

We Will Always Be With the Lord

23rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST [a]

November 12, 2017

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. That's how the Lord answered the Sadducees who were teaching that there is no resurrection of the body.

The Sadducees weren't stupid. They were upper crust, sophisticated. That a dead body in the dirt would somehow have life breathed into it and would stand up—a living person—and start walking around, and eat food and drink wine, and talk with others and laugh and even sing—a refined Sadducee wouldn't get sucked in by that. That kind of talk—the talk of a dead body being raised up to life—that kind of talk belonged to the rubes who never made it to Jerusalem's polished marble halls.

So when the Sadducees back Jesus into a corner with a question of just how the resurrection from the dead would actually work—will a man still be married? or will we have the brown hair of our youth or the gray hair of our older years?—Jesus instead turned our eyes away from trying to untangle all the possible difficulties of seeing how this resurrection of the body would fit into our understanding, and he placed in front of us the one question that really matters: *Is God the God of the dead, or of the living?* [Matthew 22:32]

Because, if God is the God of the dead, then he's not really God anyway. On the other hand, if God is the God of the living, then what we need to ask is not the Sadducee's question of "how does the

resurrection from the dead work?”, but rather, “Do I belong to God?” Because if I do, I’m living, since he is not God of the dead but of the living.

But now the Apostle Paul is writing to the Christians in Thessalonica—that’s in Greece—and there are no Sadducees there. In Thessalonica the question is, If there is the resurrection of the dead on the last day when the Lord comes again to judge the living and the dead, then what of all those who have died in the faith before the last day? What of my loved ones who had faith, but who died last year, or two years ago? And those Christians who died decades ago, even centuries, Christians such as, say, Jonah, or Daniel, or Moses, or Abraham? What of, for that matter, Adam and Eve, who had faith in the coming Christ, who would take away the sins of the world, including theirs?

Their bodies are still in the ground. Still dust. Not resurrected. What of them? Are they lost in some middle land, not really existing except as a memory? Should we come up with some human theory of a limbo state, or some purgatory that’s holding them, since as yet there is no resurrection?

So Paul writes to the Thessalonians to comfort them. Those who have died, they are not dead, they are not suspended in some inhuman limbo, disconnected from the God of life. For is God the God not of the dead, but of the living? And all who belong to him, are they not living?

Paul does not want the Thessalonians, nor the rest of the Church, including us and our families, to be ignorant of the gift of the resurrection of the body, and how that gift is given to those who belong to the God of life.

Those who have died, for them, Jesus doesn’t use the word death, but sleep. They have died in the flesh. There is, upon that death, no living body; but for the person, there is no death. The person himself, the person herself, they still live. The soul—and in Scripture the word soul doesn’t mean some kind of disembodied spirit or a ghost floating around, but soul means person, it means life, it means you—and this soul does not die, but lives.

Your soul is you in your whole personhood, in your personality, in the humanness that belongs only to you and gives you who you are; it is you in all your giftedness before God. Your body of sin, that is put to death, it goes into the ground; but you, your soul, you yourself, you do not die.

So those who have died in the flesh before Jesus comes again—and this includes, for instance, Moses, and Adam and Eve, and their son Abel, and it also includes, for instance, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther, and Christians martyred by the Muslims in north Africa, and also our loved ones who have died in the faith last year, or last decade—those who have died in the flesh before Jesus comes again, they are not dead.

God is not God of the dead, but of the living. They are with the Lord, their soul, their personhood is intact, undiminished; they are in joy, they are, as Moses was able to do on the Mt. of Transfiguration, though he had died in the flesh over a 1,000 years prior—they are still living before God, enjoying his gifts, and able to converse and to praise him and speak with him.

They are living. There is no death for those who belong to God. And they wait—with anticipation, with thanksgiving, with praise and song, they wait for the day of Christ's return to Earth, when all those who belong to Christ will be raised up in the body. Not the body of death, the body weighed down with guilt, made sick with sin, covered with the shame of this world, but the body of the resurrection, the body living into eternity, the resurrected body like the glorified body of Christ Jesus.

They wait. And we, along with them, wait. We know not the day—maybe this evening as we watch the news, maybe next week, maybe next year or next decade, maybe longer, but we wait:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

[1 Thessalonians 4:17]

Then Paul says to the Church, *Encourage one another with these words.*

Encourage one another with the words that God is God not of the dead, but of the living, and if you belong to him, you are living.

Encourage one another with the words that we will always be with the Lord. Whether now, as we wait in our sinful flesh, daily repenting of our sin and daily being cleansed by the Word of the cross, or whether in Heaven, at the Lord's face, if we die before our Lord comes again, we are with the Lord.

Encourage one another with the words that Jesus died, and he rose again in the body, and he now comes to us in his Body and Blood, forgiving our sin and binding us to himself.

Encourage one another with the words that Jesus died as the Son of Man, bearing the sin of all mankind, putting our sin to death in his own body, so that the Body and Blood he now gives to us in the Sacrament is that Body and Blood which was on the cross and which now gives us our righteousness.

Encourage one another with the words that Jesus rose from the dead, so that the Body and Blood he gives to us now is the resurrected Body and Blood, and he is bestowing life.

Encourage one another with the words that Jesus, who dwells with us in his Word and in his Sacrament, promises that we will always be with him, we will always be in life, and even as he binds us to himself, so he also binds us to another, reconciling us to each other, healing our families, establishing peace among brothers and sisters, delivering us from the condemnation and retribution of our sinful flesh, and into the grace and forgiveness and then eternal life which belong to all those who belong to him.

For he is the God not of the dead, but of the living. And by his grace and promise, you will always be with him.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.