

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“The Word Sounding Forth”
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Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Some of you will remember Shel Silverstein’s wonderful poem from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*:
Listen to the MUSTN’TS, child,
 Listen to the DON’TS
 Listen to the SHOULDN’TS
The IMPOSSIBLES, the WON’TS
 Listen to the NEVER HAVES
Then listen close to me—
 Anything can happen, child,
ANYTHING can be.¹

Paul would have liked those lines I think. Our lesson today from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians is among the earliest of Christian writings. Most biblical scholars would tell you that Thessalonians is Paul’s earliest writing, so these are among the first Christians, those who turned to God from idols and now are spreading God’s good news far and wide. And Paul is glad to see them. He is glad to be with them. He had just left the community in Philippi where he and others were shamefully mistreated (1 Thess 2:2). Now he is welcomed by a community that is strong and caring and sharing and generous. These Thessalonians are an example to all the believers. God’s word is sounding forth from them.

They are an extraordinary bunch and Paul is rightly proud of them. So Paul proclaims: “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then he continues several verses later: For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you.

Those Thessalonians, their fortitude, their faith, their love, these came from God who chose them before they even knew it. Their reality was not easy. They knew about suffering. They knew that the world was not the way it should be. And yet, in spite of persecution, they received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. That’s how they became an example to all the believers. They stood tall even in the midst of some very difficult times. They stood tall because through Paul they had discovered that God was with them, despite all evidence to the contrary. They discovered for themselves what the Israelites had discovered so long ago in the time of Moses, that God’s presence would go with them, all the time, protecting them and encouraging them, watching over them, loving them.

We have known people like this in our own time. Several years ago we had the privilege of visiting South Africa. The Dugans are just home from a trip there themselves. It is an extraordinary place, not just because you can see beautiful animals and landscapes. The people are extraordinary. Like the Thessalonians, the people of South Africa have been an example for all the believers in the ways they stood tall in the midst of terrible persecution and suffering. There is a wonderful song that some people in South Africa used to sing—you might know it: *Asikhatali noma si boshwa*—translated: It doesn’t matter if you should jail us. We are free and kept alive by hope. They could sing that song because they knew they had been chosen by God. They could sing that song because they understood

¹ Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. © 1974 Harper Collins.

that the powers of injustice were no match for the power of the Holy Spirit. They could sing and they continue to be an example for all the believers. God's word sounds forth beautifully from South Africa.

It can sound forth here too. Right now we live in a time when it feels like the world is falling apart. We've had disasters; we've had shootings; we have a political landscape that is unlike anything most of us have ever known, and that is true whether you are a Republican, a Democrat or an independent. It is not an easy time. Yet God's word is still sounding forth. We still have a word of hope and strength to share and as I have said before, that word needs to be proclaimed especially in times like these.

Dr. Kelly Flanagan who is a clinical psychologist in Illinois wrote something recently about What to do when the news is all bad. "I'm standing in the dark but I can hear the daylight. In my neck of the woods, as autumn becomes more frail, cicadas mark the daytime—around midday, they awake and begin their daily song. Then, around sundown, they are supposed to recede, and the crickets preside over the darkness, humming until daybreak. And yet, sometimes, they overlap.

"I'm standing in the dark, but I can hear the daylight. If I listen closely, threaded throughout the din of crickets, I can hear the rebellious hum of cicadas refusing to go gently into the night. And here's the thing: if you listen closely, a bunch of insects can teach you about how darkness and light really work: Always, darkness and light overlap."

He continues suggesting that it seems that darkness is everywhere right now. "If you read the headlines, it is easy to believe darkness reigns. The truth is that darkness and light overlap.

"Just a few weeks ago, a friend of mine was in a department store. From the next aisle, he could hear a mother playfully talking to her infant child. He could hear the child giggle and gurgle in reply. The interaction was so sweet, he peered around the corner to see it. The baby was nestled in a car seat and tucked into a shopping cart. The mother was lovingly hovering over her, smiling and laughing, too. But the mother was bald.

"In a department store aisle, the darkness of cancer and the light of laughter and love overlapped.

"After peeking around the corner, it's hard to see anything but the darkness of the mother's cancer, the gloaming of the grief that may lay ahead. Darkness does that to us. It surrounds us and, like the din of crickets, threatens to drown out everything else.

"We have to listen closely for the sounds of the daylight.

"But if we do, we'll discover it's always there, simply dwelling in the midst of the darkness. You see, light doesn't try to destroy darkness. Light simply enters *into* darkness, dwells *within* darkness, and insists on existing, too. It refuses to go gently into the night. Light simply overwhelms the darkness,...

"Sure, sometimes the darkness is easier to see. Sometimes we have to listen a little harder for the sounds of beauty and love and generosity and sacrifice and kindness and peacefulness and tenderness. Sometimes we have to remember what we heard when we were one aisle over and the darkness wasn't quite so obvious. But if we listen, we'll hear it: Peace overlapped with hate in Charlottesville. Sacrifice overlapped with massacre in Vegas. Charity is overlapping with destruction in Texas and Florida and Puerto Rico. Heroism is overlapping with heat in California. Discourse is overlapping with division everywhere. Peace is overlapping with terror, and love is overlapping with fear.

"There is light here, if you listen for it. And then there's this: if you listen long enough to the light in the midst of the darkness, you will happen upon a deeply graceful mystery: *it is the light in you which bears the light in everything else*. So, to *be* the light, you don't even need to become something new; all you have to do is be the very ordinary light you already are. That is the very good news, so common

it's not even news. It's just good. Overwhelm the darkness. Do the one thing darkness can't do: shine in the midst of it. Give us something beautiful to listen for, from one aisle over."²

We in the church are called to proclaim God's light in the midst of darkness. You've known difficult times in the past. Some of you are dealing with them right now. Yet you know how to be an example for other believers. You know how the word can sound forth from this place. You've done this before and you can do it again.

Right now, I believe the church is called to celebrate what God is doing. We waste a lot of energy on what is wrong in the church. We could better spend our time by celebrating what God is doing right now. Recently the Stated Clerk of our Presbyterian Church USA, J Herbert Nelson, spoke at a gathering for denominational leaders. Over and against those who sing "some kind of sad lullaby," Nelson called the church to work for and witness to the kingdom of God. Some Presbyterians say "that our work is to fix the church," but it's not, Nelson said. It's to work faithfully for God's kingdom, and to believe that God has provided what is needed. "And if we are faithful, God will fix the church."

"Christians follow a transformative God, a God who says that if you follow me, "things will change in your life," Nelson said. The faithful answer when God calls "is to just say 'Yes. Yes, Lord.' Yes, Lord, take me to the place of the greatest potential," the places where people are crying, where no one else wants to go, to places of unrest, "because I know a Jesus who can calm the storm."³

In a time when so many people focus on the church being in trouble—numbers are falling, congregations are leaving, people don't seem as faithful as we might hope—focus on whatever problem you want to focus on, here in this place, we can celebrate that God has already given us everything that we need. We can practice a theology of abundance. We can discover for ourselves what Shel Silverstein proclaimed that in the midst of mustn't, shouldn'ts, impossibles and won'ts, anything can happen. Anything can be!

The word of our God can sound forth from you. As it does, a whole community will give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in their prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Be who you are called to be and God's word will sound forth from this place.

Let us pray: We give you thanks dear God for all those who have been an example for us, and we pray that we might follow that example, so that your word might sound forth from this place throughout the world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

² Kelly Flanagan, What To Do When The News Is All Bad. Posted Tuesday, October 17, 2017. <https://drkellyflanagan.com/2017/10/17/what-to-do-when-the-news-is-all-bad/>

³ J. Herbert Nelson, as reported in The Presbyterian Outlook, October 15, 2017. Written by Leslie Scanlon.