. For the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near. And he told them this parable. Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves. You can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the Kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth. This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and Earth will pass away.

But my words will never pass away. This is the word of the Lord.

All right. Hey, kids, why don't you come up here for a second? So does anybody see Jesus? Any of you see Jesus? No. But 2000 years ago, you could have seen him like he was walking on the Earth. He came as a little baby. What do we call that? When he came as a little baby when he was born? Yeah. Sophia. Christmas, right. So we celebrate that Jesus came and Christmas is coming soon. And we're going to celebrate that. But we're in the season called Advent, because guess what?

One day we will see Jesus again. We'll see His body. We'll be able to high five him and touch them and hug them and everything. That's when Jesus comes again, when Jesus returns, that will be his second Advent, his second coming into the world. And we're all waiting for that. Are you waiting for it? Yeah. So it's exciting. Until then, we're called to learn more and more about them, to grow and become like them, to pray and worship God. And that's one of the things that you all do in kids alive.

You learn more and more about the goodness of God. So you're going to go with Miss Lilly and Ms. Lauren and let me pray for you now, Father. Thank you for our children. Thank you for their faith. Thank you for their love. And thank you for how you use them to inspire us to love and know you more with childlike faith in Jesus name. Amen. God bless you guys. All right. Run as fast as you can fast as you can. I love it. What will you pray with me?

But before we do, I just want to say, hey, Ravi, we're so glad to see you back. Robbie's been in India for a year now, right? Yeah. Eight months. And we have missed Him. But it's good to have you back. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we long for the coming of Jesus. We know there are so many things to be put right. But, Lord Jesus, you do come every day in our hearts when we call out to you and we want you here. We want you honored.

We want your word to become known to us and to the world around us. And we ask that you do that today in our midst, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that you would light a fire in our hearts, and we will become more and more like you for the glory of your Father and the power of your Spirit. And in your name, we pray. Amen, as you can see, we are in the season of Advent. Advent is a Latin word, Adventus. It means come, and it really was one of the very first prayers of the early Church.

Come, Lord Jesus come. And as you go throughout Scriptures, you see that it is a prayer and a theme of the Scriptures. When the prophets were writing, they would speak of the day of the Lord, the great and terrible day of the Lord, but also a day when everything that's wrong is put right. When everything that is unjust and broken is fixed and made, just when the poor are lifted up and when the rich and the proud are put down, when those who have been oppressed are renewed and those who have abused are punished.

Come, Lord Jesus. We pray in the New Testament times when Jesus said, I'm coming to make all things new. In fact, the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible in Revelation 22:20 it ends with a prayer. Jesus makes the promise once again. And he says he testifies to these things, says, yes, I am coming soon. And John, who's having this vision of Jesus and of heaven, says, Amen, Amen, come Lord Jesus. Since that time, that's been the prayer of the Church. And during the season of Advent, that's our cry.

We look not only to the birth of Christ, but for His coming again when he's going to put everything right and that we offer up our lives in what's called a minilent, in a period of prayer and fasting and crying out to God that he would come in our lives. That what's wrong in our lives, in our marriages, in our work, in our politics, and whatever it is that he begins to do the work of setting it right now of coming now. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

We pray in advance of His great return of His great coming again. And so in the season, the question is always, are you ready? Are you eager? Are you waiting in expectation for His return? That's Paul cry here in his letter to the Thessalonians that they might be ready. There might be a Church that in every way looks ready. What does that look like? Well, there was once a Church that was planted in the northwest region of our country in Seattle was planted as a little Church by a few people with a dream.

Their dream was that they would take one of the cities known for being one of the least Church cities in the world, and that the light of Christ would come would break into that city through that Church. It was a heartfelt dream. It was a humble dream. They encouraged one another. They prayed. They gave. They were generous, as could be. They opened up their homes, people who lived on the streets, people who know what it was to been abused or trafficked were finding new life in Jesus Christ right there.

In the midst of that city. The city was Seattle. The name of the Church was Mars Hill Church. It was the dream of a few people. But over time, as the Church began to grow, one very gifted leader rose up among them. To be sure, at the beginning he was opening up his home even more than everybody else. He was giving of his own resources even more than everybody else. It looked like what God was doing was raising up an incredibly Godly witness in the middle of this city.

But as the Church began to grow like gangbusters, first in the hundreds, then in the thousands, ultimately to about 15,000, the vision was honed. It became razor sharp. And yet somehow, as the Church grew in number and the vision and the strategies and popularity of the Church grew, the generosity, love and Grace that so marked the Church at the beginning was replaced by effectiveness and entertainment and celebrity and achievement and books and videos and social media and worldly success. The story of Mars Hill Church is chronicled today in a wildly popular podcast called Who Killed Mars Hill.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill Church. It's a devastating story, and I couldn't help but think of it as I read Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians as he called out to them to be ready for the Lord's coming to let faith and love grow among them. You see, in the end, it's not about numbers, it's not about growth or outward effectiveness. That's not what marks the success of a Church. What marks a success of the Church are the stories of love and faith and generosity and Holiness and Christlikeness.

The reason we don't end the sermon here because the thesis of the Mars Hill podcast is that the

cautionary tale as they tell it is not on the pride and folly of one man or even of one Church, but on a weakness in the American cultural expression of Christian faith that often relies just as much on power and effectiveness and manipulation as the world does. So we'd really do well to take note as God is building a Church here, which is what I hope to do with Paul's letter to the Thessalonians Thessalonians three, chapter three, verses six through 13.

Because this cautionary tale about the dangers of success applies not only in the Church context but in our lives, our families, how we live, and how we get ready for the coming of Jesus. So if you want to turn to one Thessalonians three, we're going to look at this little Church that Paul and his companions planted in Thessalonica a little Church in the midst of a city a lot like Seattle, a Harbor city, a city that's prosperous, a city that has so many things going on but is also caught up in pagan idolatry in which people who are weak are trampled down.

People are trafficked, they're used, they're abused. And it's in the much of this that people start coming to faith through Paul and his companions. But of course, they're noticed and persecution arises, and the leading Jews of the city use their influence to make sure that Paul and his companions are booted out. So Paul and his companions want to know, did the Church that we planned in Thessalonica really take root? Are they continuing on with the good start that has been made? So in verse six, he says, but Timothy has just now come to us.

They sent Timothy, who I presume was not with them at the time, and so therefore he can have entrance and access into the city that they've been exiled from because nobody knows him. So they sent Timothy to find out how things are going to see, as he said, that our neighbors might not have been in vain. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

So power and His companions are greatly encouraged. That's how it is with good mothers, good pastors, good bishops. They love to hear the reports of what God is doing in the lives of others and how their faith is flourishing and the way they're carrying out their ministries, in their families and in their businesses. I love it. I love it when you come to me and tell me, hey, guess what happened to my family. Guess what happened with my cousin. Guess what happened at work or in my neighborhood.

And we heard stories of people coming to faith or ways that you were able to serve somebody, love somebody, share the gospel with them. And verse eight, it reveals Paul's heart. It says, for now we really live since you are standing firm in the Lord. Now that we see that you're growing up in a culture that's actually against you. And you're living for God. And you're standing firm against the Devil's, attacks against the world, the flesh, against the temptations and desires. And you're living for God.

He's so excited about that. I'll never forget. Years ago, when I was doing youth Ministry, we had a great leader in the Pittsburgh Youth Network, a guy named Chuck Rosemier. And it was Chuck's delight to see our various youth ministries flourish. But you know how it is when you've got a leader like he would organize the camps and everything, and we'd all come together. And it would be a group effort. When you're a leader, you're going to be criticized. And oftentimes I was critical of Chuck.

I would think, why did he get that person to speak at that event? That's not the right choice. Why did he organize something this way or that way? Come on, Chuck. But I love them. I love Chuck, but I had a little spirit of criticalness towards him. And then one day, I'll never forget we were at this camp called Laurelville. It had just been going beautifully. Hundreds of kids, the gospel was being preached. Kids were giving their lives to Christ, and kids had gone to their cabins.

And I was on the program staff. And so some of us who it's kind of our downtime. We gathered around a fire with Chuck, and we're standing there and the smile on his face as we talked about what was going on in the camp. It was beautiful. I think I was looking at Jesus. Chuck's no longer with us. He's in heaven. He died at the age of 50. But that smile has meant more to me over the years. At that moment, I saw his heart like I'd never seen it before.

He was for us. He was for the gospel. He was for the prospering and flourishing of the Church. And I've wanted to be like that ever since my God's Grace. I hope I'm getting there. So they're delighted that they're standing firm. And in verse nine, Paul says, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God, because of you, because of you. Paul is standing here as a father with children in the faith. I think of the joy that parents and grandparents have when we see our children and our grandchildren growing in the relationship to God, in the relationship to one another.

And that's what it comes down to, doesn't it? It comes down to relationships. And that's the language that Paul is using. How can we thank God enough for you at the beginning? That's what Mark Dresco had the Marsh Hill Church. You could tell from the early days of that Church that they delighted in the people of that Church before something went terribly wrong and shifted in his heart and in the hearts of several of the senior leadership. It's all about relationships. I was at an arts conference downtown put on by Jess Ray, who's lead worship here one Sunday and another lady that runs a thing called Redeemed Art Collective.

And their whole goal was to encourage artists in their faith. And so there were all these musicians, mostly. And I was there as a visual artist. And at the end of the conference, there was a panel where they asked the various speakers to sit and to share their perspectives and answer questions. And the final question was, what is one takeaway you'd want us to have? And they went down and the different people said different things. And then they got to this guy, Davon Hill has won a Grammy.

He's won Devils. He's an incredible gospel singer and songwriter. And the one said, this, don't Yass? People? If you're a musician, you're going to be dealing with sound techs. You're going to be dealing with producers. You're going to be dealing with a lot of people who are running around to make what you do succeed. Yes, them. Their people get to know them, respect them, love them, he gets it. It's all about relationships. At the end of the day and day, Paul writes, we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now. It's incredible, because if you read the first few chapters of Thessalonians Paul is confident that this is a Church on the right road. This is a Church that whose faith is being reported abroad. Just as Mars Hill's faith was being reported all over this country, people are reading books about Mars Hill. People are listening to podcasts by Mars Hill. Paul is saying that's the kind of faith that we're hearing about. And yet he can still say we long to see you and supply what is lacking in your faith because we never arrived, do we?

There's always more to learn. The job is not done. This is a truth known by every pastor and missionary, always more. And it's so consistent in the New Testament. Peter writes a second. Peter, for this reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness and to goodness, knowledge and to knowledge, self control and the self control, perseverance and the perseverance mutual affection. It's a mutual affection. What love for if you possess these qualities and increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's what it means to be ready for Christ to be growing in these things all the time, to be exhausting and challenging one another in these things, to be looking for it in the life of a Church. And when we both see it to nurture it, we had a time getting these two things lit this morning, didn't we? We was doing his best, and the word just was not dry enough and not catching. And it was frustrating. And we confess we had to move a little bit of gasoline, which is not a good thing to do.

But we finally got that thing going. It's the same thing in the Church. You look and you see what's not on fire and you don't criticize it and you don't walk away from it and you don't put it out. And you say, what can we do to fan it into flame? And you pray and you work and you love. And God lights the fire. He lights the fire. And that's what you see in Paul and his companions, a super reliance on God. In verse eleven, he says, now may our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus Christ cleared away for us to come to you.

It's got to be God that does it right. The walls against us. We've been exiled. He cleared away. And

then the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other, for everyone else, just as ours does for you. This is for God and from God. And sadly, in the Mars Hill story, you see a shift and there's, man. There's incredible stories that will touch your heart if you listen to that podcast of how people loved each other and loved God. But there's this shift to relying on social media and human expertise and cutting edge technology and hype and marketing strategy and anything that would work and share.

The person becomes the solo preacher, and he becomes the face of Marshall Church. And he got to a place where he said, There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus. And by God's Grace, it'll be a mountain. By the time we're done all for the moons of getting to the goal, which first was to reach Seattle, 15,000 people in Seattle worshiping God. And then he said, now the goal is 50,000 all around the country. We're going to plant Mars Hill churches that will have Mark on the screen, 50,000 and he told his senior staff, I don't care if you go with me or not.

That's the goal. If at the end of the day, we need different people to get to that goal, that's what we're going to do. It's chilling. It's chilling. It's always about love, the increase in overflow of it. And he lost sight of that. Tell you one last story about this, and I'm telling it not to not to demean this one man, but because literally all of our eyes can get off of Jesus, all of our eyes can get off of the main thing off of love.

And it can be more about what the table looks like or how the fires are, how comfortable we are, how good are we welcoming people and all that stuff? And it's always got to be about love. One of his media guys went with him to London and he had a double eye infection. He said, I could barely see. And there was this big event that was going on, and it became clear that they were just going to leave me behind. In fact, the only question I received from the senior leadership was, Is it contentious?

And they made clear that if it was, they were going to leave him in London until he was healed and they were going to go back to America without them. He felt crushed. There was an English pastor there who had welcomed them in and was helping with the event that was going on. And the English pastor storm and said, What's wrong? And he told him what was going on with his eyes. And he said, Come with me. And he said, that man took me by the arm and he walked me to a medical clinic.

He ate with me all that day as they treated my eyes. He walked me from there to the hotel. He made sure that I was fed and cared for. He said. It was such a foreign experience for me that I realized that my time at Marshall Church was done, that we had missed something deeply. And he said that in a moment he felt the love of Christ, and he realized that's what he'd been missing. That's what it's all about. We're praying in this season. I'll come and Paul ends this section by saying, May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless.

May he strengthen our hearts so that we'll be blameless and Holy in the presence of God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his Holy ones, that's our prayer. Isn't that Church. O Kam Emanuel O'Connor Lord Jesus name I pray. Amen.