

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"The Children of God: How to Not Fall Asleep in Church"

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Psalm 123, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

He had fallen asleep in church – again. And my mother knew that Dad had fallen asleep because his snoring had drawn her attention away from the sermon.

God bless him, my dad tried to stay awake. He knew it upset and embarrassed my mom when she caught him snoozing through service. He has always been a faithful, churchgoing man. But for the last couple of years, he had struggled week after week to maintain consciousness through the hour of worship.

It wasn't that he wasn't getting enough sleep. In fact, he had recently retired and was sleeping quite well. It wasn't any kind of narcolepsy unless there is a particular strain of that disease which only manifests itself in the church pew. He couldn't really blame the worship service. He'd been worshipping in Presbyterian churches for decades and had managed to at least keep his eyes open, even when he wasn't fully engaged. He honestly didn't know what the problem was. And so, after one too many elbows in the ribs and exasperated looks from my mother, my dad simply stopped going to church.

Now, this was no easy decision for my dad. As I said, he is a faithful and devoted Christian. But more than that, he is extremely susceptible to guilt. And for my dad, not going to church meant you were brazenly not following the will of God, and the guilt of that disobedience weighed heavily on him.

So, for the first time in his life, in his mid-fifties, my dad went church shopping on his own. He got permission from my mother first, of course.

Mom had no intention of leaving her Presbyterian church. She served as an elder in regular rotation, ran committees, went to bible studies, cooked community dinners, and generally helped out anywhere and everywhere. I honestly wonder if the walls of that church would continue to stand were my mother to step away from it for too long. My mother never fell asleep in church.

In my memories of my dad at church, he is always playing the guitar and singing. In the church I grew up in, Dad and I led the music for the Easter sunrise service every year. Sometimes we'd sing special music for Christmas Eve. Dad even wrote a few songs just for worship. His passion is music, and when he was called upon to share his passion with the church, he came fully alive.

Through a number of leadership changes in my parents' church, dad's gift for music had gotten lost. There'd been a few creative clashes and some hurtful words exchanged. Dad felt underappreciated or overlooked entirely. So he had stopped offering to play and people had stopped asking.

And not too long after that, Dad started falling asleep.

As dad church shopped, he found a new non-denominational church that worshipped in the local high school auditorium. After attending worship a handful of times, he'd been invited to join the church's worship band. And that was it. Dad was hooked.

He never fell asleep in worship because he was usually on stage. And his faith grew and deepened because he actually heard the whole sermon. He built friendships with the other musicians and worship leaders that sustained him in his faith.

The next time I came out to visit my parents, I had to choose between going to mom's church, where she was helping to serve Communion and was even leading part of the liturgy from the table, and going to my dad's church to see him play in the worship band. It was a tough call. But my dad was so excited about his new church that I couldn't say no to him.

The band wasn't that good, but my dad was great. He was fully alive and engaged. He wanted to talk about the pastor's message after church and tell me about how the band rehearsed and chose the music. He got involved in several other areas of the church's ministry, helping to build new facilities and get the word out in the community about the church.

My dad's experience reminded me of what Howard Thurman once said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

The church in Thessalonica was a lively one. Paul writes to them with great joy, remembering their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul celebrates that the message of the gospel came to this church "not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Thessalonica in the first century was a bustling metropolis, the Roman capital of the region of Macedonia. It was a diverse and industrious city, but because of its diversity, religious fervor was kept to a minimum and devotion to the Roman imperial religion was strongly encouraged.

Thessalonica was Paul's first stop on his missionary foray into modern-day Greece, and the response he found to the message of Jesus Christ was nothing short of miraculous. Some Jews and a large number of Gentiles believed in the gospel message, and they formed a community of faith, gathering in homes, eating and worshipping together, and encouraging one another through the many adversities they faced because of their beliefs.

Oddly, I think adversity may have been the key to success for the Thessalonian church. Believers were persecuted and even killed, but this kept them on their toes. They had to "encourage and build up each other," as Paul commends them for doing, because practicing the Christian faith in that time and place was difficult and dangerous. The fledgling church needed everything anyone had to offer – a safe place to gather and seek sanctuary, teachers and students, healers and prophets, people who could think and plan, and people who could contemplate and listen. Everyone was essential to the project, and, according to Paul, everyone had been giving it their all.

Paul writes to assure the believers in Thessalonica that they are on the right path. They are children of the light and children of the day. Now, this language about day and night has at least three dimensions to it.

First, Paul is talking about what is often referred to as the "Day of the Lord," the day when Jesus will return to complete God's redemptive work on earth. The Thessalonians are awaiting this day with great expectation and are, perhaps, a bit disappointed that it has not yet arrived.

But Paul assures them that no matter when that day comes, their identity as children of the light and children of the day equips them for this eventuality. Now this identity is the second dimension of this day and light imagery. Paul wants them to identify themselves over and against this comfortable, secular society, as children of the day, meaning they belong to Christ, who is himself the light of the world.

Finally, Paul uses this day and light imagery to encourage the Thessalonians not to fall asleep, and to get suited up, putting on the *defensive* armor of faith and love and hope. They are not preparing to fight a battle, but they are getting ready to survive the night watch. The walk of faith is not an easy one. There are obstacles

and challenges, and Paul know the Thessalonians need to be awake and on guard, ready to defend themselves and one another.

The Thessalonian church is lively indeed, and we can see why. Imagine excitedly awaiting the day when Jesus will return, when there will be no more death or pain or weeping, when all things will be made new and re-created in the goodness God desires. Anticipating that kind of event, preparing yourself for it and viewing the world through that lens, would certainly make you feel “fully alive.” If any day God’s final redemption could come like a thief in the night; if any day all of our petty complaints and superficial concerns could be overwhelmed by a new and wonderful reality; if any day we might see God face to face, encounter the risen Christ, live in the realm of the Holy Spirit – now *that* would make you feel “fully alive.”

Imagine if also, like the Thessalonian church, you knew exactly who you were and to whom you belonged. We live in a world of such fractured, or maybe composite identities. Families often live far apart, friendships are often built on personal capital rather than genuine affection. Some people can identify with a home town, and others find an identity in college or professional sports teams. We identify with our jobs, with our schools, with our achievements. We even quite often identify with name brand products. Apple...or Windows. Coke or Pepsi.

And while there are certainly many positive aspects to having these identities pieced together from different parts of our lives, what it can’t do is give us a real center that brings us fully alive. We might feel lively while we’re cheering for our favorite football team, but that doesn’t help us when we walk into work on Monday morning. We might feel fully alive in our studies or at work, but that doesn’t help us when we come home at night or on the weekends. We might feel fully alive when we get the latest and greatest piece of tech, but Siri isn’t going to be able to answer all of our questions about what our life is going to add up to.

That central, grounding identity as a follower of Jesus Christ, however, is an identity that will help us in any and every one of our other multiple identities. If you are a Christ-follower first and foremost, everything else can make sense in relationship to that. I can’t think of another single identity with that kind of power.

Finally, imagine how lively your faith would have to be to survive in a hostile environment such as first-century Thessalonica. If you were in actual, physical danger because of your Christian faith, you would have to be nothing less than a fully-devoted follower to even bother with it. And you would need other fully devoted, fully alive followers to support and encourage you. This is not the kind of faith you take on alone.

This is the kind of faith that needs people who have come alive.

My dad thought his faith, his God, his church, needed him to sit in the pew every Sunday. Or at least most Sundays. And for a season anyway, that led him to think there was “peace and security,” as Paul says. He asked what the church needed, and he heard, “we need people to serve on committees” and “we need people to teach Sunday school and lead youth group and serve community meals.” All good and necessary activities of the church. And some of these things are the things that make my mom come alive. But my dad, well, he fell asleep. These were not the things that make him come alive. And what he discovered in his search is that the church, like the world, needs people who have come alive, people who are fully awake, people who are children of the day and children of the light.

And so my invitation to you today is this: What makes you come alive? What keeps you awake in church? I invite you to stop asking what the church needs and to start asking what makes you come alive. Because what the church needs are people who have come alive.

I want to close with a word of reassurance. Staying awake can be exhausting. We need our rest. We need to sleep. We need to regenerate. We have seasons of excitement and whole-hearted devotion, and we have season where we fall asleep, even in church.

But the segment of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians concludes with the assurance that "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."

Lest we think that our salvation rests upon our own ability to stay awake – waiting for the Day of the Lord, living into our Christ-following identity, bringing our whole selves to our faith walk – let us remember that it is by the grace of God, and only by that grace, that we experience the kingdom of God now and life eternal with God in the future.

As the Psalm we heard this morning depicts a dependence on God that reflects our need for mercy. We cannot stay awake all the time, and God knows that. That is why God didn't leave our salvation up to us. God knows that we are in constant need of re-awakening. That is why the Holy Spirit continues to work among us.

Hopefully none of you out there are asleep yet. Hopefully you've managed to stay awake through my sermon. But if you are asleep, know that God loves you and has sent Christ into the world to save you all the same. And if you are asleep, or falling asleep, or peaceful and secure in your faith life, I encourage you to ask what makes you come alive, and go and do it. Because what the church needs are people who have come alive.