Waking up to find you are his

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

We're quickly coming to the end times, at least, the end of the church year. This is the first of three end-of-the-year Sundays. This year Christ the King Sunday is November 22th, the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

Our text today comes again from 1 Thessalonians, the earliest of Paul's letters. It was written about 50-51 A.D., shortly after he had become a Christian and only twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is important to realize that in those twenty years some Christians had died. Those who were still alive couldn't quite understand this. After all, there was the resurrection and then the Lord was coming again, wasn't he? That's what they had been told, what they expected.

In fact, even Paul thought the end was coming in his lifetime. He was convinced of it. We can see his thinking in his letters.

But when it didn't happen as they expected, the Christians started speculating and wondering about all this. How will it happen?

When Jesus comes, will those who are still alive see him first? And then those who have died, will they then be raised? Who will be first? How will it happen?

Paul writes: "No, it's not going to happen like that." He says: "We who are alive shall not precede those who have fallen asleep" (I Thess 4:15). Rather, first the dead in Christ will arise and then second, we who are alive who are left, shall be caught up together with them "so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (I Thess 4:17-18).

We "who are left" behind. That's an end-time phrase, being left behind. You may have read or heard about the *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye. They sold millions of copies.

When Paul talks about where people go or are after death, he says that people are asleep until the final judgment. Then he pivots to saying: "But."

His point is really important as we come to the end of the church year. He writes: But as to the time or the seasons, we don't know. It's like the thief in the night. You don't know when he's coming. If you did, you'd make sure the doors are locked and the security lights are on. You'd be prepared, in the know.

That's a clue as to why books like the *Left Behind* series are popular. They dangle before people the idea that we can figure this out. We can see and know what God is up to and how it works.

But Paul reminds us that the end comes like the thief in the night. It is not only Paul who says this. In the New Testament there are five places (Matt 24:43, 1 Thess 5:2, 2 Peter 3:10, Rev 3:3, 16:15) where this same image of a thief in the night is used. And what's the point about the thief in the night? If you knew the thief was coming, you would be ready. But how can you be? It's both hidden and a surprise.

And it's like the ten maidens who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Some took enough oil and others didn't (Matthew 25:1-13). Some were prepared with extra oil which was good because the bridegroom was delayed, and others weren't.

Paul also says one day there is peace and security, then suddenly war and chaos. Or it's like a mother-to-be who goes into labor early and there's danger for her pre-born child.

Or it's like walking along and then suddenly being caught in a snare, a hidden trap, as it says in Luke 21:34: "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you like a snare." It catches you off guard.

There is no warning, and all of sudden, everything changes. If you have ever been robbed, you know how awful that feels. It happened unexpectedly, and there wasn't anything you could do about it.

Or you're driving a car when all of a sudden someone hits you. Your world is turned upside down.

The end is like that. Mark 13:32 says: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

What do we say to this? Many people think: I'm going to live one world at a time. I'll deal with the next world, the next life, when it comes. For today, I can put that off.

And what about plea bargaining? When the end comes. can we plea bargain with God? Can we say: "Lord, I wasn't fully informed. It was my parents' fault. It was the pastor's fault. None of them did right by me, and as a consequence, I didn't realize what's at stake. In any case, I'm a good person now, certainly not as bad as you know who. Surely, we can work this out."

But the text says: Like a thief in the night, wrath is coming. The wrath is, of course, the Lord's judgment against sin and evil. They have no place in his kingdom to come. Holiness cannot abide sin and evil.

Then what about us? Are we ready enough? Do we believe correctly? Have we done enough good? These are the wrong questions.

Paul then has this striking statement (paraphrase): "But we belong to him."

He says: We have been destined, we have been predestined, we have been chosen. It doesn't depend on us. It doesn't depend on all these false religions we cook up about whether we're good enough or think rightly. Rather, it's because he has made us his own.

Then Paul talks about darkness and light, about being asleep and waking up. He writes (paraphrase): "We're not of the night or of darkness, we're sons and daughters of the light and of the day. We're not sleeping; we're awake."

It's like a comment made by a famous Lutheran, Gerhard Forde, a seminary professor, who died about 20 years ago (2005). Someone once asked him about sanctification, that's a fancy word for the Christian life. The question was: What's the relationship between sanctification and justification? Between the Christian life and the cross. Forde always had a kind of poker face. He paused for a moment and then said: "Well, sanctification is waking up to the fact of justification."

That's like Paul in our text. Waking up to the fact that you belong to him.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:12: "Not that I have already obtained this [the resurrection from the dead] or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

That's what we're about: Waking up to the fact that we are his. He has a plan for you. Your life is going somewhere. And despite all appearances to the contrary, he is Lord and his kingdom is forever. You can rest in him, count on him.

What happens to all the others? We don't know. We really don't know. But that's the Lord's problem, not ours. And it's not up to us to answer that or solve that. We let God be God. Thank goodness he is in charge and not us.

As for ourselves, we stand with Paul: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Romans 14:8-9).

He is Christ the King, and we are his. Amen