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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

BELONGING TO THE DAY

There are times, places, when even the day seems like night. Have you ever been in such a situation? Thirty years ago, I was part of a group visiting Nicaragua and El Salvador at a time when each of those countries was going through what was close to a civil war. The group of which I was a part went to see how the church was doing at a trying time in an attempt to be in solidarity with our sisters and brothers in Christ who were facing daunting challenges. We went to Nicaragua first and although the conditions there were quite bleak, there was hope that the fighting was about to come to an end. The church was able to operate freely to minister to the poor in that situation. The needs were vast, but faithful people were trying to rise to the challenge. Then we went to El Salvador. A different kind of war was going on there, where paramilitary death squads were operating. Christian leaders who had spoken out on behalf of the poor had been gunned down in public, and others had been put in jail as political prisoners. We visited with children who lived in squalor in a large trash dump in the capital city. There looked to be no positive way forward. The lack of hope there was so palpable that one evening, I just broke down and wept.

When it came to the Christians in Thessalonica to whom the Apostle Paul wrote, they were under attack. The Roman Empire's Pax Romana did not extend to a faith movement it did not understand. Some members of the church had been martyred, others had been put in jail. Not only had they been facing great difficulties, it seemed as if there would continue to be dark days ahead. With no prospect of rising up against the empire's vast military power, they had to figure out what to do with their feelings of fear and despair. I can understand that the Thessalonians longed for God to come and set things right. They yearned for their grief to be turned into joy. When Jesus had died, he had been raised up, breaking death's grip. Their expectation in addition was that their Lord would return soon to bring about a broader resurrection over the deathly ways of the world. While they were waiting for his coming, Paul told them that even though it seemed that

the powers of darkness and death were in control, that they could live in light of a divine light that would illumine their present as well as their future. They were told to show that they were children of light, that they belonged to the day instead of the night. Belonging to the day - what does that mean?

In the parable Jesus told that we heard earlier, there were two servants who lived as children of light and one who did not. The two recognized the value of a great asset placed in their care, but they also recognized that the owner, whom they understood to be generous and well-meaning, thought highly enough of them to entrust them with something of great value. This was good news. Living in the confidence of the good and kind master, they fully applied what had been placed in their care and they saw very good returns. But the third servant viewed the owner as someone to be feared. He was filled with such apprehension that sadly he was unable to make use of the good news, the heavenly light placed in his care. It was as if he just buried it in a hole.

There are those who see what is going on in the world and they are overtaken by despair. They may be tempted to just crawl into a figurative hole. They are unable to trust that God's capacity for wholeness is greater than the brokenness they see around them. Some not only are afraid about the future. They also see God as someone to be feared. But we are called to be children of light, those who belong to the day. We can surround ourselves with the light of the significance of a loving God, of whom we needn't be afraid. We find illumination in a divine love that is stronger than hatred and indifference. We can live in light of resurrection news that even the fear of death can be transformed by the hope of God's life-giving power. The gospel not only offers life in the hereafter, its transformative message of light and love changes how we live our lives.

Rev. Andre Trocme and his wife Magda were French Protestants who lived in a tiny mountain village called Le Chambon during the Second World War. Along with their fellow townsfolk, the couple provided refuge and, when possible, escape from the Nazis for Jews and others fleeing Nazi persecution. Although the Trocmes and other villagers who shared in this rescue operation were under surveillance, they quietly continued their efforts throughout the war. Ultimately, their investment of personal risk and gospel love yielded an enormous reward.

Between 1940 and 1944, the villagers of Le Chambon saved the lives of more than three thousand five hundred Jews, many of whom were children, as well as fifteen hundred others fleeing persecution. Years later, Magda Trocme was interviewed by those who found it hard to fathom such courage, such risk. She said this about her choices: “Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself.”¹

In Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, Animal Dreams, one of her characters, a young horticulturist, named Hallie, has gone off to Nicaragua to work with those who were mired in poverty. In a letter to her sister, Codi, back home in the States, she tries to explain her choices:

Codi, here’s what I’ve decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right into it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can’t say it: elemental kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That’s about it. Right now I’m living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides.²

We don’t live under the threat and power of Nazi Germany. We don’t live in a nation that is in the midst of civil war. But in our own context, there are or will be times that look like midnight, when God’s call for us to live in light of the eternal dawn comes to us. Do we love deeply enough? Care passionately enough? Give generously enough? Risk greatly enough? We are stewards of that heavenly light. It doesn’t belong to us; we actually belong to it. Yes, there are fears that could paralyze us, but God’s light can be invested in our lives and shared with others. Let’s live in and live out that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides and see how God uses the divine light we seek to reflect. We belong to the day!

¹Carol Tittner and Sondra Myers, The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 107.

²Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams, (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).