

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA  
Advent 1, Year C, December 2, 2018  
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Be Ready"  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

remember Y2K?; that was almost 20 years ago now; remember that there were some who said it would be the end of the world as we knew it?; that our computers would not be able to handle the changeover from 1999 to 2000 because of short-cuts in computer programming; many feared that the power grids would shut down, or that the banks would not be able to operate, or that there would be civil unrest; there were some Christians who were in churches that night, believing that the millenium change would lead to Christ's return; and remember what happened on December 31 of that year as 11:59 pm rolled over into midnight at the start of the new millennium?; the digits 12:00 clicked into view, the power stayed on, and the fact that nothing bad happened led to an ever bigger New Year's Eve celebration than usual

but let's also recall that the main reason nothing bad happened at the Y2K changeover was because many people worked long and hard ahead of time to be ready before that date in order to keep all of those dire consequences from happening; they knew what to do and they knew the deadline by when it had to be done

the situation presented in our Gospel reading today also depicts the end of the world as we know it; signs in the heavens, distress and confusion on the earth; and Jesus, who refers to himself as the "Son of Man"—no longer a distant figure from the pages of the Bible—but now present among us in person to bring about judgment day; so we might rightly wonder, when this comes about, will I be ready for it?; and what sets this end of the world scenario apart from Y2K's is that we do not know the date or the time for which we have to be prepared for Jesus' second coming; we may not even be sure precisely what we need to do in order to be ready for it; passages such as this can be very unsettling when taken to heart

well fortunately, our passage from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians today gives us one way of checking out our preparedness; he gives a list of what he thinks the Thessalonians should attend to before this event arrives; he gives it in the form of a prayer he prays for them; he prays for four things: that

“whatever is lacking in [their] faith” would be restored; that they would “increase and abound in love for one another and for all”; that they would be “strengthened in holiness”; and that they would “be blameless before our God”; it just so happens that this four-part prayer resembles one of the frameworks used in spiritual direction as a tool for helping people think about different aspects of their spiritual life; it’s also a simple way to remember how to keep our spiritual life in balance; the particular spiritual direction framework looks at how we live out our spiritual lives with our heads, with our hearts, with our souls, and with our hands; we can interpret Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians also as a prayer for us, as a prayer for all Christians; and look at how these four aspects speak to our always being prepared for whatever the world throws at us now—or whatever the end of the world might throw at us, someday

Paul’s prayer that we not lack in our faith, is primarily a head concern; we should be aware of what we believe and how those beliefs should be carried out in our lives; Paul’s prayer that we would increase and abound in love for one another and for all, is primarily a heart concern; we should be aware of how our relationships with all people and with God should be informed by an attitude of Christian love; Paul’s prayer that we would be strengthened in holiness, is primarily a soul concern; we should be aware of how God’s Holy Spirit, given to us at Baptism, is still within us, guiding us, and strengthening us; Paul’s prayer that we would be blameless before God, is primarily a hands concern; we should be aware of how the choices we make to do, or to avoid doing, certain things affects our relationship with God and with other people; heads, hearts, souls, and hands: this is not to say that these four parts of our spiritual lives can be divided out neatly from each other; no, there is always much overlap in how they operate

notice also that Paul is praying for an entire church of people; the word “you” in it is plural in every instance; one of the biggest differences between the Biblical world view and our modern world view is that we now tend to think of everything on an individual basis; the Bible looks at faith in a much more communal way; while there certainly are some things we will each have to answer for personally on judgment day, much of our life of faith revolves around what we are able to accomplish, not on our own, but as a member of a community of believers; we’re all in this boat together, and one of the church’s purposes is to combine our collective heads, hearts, souls, and hands in such a way that we can accomplish far more together than we ever could

individually; we need each other to do Christ's work; we need each other to be fully prepared in advance for judgment day

I expect you've heard of the "no child left behind" education policy; I don't really know how successful it has or hasn't been, but I do like the idea it expresses—the idea that no one gets left behind; well Christ has a "no soul left behind" salvation policy; just like an education policy requires a system of schools, administrators, teachers, textbooks, and practices all focused on student success; so Christ's salvation policy makes use of a system of churches, pastors, teachers, the Bible, prayer, non-church organizations, and the work of the Holy Spirit, all focused on preparing us Christians for living the fullness of life now, and the extension of living that fullness of life on beyond judgment day

so don't worry about being on your own in preparation for judgment day; that's what all of us are doing, working together as the body of Christ; and remember we people are not alone: we rejoice that we have God's most powerful grace working on our behalf; even though we can't predict when judgment day will come, we can set ourselves to the tasks now of using all the helps God has given us to be prepared in advance, for whatever will come our way, and whenever it may come