

Service Date—December 6, 2020
Sermon Text--I Thessalonians 5:1-11

On this (coming Sunday) day, December 6th, a young man, just 17 years old, by the name of Arles Cole went Christmas shopping. He went to the store and bought a number of gifts for family members and friends. He made arrangements to have some of the gifts sent directly to the homes of the relatives for whom they were intended; the other gifts he took back home intending to deliver them personally. The gifts he had shipped directly arrived at their destinations safely, but the ones he took home with him were never delivered. You see, the December 6th on which Arles Cole went shopping was December 6th, 1941, and home for him was a bunk and a locker in a battleship called the West Virginia which on that day was anchored along with the battleships Nevada, Tennessee, and Arizona, at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. At dawn the next day, Sunday, December 7, 1941, Japanese aircraft carriers launched 353 planes armed with bullets, bombs and torpedoes which attacked Pearl Harbor naval station and Wheeler air field destroying ships and planes and leaving 2,400 Americans dead and nearly 1,200 wounded. It was a day of swift and sudden destruction that as President Franklin Roosevelt said, "Will live in infamy." Now here we are, on (approaching) the same day, December 7, 79 years later, and the Lord has a message for us, a warning message about a coming day of swift and terrible destruction. That day of sudden destruction is the Day of the Lord, the day our Lord returns to bring an end to this present age, raise the dead and pronounce his eternal judgment on all flesh. That Day, St. Paul warns, Will Bring Sudden Destruction, but St. Paul goes on to remind us that although the Day of the Lord will bring sudden destruction we don't have to be surprised, and we don't have to be destroyed.

I. The Day Of The Lord Will Bring Sudden Destruction, but we don't have to be surprised

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor extensive investigations were conducted to try to figure out how such a large force of enemy ships and planes could unleash a surprise attack and wreak such horrible destruction on a military base that was apparently so unprepared for an attack. Perhaps all the reasons will never be known that explain just exactly how such sudden destruction could have happened at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This we do know, however, even though the Day of the Lord will bring sudden destruction we don't have to be surprised.

St. Paul begins our reading this way: "Concerning the times and dates, brothers, there is no need to write to you, for you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people are saying, 'Peace and security,' destruction will suddenly come on them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will certainly not escape." His words are a reminder of something that is frequently taught in the Scriptures, that is...the suddenness of the Lord's coming in glory. In our Gospel reading, for example, Jesus compared the sudden fury of the Day of the Lord to the universal flood at the time of Noah. Just as people at that time were calmly going about business as usual unaware that anything was wrong and then were caught unprepared by the sudden destruction of the flood, so Jesus says it will be when he appears in glory. He said that it will happen so swiftly that as two people are going about their business together without warning one will be snatched away to be with the Lord while the other is left to perish with the world. Now in our reading Paul uses two more illustrations of the sudden, unexpected nature of the Lord's coming. He says that day will come like a thief in the night, who if he knows what he is doing, comes at a time when no one is expecting him. And again, Paul says like labor pains on a

pregnant woman. Just as those labor pains come without warning but suddenly and unexpectedly upon a woman, so the day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly.

"But," Paul goes on to say, "you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness." Here Paul uses a figure of speech that we are familiar with. He says that we as Christians are not "in the dark" about the day of the Lord. He means that we are not completely ignorant about the Lord's coming. Just the opposite is true. We know the Lord's solemn promise to come back to this world in glory for judgment. In contrast to many who do not know that Jesus who ascended into heaven will come back to judge the living and the dead; we know. The Holy Spirit of God has enlightened us to believe Jesus' promise to return and so there is no reason why that day should catch us by surprise. We know it's coming. We know our Lord will come again because we know how he already came once—just as he promised. We are getting ready to celebrate Christmas; the coming of the Savior God promised to send into the world. It didn't happen for many years. Maybe people thought God forgot his promise, or they just got tired of waiting, and then the glory of the Lord shattered the darkness of the Judean night as an angel of God delivered the wondrous news of the promised Savior's birth and St Luke tells us that: "*Suddenly* there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest!" The Savior came as promised. He will come again as promised. And many will be surprised by his coming...even though they are forewarned.

But St. Paul knew that just knowing that the day of the Lord was coming was not enough. He knew that it was possible for those who knew very well that the day of the Lord was coming to become distracted, to begin to daydream and suddenly they were no readier than anyone else for that day. So he goes on, "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night." What Paul means is simply that since we know that the Lord will return let's stay awake and be prepared for the Lord's coming. His words are a warning against letting the worries, the cares and the pleasures of this life distract us from what is really important and that is being found prepared for the Lord's coming in glory. He compares this to falling asleep or becoming drunk. Just as the person who is asleep is unaware of what is going on, so the Christian who forgets the Lord's promise to return in glory is no better off than the unbeliever who had no idea that Christ would come again to judge all people. And as alcohol dulls the senses of the drunk, so those who get so involved in this life, and so wrapped up in living for the here and now are in danger of having their spiritual senses dulled and being found unprepared for the coming of the Lord. In Philippians 3, St. Paul writes: "Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things."

To prevent this Paul urges Christians to put on faith and love as a breastplate. Here Paul carries on his metaphor of darkness and light and sleepiness and being alert as he pictures Christians as soldiers standing watch for the enemy to come. But instead of a breastplate of brass or leather he says our uniform should be faith and love. He combines faith and love because like smoke and fire, where there's one there will be the other, so where the fire of faith burns in the Christian heart so there will be works of love as evidence of that faith in the Christian life. In the same way, Paul is encouraging those of us who confess so often that we believe that Christ will come again in judgment to examine our lives to see if our lives reflect that confidence. Do we have first things first in our lives? Are our priorities those of a person who is looking for and waiting for the day of the Lord? Or have we been lulled to sleep or become drunk with the cares of this life and lost our

perspective of what really matters. If not, then now is the time to rid our lives of the deeds of darkness and to put on the armor of light. Now is the time to be sure that we would be ready to meet the Lord no matter when he would return and no matter where we would be. We have just recently begun a new church year. Think back to the last one. Did our behavior demonstrate that we are children of light who are looking forward to the coming of our Savior? Or did our behavior suggest that we are intoxicated by the things of this world, spiritually sleepy and unprepared to meet our Lord? Let us on this 6th day of December get ready for a day of destruction that could come at any time. Yes, the day of the Lord will bring sudden destruction, but we don't have to be surprised, and we don't have to be destroyed.

II. The Day Of The Lord Will Bring Sudden Destruction, but we don't have to be destroyed.

Paul said that the day of the Lord would bring sudden destruction. Although he didn't expand on that thought he did hint at its meaning when he says that "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath." The day of the Lord's return in judgment will be a day of wrath. The prophet Joel gave us a much fuller description of the coming wrath and the destruction of the day of the Lord in his prophetic picture of that day of judgment. There you heard him urge the nations who had rebelled against God to prepare for war against the Lord. It is a pretty dramatic picture he paints. Every rebel against the Lord who ever said, "I don't believe there is a God of justice, but if there is, then let him bring it on," will find his foolish wish fulfilled on the day of the Lord. Everyone who ever challenged the Lord's right to say, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not" will be invited to prepare for war against the Lord of hosts. And how does that go? You heard how the destruction of the wicked is pictured in terms of a harvest in which the ripe grain is mowed down with a sickle and grapes are trampled flat in the wine-press. Unfortunately, that is the fate that awaits so many people on the day of the Lord. They will be mowed down by the sickle of God's justice, trampled in the winepress of God's anger and destroyed. But again, Paul shows us that things are different for us, as we don't have to be surprised by the sudden coming of the day of the Lord, so we don't have to be destroyed in the destruction of that day. That's because as the prophet Joel said in our Old Testament reading, the Lord will be a refuge for his people from the destruction of that day.

And Paul, too, teaches that there is hope for sinners on that day and that hope is found in the Lord. Listen to Paul as he writes, "For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." Wrath was our rightful lot. Wrath was what we had earned from God for our sins. But God who does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked had other plans. Notice how simply St. Paul proclaims a fact of wondrous and undeserved love. "God appointed us to receive salvation." Before the world began, from time immemorial, God chose us to be delivered from eternal death. He appointed us to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth and to that end he sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for us. And that is what Jesus Christ did. He died. He died in shame on a cross the sinless for the sinner. He died under the wrath of God and abandoned by him the guiltless for the guilty. He who had no sin became sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. He died and by his death satisfied the anger of a righteous God, so that God could pronounce the entire sinful world to be forgiven and righteous before him. Then he rose from the dead so that his empty tomb might be positive proof that God's anger with sin is stilled. But God did even more for us. When we were still in darkness, when we were dead in our sins, blind to the truth of God and hostile toward the message of the cross, then God himself led us

out of the darkness of unbelief and death into the light of life. Through the Holy Spirit who was poured into our hearts in holy Baptism God made us what we are today, sons of the light and sons of the day, and through that same Spirit, God keeps us steadfast in true faith as we wait for that day to dawn. In a truly wondrous way God has delivered us from the wrath we earned.

You heard earlier about Arles Cole, his shopping trip and gifts. That wasn't the end of his story. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor found him three decks below the main deck and any hope for survival. He tells how as the water rose around him and he prepared to drown a bomb hit his ship. It opened a hole in the deck but amazingly it was a dud and didn't explode. He climbed out through that hole and survived that day of destruction on December 7th, 1941. It is an amazing story that sends shivers down your spine—but your stories and mine are no less amazing. God appointed us to receive salvation and prepared that salvation for us through the sacrifice of his Son and by sending us his Holy Spirit. By the cross he opened a way for us to escape death and live forever.

This mercy of our God means that whether we are awake and still living on this earth when that day dawns, or asleep in the grave when Jesus comes, we will live together with our Lord for all eternity. This is the confidence that we have facing the destruction of that last day—that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord. Contrary to what so many foolishly believe, as St. Paul says in I Corinthians 6: "You are not your own." No, he says, "you were bought at a price." Think of the precious price God paid to make us his own—the life of his dearly loved Son offered up on a cross. Can you even imagine how precious you are to God? That's why Paul can ask in another letter, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" And he can answer, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, nor the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now what are we to do with this hope that we have? Paul says as we await that day we should wear this hope of salvation like a helmet. A soldier wouldn't think of going into combat without his helmet, in the same way we Christians ought not consider going into our daily battles without our hope of salvation, a hope that is found in Jesus Christ and him crucified. In other words, Paul urges us live in the closest possible relationship to our Lord and Savior. That means daily seeing our sin and our need for the salvation he brought. That means daily going to the cross to be reminded again and again that the blood shed there purifies us from every sin. And it means encouraging others with the good news that the day of our Lord's coming will bring us not destruction but deliverance from this world of sin and sadness, loneliness and isolation, depression and despair. St. Paul ends our reading this way: "Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up, just as you are also doing." It isn't easy these days, but let's try to stay in touch with our brothers and sisters in Christ. They need your encouragement and you will be encouraged as you bring the Lord's encouragement to them.

When it comes to the Day of the Lord, some people spend all kinds of time and energy trying figure out times and dates that God has not revealed. Instead of worrying about what we can't know about that day, let's concentrate on what we do know. What we know is this: the Day of the Lord will bring sudden destruction. But we also know that that great day is coming so we don't have to be surprised and we know that Jesus died for us and lives again so that we won't be destroyed. God grant that that day may find us awake and alert, dressed in the blood and righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ and ready to welcome our Savior and enter the glory of our Father's house in heaven. Amen.

