

The Funeral of Alexander Kvale
“Hopeful Grieving”
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
August 21, 2023
Faith Presbyterian Church
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

Our Scripture text this morning is from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter four, verses thirteen through eighteen.

Please do listen carefully, this is God’s word for us this morning.

The Apostle Paul writes:

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.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Today we especially remember that “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we ask this morning, that by your Spirit the words of my mouth
and the meditation of all of our hearts
would be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,
our rock and our redeemer.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 19:14]

Introduction

Our text this morning is a passage in which the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians who have lost Christian loved ones ... and who were struggling with how to think about that loss. And so it's a very appropriate text for us this morning. [Wright, 123]

The questions that these Thessalonian Christians had were around uncertainty about where their loved ones were, and where they would be at Christ's return. And even as he answers some of their technical questions, Paul also offers words of comfort, and encouragement, that apply to us this morning, as we mourn the loss of little Alexander Kvale.

And Paul says in verse thirteen that his purpose in writing all this, is that the Christian in Thessalonica would "not grieve as others do who have no hope."

As others have pointed out, Paul is not speaking against grief here – not at all. Rather, he's speaking against a certain kind of grief in the face of death among God's people. He's speaking against hopeless grieving. He doesn't want them "to grieve as others do who have no hope." There's a double negative there, and as one author points out, if we simply shift the language to the positive, then what Paul is essentially saying is "I want you to *grieve hopefully*." [Keller, 36]

But how do we "grieve hopefully"?

Grief

Well, the first piece of that is that we do, in fact, grieve. We mourn. We feel internal pain. We weep.

We grieve because death and loss are intrusions on this world – they are not the way things are supposed to be here. And that response is affirmed again and again in the Scriptures.

The Bible doesn't call God's people to just have a stiff upper lip. The Bible doesn't call God's people to be stoic. The Bible doesn't call God's people to just look on the sunny side of life. But the Bible often calls on God's people to grieve.

The Bible gives us 150 psalms as the ancient, inspired hymnal for God's people. And the most common type of psalm that we find there is a psalm of lament – a psalm of grief. God expected – he called on – his people to grieve.

When our Lord himself faced the death of a loved one – the death of a friend – even though he knew about the hope that was ahead for his friend, in that moment when death had taken his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept – he grieved. [John 11:35]

Jesus grieved the presence of death and brokenness in this world – and we should follow his example.

We grieve because this world is not the way things were supposed to be when God first made it. We grieve because sin, and death, and brokenness are alien intrusions in this world.

When God looked out over creation, and said in an unqualified way that it was good, at that point in time the creation did not include little tiny coffins, for babies who died before they were even born. Such a thing didn't exist.

When God looked at the world and said that it was good, it did not include mothers and fathers who had to bury their children.

This is not the way things are supposed to be. Alexander is not supposed to be in a box before us this morning – he is supposed to be in his mother's arms.

And the appropriate response to the invasion of death into the world in general, and into the Kvale family in particular – the proper response to that is grief. We should weep.

As Christians, we are called to grieve.

Hope

But, Paul tells us, we do not grieve in the same way as others do. We do not grieve as those who have no hope.

Instead, we grieve hopefully.

But what does that mean? What does that look like?

Paul helps us understand the kind of hope he means here.

He roots that hope not in wishful thinking, but in historical fact. "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again" he starts, in verse fourteen.

Paul anchors our hope in concrete fact. It's not hope the way we often use the word – it's not hope of merely expressing a desired outcome. Rather, what Paul is talking about here is the hope of a certain future, which is rooted in the power and the promises of Jesus Christ.

The power of Jesus Christ is proved in his death and resurrection. Jesus has died. But death could not contain him. He overcame death, and he rose from the grave. Death has no power over him. Jesus is more powerful than death. That's not wishful thinking or theoretical conjecture or a pretty story – it's historical fact: Jesus has proven to the world already that he is stronger than death. We should therefore have full confidence in his power.

But second, our hope is also rooted in his promises, which he has spoken to us – as Paul indicates in verse fifteen. Because Christ has promised to overcome death not just for himself, but for all who belong to him: to those who believe in him, and to their children. As the Apostle Peter said: "the promise is for you and for your children." [Acts 2:39]

Jesus has proven his power in his death and resurrection, and he has given us his promise, for us and for our children, in his Word. And in his power and his promise we have hope.

But what is the shape of that hope in the face of the loss of a little one like Alexander? What are the details of that hope for Karl, and Bethan, for their families, and for all of us gathered here today?

Well, Paul tells us a few things that are worth reflecting on.

Hope: “God will bring with him ...”

The first comes in verse fourteen.

Paul is speaking about the second coming of Christ – the day when Jesus returns to the earth to make all things new. And he says, almost in passing, that “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep,” meaning those who have died.

The Thessalonians are worried about where their loved ones will be when Christ returns, and Paul basically says: “Don’t worry, God will bring them with him.” [Morris, 140]

And built into that passing statement is an incredible assurance about where our Christian loved ones are right now. They are with God. They are with Jesus. They are in his presence, and secure in his keeping. [Wright, 124]

Alexander is not with us this morning. But it’s no mystery where he is. He is with the Lord. He is before the face of God. He is in the arms of Jesus. I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like (as Bethan so beautifully puts it in her letter to him) that little Alexander saw the face of God even before he saw the faces of his parents ... that he will learn the name “Yahweh” even before he learns the names “Mommy” or “Daddy.” We cannot imagine that – we cannot know what that experience must be like. But we can know that Alexander, at this moment, is in the safest, most wonderful keeping that he could possibly be.

He is kept and cared for by the Lord of love – by his heavenly Father. He is in the immediate presence of Jesus Christ, who delights to take little children in his arms.

And so even as we grieve this morning, we grieve with profound hope.

Hope: “The dead in Christ will rise ...”

But Paul doesn’t stop there in giving us hope. He doesn’t just point to where those who have died in the Lord are now – he goes on to talk about where they will be.

He goes on to say in verse sixteen that when Christ returns to this earth and makes all things new, that at that time “the dead in Christ will rise.”

Christ is not done with this world. Sin and death and brokenness are intruders here. And the day will come when Jesus returns and wipes them all away, and returns this world to what it was meant to be.

Christ is not done with this world. But he’s also not done with our bodies. He will raise them up, and make them new.

On your way in today ... or on your bulletin cover, you've seen the pictures of little Alexander. You've seen his little hands and his little fingers. You've seen his beautiful face. Look at him again. God is not done with that face. God is not done with those fingers. God has so much more planned for them.

Because just as Jesus rose from the grave, so Alexander will rise. When Christ returns, God will bring Alexander with him, he will reunite his body and soul, and he will make his body new. And Alexander, in the flesh, will run, and jump, and dance. His face will smile. His head will tilt back, and his mouth will open, and he will let out joyful laughter. And he will walk before the Lord not just for a moment ... not just for seventy or eighty years ... but for eternity.

That is the promise of the resurrection.

And so though we rightly grieve the presence of the tiny lifeless body that will be laid in the ground later today, we grieve with profound hope. Because we know that God is not done with Alexander's body.

Hope: "We ... will be caught up together with them ..."

Paul gives us hope for Alexander's soul. He gives us hope for Alexander's body.

But once again, he doesn't stop there. He continues, in verse seventeen, and he says of Christ's return: "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."

Now – we can sometimes get distracted by the talk of the clouds and the air here and miss Paul's main point.

Paul is using the imagery here of what would happen in the ancient world, when the Roman Emperor came to pay a state visit to a Roman colony: As he approached the colony, the citizens of that city would come out of the city to meet him while he was still on the road, on his way there, and they would then accompany him into the city itself.

Such an event, we should note, was a communal one. The people of the city together would go out to greet the king. Families, friends, in celebration would go out together to greet their Lord and welcome him.

Paul is using the same imagery here for the coming of Christ: that as Christ descends to the earth, Paul describes all God's people together, those who had died and been raised along with those still living, all of them, together, ascending to the clouds to meet Jesus in the air, and then accompany him as he descends to the earth.

And as would be the case in a Roman city, this would be a communal event. Among God's people, family and friends would gather together, embrace one another, celebrate with one another, as they went out together to greet and welcome their Lord. [Wright, 125; Morris, 146]

And Paul makes that point, which we should not miss, that this is something that will happen with God's people "together." Remember, he's speaking specifically to those who have lost loved ones

in the Lord, and are worried about what this means for them. And in verse seventeen Paul explicitly assures them that they will be together with them, at the resurrection, in the flesh, reunited, in order to greet the Lord's coming together. [Morris, 144-145]

There is often a moment of profound joy, when a mother and father meet their child for the first time, face-to-face. And they look into his eyes, and he looks into their eyes, and they embrace.

Karl and Bethan, you did not have that moment with Alexander. But that moment is not lost. It's just delayed.

The day will come when you will look with your own eyes on Alexander's face, and he will look right back at you. And you will embrace him, and he will embrace you. That moment of joy is not lost forever. It's still to come.

And you will not be the only ones to experience a moment like that, on that great day. I know I myself look forward to meeting the three of our six children that my wife and I lost to miscarriage. There are many here today who, on that day, will embrace the children they have not yet met, and gaze upon the children they have yet to see face to face.

Think, for a minute, of the joy that occurs in that moment when a father and mother meet their child, face-to-face, for the first time. There will be innumerable forms of joy surrounding us at the resurrection. But one form in the midst of them all will be the joyful first-time meeting of parents and their children, happening thousands, and even millions of times over. And even that will be just a drop in the bucket of the joy that we experience when Christ raises us up, and we are together with God's people, and we together greet the Lord at his coming.

And so even as we grieve this separation from Alexander now, we grieve with profound hope and anticipation for the reunions that will occur in the flesh, at the coming of the Lord.

Hope: "We will always be with the Lord ..."

And it is, of course, the Lord's coming that will complete our joy. Paul writes in verse seventeen that after this has all happened "we will always be with the Lord."

We will not just greet those we have lost in this life. But as we greet one another, we will turn and behold him: our Lord, our Savior, and our King – who made such reunions possible, and so much more.

We will worship him together. We will serve him together. We will live together before his face. And in his presence, our joy will be complete.

And so, though we grieve today, we grieve with profound hope.

Conclusion: “Encourage one another ...”

Paul gives all of these grounds for hope for those who are grieving. But he doesn't stop there. He adds one more line.

He says in verse eighteen: “Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

In other words: Hearing these words once is not enough. We need to be reminded of them. And we need not just to remind and encourage ourselves with them, but Paul tells us here that we need to encourage one another with them. [Morris, 146]

Brothers and sisters – you who are grieving alongside Karl and Bethan this morning: this is the Lord's charge to you. You are called on to encourage Karl and Bethan with these things. And you are called to do that not just today, but in the days, and the weeks, and even the years ahead. They know the truth of the gospel. But as Paul says here, they also need you to encourage them in these things.

And Karl and Bethan, do not forget that you will need encouragement. It will be tempting at times, in moments where grief hits you afresh, to retreat within yourself. And surely the Lord can meet you there.

But he also intends to encourage you through the people he has placed all around you: through one another, through your families, and through your church family. So don't hide your grief in the days ahead. But be honest about it, and let others come alongside you, bear your burdens, build you up, and encourage you with the promises of the gospel.

Today we grieve. But we grieve with profound hope.

Christ has overcome death. Christ has promised to be our God and the God of our children.

And so we can entrust Alexander to Christ's keeping today, and look forward with confident hope to the joys that are still to come.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Keller, Timothy. *On Death*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020.

Morris, Leon. *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959.

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.