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## *Living in Anxious Times*

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Proper 24 – Year A

I speak these words in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Margaret Ann has been doing a lot of traveling for work lately, and when she travels our communication changes. Now, I will be the first to admit I'm probably not the best communicator. I am one of those spouses that has my head in my iPhone, or am watching the TV, and the words she is speaking to me are coming in one ear and out the other. I am thinking about my next sermon, or trying to imagine if Tennessee will ever win another football game. Yes, all those things are going through my mind, and I'm not always paying attention to what is being said.

But, when Margaret Ann travels our communication changes—I have to focus on every single word. This past week, Margaret Ann went to Thomasville to work in the corporate offices, and as I walked her to the car in the morning, she gave me a list of things to do: Remember to pick up Bradford from school and give him a bath. Also, Cyrus has a letter that needs to go in his Cathedral Preschool bag. Finally, there is a casserole in the fridge that you need to bake. Remember to bake it with the top on, then take the top off and let it get crispy. Finally, make sure it cools before giving it to the boys or they will burn their mouths.

Wow! All of that before my first cup of coffee! I had to pay attention to every word because when someone is away, or when someone is going away, what is communicated becomes very important.

You know this to be true in your own lives. When you drop your children off at school, the last things you say to them in carpool line are often very important. If you are going away for vacation, you usually send emails to those in the office communicating the important things that might occur in your absence. Shifting gears to something more serious, when a loved one is dying and doesn't have long to live, those conversations are important and full of important information.

This is exactly what is happening in our epistle today. Paul has gone to Thessalonica, preached, and gained a lot of converts. The church started growing and the powers-that-be don't really like him, so they run him out of town and he goes to the next town, where he preaches, grows the church and eventually gets run out of that town. The cycle keeps repeating itself, and every now and then he is thrown in jail.

So, Silas and Timothy let Paul know what is going on in Thessalonica. They say that the people in Thessalonica are anxious about Paul's return, and he is obviously anxious about them turning from Christianity back to their former ways.

Paul writes this letter because he is away and anxious about what is happening in the community. Remember, when someone is anxious and away, the words are often full of important information.

Many scholars believe this is the oldest letter in the New Testament. And, if this is the oldest letter in the New Testament, and our appointed lectionary text today comes from the opening chapter, then these might very well be the first words of the New Testament.

During this time away, what does Paul say to the Thessalonians? Paul lets the Thessalonians know that he gives thanks for

the lives they are living, for their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope. Remember, Paul is away, and when someone is away those words become very important. We hear Paul's words again in another letter, a very famous letter, one that is often read when I am officiating weddings: "And these three abide—faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Those words to the Corinthians are also the same words Paul uses in his very first letter to the Thessalonians—"work of faith," "labor of love," and "steadfast hope." Those virtues of faith, hope, and love are present in Paul's very first words.

Paul says that a Christian life should be lived as a work of faith, a labor of love, and steadfast hope. Remember, he is writing to Christians living in anxious, challenging, and difficult times. There is a timelessness to those words because we too live in anxious, challenging, and difficult times. Don't those words apply to us, just as much as they do to the Christians living in Thessalonica?

We need to live our lives in a way that bears witness to Christianity as a life that involves a work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope. What does that look like?

What does it look like to live life as a work of faith? When Dean Candler stands up here to give the offertory sentences, he often says we offer our gifts of money, our concerns, and our lives to God. In one of the Eucharistic prayers we hear the words, "we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies to be holy and reasonable sacrifice to God" (BCP, 336).

Our lives, our relationships, and our work are all offerings to God. Remember those famous words by Martin Luther King, Jr.? Dr. King was speaking about offering your life as a work of faith: "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'" That is what it looks like when we offer our lives as a work of faith.

Labor of love. What does it look like when we offer our lives as a labor of love? This past week we started our Adult Confirmation Class. During that class, Clayton Harrington, our program coordinator for youth ministries, was walking us through the Baptismal Covenant. We got to the line: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" (BCP, 305). Another way of saying that, will you seek, serve, and love Christ in all people? In those who are different from you? In those who offend you? In those who have hurt you? It isn't easy. In many cases, living the Christian life is a labor of love.

Finally, Paul talks about steadfast hope. What does it mean to live as a person with steadfast hope? As Christians we are Easter people, people of the Resurrection, and people of joy. We are people that believe in the power of the resurrection! One of Dean Candler's leadership axioms is "spread good gossip"!

The word "gospel" means "good news." As Christians we are to spread good gossip, or good news. We live in a society that focuses on the bad and negative; this even happens in the Church. We are called to pay attention to the good news, spread the good news, and then hopefully we will come to be people of steadfast hope.

The Christian life is a life lived as a work of faith, a labor of love, and steadfast hope.

I want to conclude today by saying you can see all of this in action this morning by going to Child Hall. During our education hour, Canon Cathy Zappa, along with the Youth Team, and both adult and youth volunteers, will be sharing reflections from their mission trip to Haiti.

I have no idea what they are going to say, but I have heard presentations like this before. I bet three themes will emerge from their reflections: "work of faith," "labor of love," and "steadfast hope." (Those reading this sermon should listen to the podcast.)

You see, when God calls, when God sends, when Christ calls you to follow, it often involves "work", "labor," and "steadfast endurance," but you also are invited to enter into a relationship, one that is life-changing, life-giving, and transformative.

That is why Paul says, "I give thanks for Christians bearing witness, by living life as a work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope." AMEN.

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