Faithful Watching and Waiting
1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

It's almost Thanksgiving break, one of the busiest travel times of the year. Airports are crowded with people heading home for the holiday, and others gathering with family on an exotic vacation. Some are traveling to watch their favorite basketball teams play in a special matchup, like the Cyclone men playing in Las Vegas Thanksgiving week.

One of the constants of flying is delays. The travel season corresponds with the arrival of winter weather in many places, and weather delays compound. Adding on the aging infrastructure, fewer air traffic controllers, and the high cost of gasoline, and there are many reasons for delays. Ask Pastor Splett about his travel back from Florida last month!

One seminary professor noticed, though, that when flights are delayed, people divide into five groups. You've seen them, too, I'm sure. First, there are the pushers. They push for information. They elbow their way up to the ticket counter demanding, "When is the plane going to arrive? I must have exact times and dates!"

Then there are the doubters. After a few minutes of waiting doubters announce, "This plane will never arrive. I'm not sitting here another minute. I'm renting a car and driving to my destination!"

Then there are the sleepers. In some cases, they snore. Others drop their jaws wide open. (Not a pretty picture!) And in the worst possible case, a complete stranger ends up using your shoulder as his pillow!

Then there are the players. Players say, "The plane's delayed? Great! It's time to go back down to the bar and have a few more drinks. Let's party!"

And, finally, there are the soldiers. Soldiers? Yes soldiers. You know, the people who are alert, on their guard, ready at a moment's notice to march onto that plane!

What kind of person are you when it comes to waiting for a plane to arrive? More importantly, what kind of person are you when it comes to waiting for Christ to arrive? Today we look at 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 with the theme "Faithful Watching and Waiting."

Pushers, you may recall, need exact times and dates. The Seventh Day Adventist church in town has been in the news a bit, since their building is right on the intersection of Grand Ave and 13th, and is one of the properties the city is trying to acquire to fix that intersection. The Seventh Day Adventists were founded by a man named William Miller, who though he could calculate when Christ would return. He went through scripture and calculated that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. When Jesus didn't return that day, it was called the Great Disappointment. Some of Miller's followers decided that Jesus had cleansed the heavenly sanctuary on that day, not Earth, and went on to form the Seventh Day Adventist church.

It's much the same story for a man named Edgar Whisenant. Edgar was a NASA engineer who used his mathematical skills to set a date for Christ's return. He wrote a book called, 88 Reasons why the Rapture Will take Place in 1988. Edgar was so certain that Jesus would return on September 10, 1988 that he said, "If I'm wrong then the scripture is mistaken."

Apparently, Edgar never heard what Jesus said last week at the end of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). No one knows, but amazingly, Edgar Whisenant said, "I know." September 10, 1988 came and went. No one knows. That's what Paul says, too. "Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." (1 Thessalonians 5:1–2)

How does a thief come? He comes unexpectedly. He comes without warning. A thief doesn't call ahead. Christ will come like a thief in the night so let's not demand exact times and dates like the pushers.

"While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." (1 Thessalonians 5:3) Have you ever tried to just keep driving, ignoring a check engine light on your dashboard? The light can mean so many things that it's hard to know what it says. Maybe it's the gas tank cover not being closed all the way. Maybe it's something worse. You can ignore it. You can cover it with a piece of black tape so you can't see the light anymore. You can take it in and see what the error code means. Sooner or later, you'll find out what the light means, whether you wanted to or not. Christ's return is the same way. We can say, "Peace and safety" all we want. We can doubt reality all we want. We can ignore the blinking red light in the Bible all we want. But Christ has died. Christ is risen. And Christ most certainly will come again. Please, please, don't join the doubters.

"So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled." (1 Thessalonians 5:6) It's easy to become indifferent and apathetic to Christ's Second Coming. Waiting is hard work! That's why we become spiritual sleepers. Last week we heard about the wise and foolish virgins who all fell asleep while waiting for the bridegroom to come. Our pet sins give us some Advil PM, put on some soft music, and before we know it, we're sound asleep. Some are in spiritual comas; others are spiritual Rip Van Winkles! Paul says, "Be alert and self-controlled!" Don't be a sleeper.

"… and those who get drunk, get drunk at night." (1 Thess 5:7) Abraham Lincoln died. So did Woodrow Wilson and Babe Ruth. John Kennedy died and so did Princess Diana. We all die. In our world, two people die every second, more than 155,000 people die a day and about 57 million people die every year. Woody Allen, speaks for a lot of us when he says, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens!" Players deny that time is running out. Players ignore biblical warnings. Players have a great time. "Let's party!"

Let's not. Instead, let's go to Alaska and meet Carl McCunn. Carl McCunn prepared for an Alaskan adventure that still has people talking. In March of 1981, Carl was dropped into a remote place near the Coleen River, seventy miles northeast of Ft. Yukon. He had two rifles, a shotgun, fourteen hundred pounds of supplies, and five hundred rolls of film. Carl began his adventure, completely unaware of one detail that would cost him his life. He made no arrangements for anyone to pick him up. In August of that year Carl wrote in his diary an understatement the size of Mt. McKinley. "I should have planned for my departure." In late November of 1981, trapped with no exit plan, he died in the Alaskan wilderness. Carl McCunn forgot this basic truth: Every trip must come to an end.

Every trip must come to an end. So will yours. So will mine. So, what is our exit strategy? How will we get out? How will we make it from this life to the life of the world to come? For years that was one of the questions asked by people going door to door making evangelism calls. Do you know where you will go when you die? What's your exit plan?

Well, Paul says not to join the pushers, doubters, sleepers or players. On the other hand, Paul does encourage us to be one of the soldiers.

Remember? Soldiers stand at attention. Soldiers are alert. Soldiers are prepared at a moment's notice. "But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

When it comes to Christ's return there's a battle going on for my heart and for my head! The enemy wants to harden my heart and he wants to mess with my mind. The enemy's goal is to take away my Christmas gift; tell me it's not that important; get me to exchange it for something else.

You do know about the best Christmas gift. Right? It needs no batteries. It will never break. There are no shipping costs. In fact, there are no costs at all. This gift is exactly what we need; and please, don't ever exchange it. This Gift is Jesus. Jesus. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus. The King of Kings, who destroys death and the devil. Jesus. The Lord of Lords, who is coming again to make all things new, even you!

Fellow soldiers! Put on your breastplate of faith and hope and your helmet of salvation. Guard your heart and your head. Fight tooth and nail to hold on to the gift of Christ Jesus all the days of your life. Why is that? What's the big deal? What's at stake? Everything. You are not destined for wrath, but for salvation through Jesus. That's good news. That's great news! That's worth fighting for. That's worth holding on to.

Because Jesus bore our sins to the cross and took the punishment we deserve, we will not be destroyed in that day. Joyfully, we "wait for [God's] Son from heaven…, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Thanks be to God! His coming will be like a thief in the night, so get ready, repent, and put your trust in Christ, for the Day is surely drawing near.

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