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Come Before Winter I

October 30th, 2005

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Video Introduction... The crazy thing is there are plenty of things to be worried about this fall. Earthquakes (47,000 dead in Pakistan), mud slides, hurricanes, tsunamis, bombings of all forms (roadside, discos and hotels), war, daily death counts in Iraq, assassinations, kidnappings, UN scandals, Supreme Court nominees, Avian flu, gasoline and natural gas prices skyrocketing, N. Korea and Iran with nuclear weapons, the AIDS pandemic, religious intolerance, child abuse, unemployment, and consumer confidence. This doesn't count the sometimes skewed media coverage itself of wars, constitutions, exaggerations in the Superdome, and more. This also doesn't count the tidal wave of church closings around the world forcibly telling Christians they can't openly practice their faith, and the equal tidal wave of churches in America closing down due to lack of members. The wild thing is, you can lump this all together in the term "the new normal," brought to vogue from the post 9-11 days. Like Andy Mellifont said walking into our men's group a few weeks ago: "Somebody tell me there's good news somewhere!"

What in the world is going on? "The New Normal" is the place we live, in present distress, not the way things ought to be. We try to avoid it, but the truth is there is a load of distress in our lives that's not normal, new or otherwise. In the first Century, it was the same fear. Paul wrote the believers in Corinth to remain as they were—"in their present crisis", their new normal.

Karl Jennings (in funeral director mode) was helping a family through a death. He was talking to a normal, "new normal" woman who had recently bought a camper. She shared with Karl her motivation for buying it was so that she and her husband could drive up north to escape, just in case the terrorists attacked SE Michigan. (but left the Traverse City region alone.) The sad thing is, I've thought of that same option! "Winter" is coming

Just as we can live our lives driven by guilt, we can live them driven by fear. But as Christians, we are not called to a journey of fear. "*Perfect love drives out fear*" (1 John 4:18). So what's going on? A choice. We are facing a choice the ancient journey of faith, or the modern journey of the "new normal." This morning I want to look at both.

And the journey of progress with the "new normal" is a journey motivated by fear. What will we do when winter hits? It says "Look. Grab what you can now. There might not be enough tomorrow." Insure yourself against winter. And so the future becomes simply what we can manipulate by our own hands and technology becomes our god.

Aren't you tired of the commercials for a TV shows? They say "Don't miss this week's episode. The greatest episode EVER!" They say it every week! They have to. And they'll say it next week and the week after that and the week after that, because that's all they have! That's all they have! The new and improved!

And even though this is *not* the journey God wants us on, he answers our questions:

What *do* you do when God has blessed you in this world and you have a lot to lose if winter hits? You become generous now, before winter. Paul wrote Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:17 *“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”*

What do you do about the fear? Paul writes the believers: listen—God is still on the throne. It doesn't matter who's in the great White House. It's Who's on the great white Throne that matters! Remember, Paul was working with Claudius in the great White House of his time. And his message was the same. It doesn't matter. God has the heart of the king in his hand, and he turns it where ever he wants.

And God's Holy Spirit dwells in *you*. In the midst of terrorism, God's peace is “in here.” In the midst of economic hard times, it's “in here.” In the midst of famine, disease, or persecution, it's “in here.” Peace. Jesus says *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*” (John 14:27). It doesn't matter what's happening outside. You can have peace in here. You can have peace with God. And with that you can face anything! Philippians 4:5-7 *“The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

And here we are today: winter is coming. Crazy things are happening. There is obsessive fear. But here's what you don't do: you don't circle the wagons. You “come before winter”. You don't forget God's mission! You act now: “come before winter.” The external environment will never line up perfectly for you to reach out in Christ's name. Don't wait! The new normal with winter on the way is a priceless opportunity for us: to speak peace into it—to speak Christ into it—into the modern journey of the new normal.

But to do that, you have to be on the ancient journey of faith. The journey of faith. What is it? It's simple: It's the repetition of the ministry of Jesus, in every time and place. It can never be identically repeated, but in each time, place, and generation, it is the repetition of the ministry of Jesus.

Do you know what missionaries do? 3 things:

1. Establish a presence.
2. Gain credibility.
3. Speak Christ into the situation.

That's what missionaries do. They establish a presence. They intentionally put themselves and their family where they're going. Then they have to gain credibility. It could take one day. It could take one year. And you do that by the Christ-ness that you are, by the God-ness that is in everything you say and do. And then you earn the right to speak Christ into the situation. You're God's missionary in this moment! Get yourself in a position to say look at me: God's still on the throne. Your fears are washed away by God's peace *in* you, no matter how crazy the situation around you is. And you can respond by being a blessing to others!

Church, God has placed us in our situations. It's time to gain credibility. You don't know how long until winter hits... And then you have to earn the right to speak into the situation. We have an unprecedented environment, atmosphere, attitude to speak into: mainly of fear.

“*Come before winter...*” When Paul wrote these words, he was in prison; transferred from house arrest to the dungeon in Rome. Dark, cold, damp, with the only light to his cell coming from the slats in the ceiling. And there by the dim light, he takes his pen and begins to write. Paul knows his time is up. He’s awaiting a certain execution. He had faced much persecution and hardship, and in his last journey he was abandoned by many. He knew it was the end. So he writes his young friend, Timothy.

By the writing of the 2nd letter to Timothy, the Roman emperor, paranoid, nasty Nero, had rounded up all the leading Christians and put them in prison. How ironic that the Apostle Paul’s trial was for atheism, because he refused to worship Nero, and for cannibalism, because he celebrated the Lord’s Supper! (This is my body, this is my blood.) And within months of this letter, out on the Austian Way, N and W of Rome, Paul was beheaded. So here we are. This trial he’s facing is not much more than a kangaroo court. But Paul’s excited for the trial: It’s one final opportunity to explain Jesus Christ to some who may not have heard yet. Yet it’s not easy. Paul was friends with Timothy and his mother and grandma.

Paul knew how close they were—mentor and sidekick. They’d been in tight places together. They knew they could count on each other. Then those haunting words “Come before winter...he doesn’t have to say “I may not be here when spring comes.”

Paul asks for Timothy, and for his cloak, and his books. When YOU’RE afraid, or desperate, or lonely, where do you turn? Where do you look to bring meaning and joy and hope to your life? That everything will ultimately be alright? For Paul, it was the Scriptures. “Please come before winter.”

2 questions:

1. Who do you want to be there when it’s time for you to die? Who do you love in the way that Paul loved Timothy? Who have you passed on the faith to?
2. What are you telling these people? If you’re like a lot of us, not much of anything. You’re doing a few things together. You’re sharing a project or two. When you send an email, it’s often a “forward” of some cool joke or game. But think about those you call your friends in Jesus Christ. Do they know how you feel about them? Do they know how you feel about Jesus? Isn’t the purpose of this life to pass on the faith that we have to friends and family with whom you share the road?

Time is Precious: For Friendship. In Paul’s case, it was before winter, or never! You have a choice today to reach out and form friendships. You have a choice to love them and to be loved. To help one another grow. To tell others about Jesus.

Time Is Precious: For Christ! The Holy Spirit invites people to come to Christ, but never “tomorrow”; always “Today.” *Matthew 6:34* “*Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*” Nowhere does it say “Believe in Christ tomorrow” or “Repent and be saved tomorrow.”. It always says “*Today is the day of your salvation*” 2 Cor. 6:2. “*Encourage one another daily while it is still called today, lest your hearts be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*” (Heb. 3:13).

Jesus always calls today...because tomorrow the disposition of your heart may change. Satan wants you to wait. If you wait, he can show you 1000 reasons for not repenting. Your heart is ready to receive Christ today. Don’t let your heart be hardened by winter. How many of us just stay where we are, looking for our cloaks, getting “busy” rather than setting out on the journey.

Time Is Precious: For You!

Winter isn’t just the season of nature we know will follow fall. Winter is also a season of life, a season of the soul, when life may be cold, barren, and bleak.

You fight against it by not participating in the new norm's fear of winter, and instead stake your claim in the Kingdom of God. Start acting out your eternal life now. Satan says you must participate by carrying around all your sins and manage them. Jesus invites you to lay them down for him. Like Paul, it's our task to cry out with it, to tell others about it. Like Timothy, it's our response...to "come before winter."

Romans 8: 38 *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, {38 Or nor heavenly rulers} neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,39 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.*