

Pen Pal Pastor

In Acts chapter 8 we meet a Pharisee named Saul whose primary goal is the persecution of those who follow Jesus. On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, Saul has a life changing encounter with the risen Christ. He becomes a powerful voice in the early church, birthing churches throughout the Roman Empire and shaping how the church comes to understand herself and her mission as Christ's body in the world. Along the way, he becomes known as Paul, and our reading for this morning comes from one of his earliest letters, one to the church in Thessalonica, a major city in the Roman province of Macedonia. The 17th chapter of Acts tells us that Paul spends about three weeks in Thessalonica preaching and teaching in the synagogue about the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. His witness wins over Jews and Gentiles alike, but he also winds up in prison. The charge is that he is proclaiming a king who is not Caesar and that he is among "these people who have been turning the world upside down."¹ [Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10]

When I went to camp in the mountains of North Carolina, there was a saying and maybe even a song for just about everything, including mail. "Hail, hail, hail to Rockbrook Camp. Above the rest you are the best. I hope I got some mail." We would sing it over and over again in the dining hall while pounding rhythmically on the tables at lunch. And then we would race out the swinging screen doors to peer into our cubbies on the porch to see if we had a letter, a post card, or even a slip of paper directing us to the camp post office for the holy grail of mail—a care package. I still get fairly excited about mail—real mail, as opposed to junk mail or bills. In this

¹ Acts 17:6, NRSV

season, I'm fairly certain I'm not alone. When we cannot see one another's faces up too close or shake a hand or share a hug or a high five, there is something especially dear about knowing that someone took the time to think of us, write a note, track down a stamp, look up our address, and get it in the mail.

While the book of Acts gives us a narrative of Paul's travels and adventures, his letters reveal something more personal and in many cases, more tender. Yes, tender. I haven't always thought of Paul as having a soft spot, but in this letter, I am struck by Paul's deep affection and appreciation for this congregation. There is a church founded in the midst of persecution, and as Paul writes to them, they are still enduring persecution for their persistence in following Christ and devoting their lives to him even when it means defying Caesar and the demands of the empire. In the thick of trials and challenges, he wants to assure them that they are loved—deeply loved—by God and by him. He wants them to know that they are also chosen, claimed as God's own and never abandoned, even when the night grows dark, and maybe especially when the night grows dark. And he wants to encourage them by reminding them of the faithfulness he witnessed firsthand and has heard about in the accounts of other travelers. Word has gotten out about their work, their effort, and their perseverance. But he is not simply praising them for their gritting it out. He is celebrating that all that they do is grounded in faith, love, and hope in Christ. He sees these things embodied in their life together, even when they are far apart. And he tells them how their witness—their joy in Christ even in the midst of suffering—has “rung out,” or “sounded forth” throughout the Empire.

Maybe it is because I miss worship music in all its forms, right now, but the idea of faithfulness in suffering ringing out is one of the most beautiful images I have heard in quite a while. And I think it is also because it rings true. As you may have heard, church bells will be

ringing out for three minutes at 7 o'clock this evening across Pennsylvania.² While each minute is dedicated to a certain group, the ringing itself is a way of offering hope for those who have been impacted by the virus and a public way to offer gratitude for those who are serving to help us through this frightening season. We don't have a church bell, of course, so I might be inclined to feel a bit left out, but then I read Paul's words about the faithfulness of the Thessalonians. They do not have a church bell either, and yet their faithfulness is still ringing out across the centuries.

At the risk of impersonating Captain Obvious, I am not Paul, and there have been times when his words have frustrated and flummoxed me. However, as I preach for the eighth Sunday straight into a mobile device, unsure of when it will be safe and wise for us to gather in person again, I find precious common ground with this man who is called to offer encouragement and pastoral care to his beloved congregations from a distance. In this moment, I share something in common with this "pen pal pastor."³ Because you see, your faithfulness rings out in beautiful ways here and now, in the thick of anxious and unsettled times, and I get to remind you of that. No, we are not persecuted for our faith the way the Thessalonians were, but this is a season unlike any other. Fear, grief, and anxiety are real and understandable. And yet, you are beloved, just as they were, and your perseverance and faithfulness are ringing out right now in a multitude of beautiful ways.

I see your compassion for those who are graduating, getting married, or celebrating birthdays in unexpected and even postponed ways. I hear your vulnerability in confessing your frustration and your concern for what comes next. I see your honesty about your anxiety and fear

² <https://sauconsource.com/2020/04/28/bells-to-ring-for-3-minutes-all-across-pennsylvania-sunday>

³ Thanks to Dr. Amy Robertson who used this term in this podcast:

<https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-038-acts-171-9-and-1-thessalonians-11-10-paul-in-thessalonica/>

about the economy, unemployment, and the uncertain way ahead. I hear your prayers for those who have lost jobs and opportunities, and for those who are grieving the deaths of loved ones from a distance. I see you who are parents of young children balancing schoolwork and the emotions that children struggle to name along with your own, all while paying the bills, doing your day jobs, caring for your own parents, showing up on Sundays and nurturing the faith of your children, too. I see your joy as you joke with one another in the comments and laugh at corny jokes over Zoom. I see you faithfully writing cards and making calls to check in on those who are isolated and alone. I see your generosity in grocery shopping and mowing the lawn for neighbors or making masks for strangers. I hear your gratitude for those who work to heal the sick and those who enable us to stay safe. I see your tenacity in advocating for those who are hungry, depressed, on the margins, and at risk. In all these ways and more, I get to witness your work born of faith, your effort born of love, and your perseverance born of hope. You are not simply gutting it out or getting by on your own, nor are you expected to; not one of us is, because not one of us can.

Siblings in Christ, you are loved by God, the same God who gives us his only beloved Son to show us that love face to face, the God who promises never to leave our side. I hope you know that, and I pray you never forget it.

Signed, this pen pal pastor, who thanks God for you today and every day.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.