



Come Before Winter

TEXT
2 Timothy 4:9–22

June 5, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In 1905, Rev. Clarence McCartney preached a sermon titled “Come Before Winter.” He preached it again the next year ... and the year after that. He actually preached the sermon every year for 40 years. Some words we need to hear again and again.

I confess that this is not an easy text for me to read. This moment in scripture is unique and so intimate it is almost impossible to hear without feeling that we have invaded a conversation that is not ours to know. Paul writes from prison, “Do your best to come before winter.” This doesn’t read like Paul’s other letters that he writes to congregations in Philippi or Corinth or Galatia. This feels like we are reading Paul’s diary. So why do you think the church kept this?

Paul is the super apostle, a giant of the early church. Without him, we Gentiles might not know anything about Jesus. But once he became a Christian, his life was never easy. He was harassed by the Romans. He was judged by Jewish leaders. He experienced hardship after hardship: shipwreck, persecution, imprisoned more than once. But Paul never

wavered. He stood tall. He had unshakable confidence in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Yet, in this letter to Timothy, we see not the unshakable hero of the faith, but we see Paul’s need. *Do your best to come to me. I need to see you now.*

The time of my departure has come, he writes. I don’t think I will survive another winter in this prison. Bring my cloak. It’s cold in this cell. And bring the books. He is probably speaking of the Old Testament — the Bible of his day. Maybe he wanted to read again about Daniel in the lion’s den.

Maybe Paul wanted to read again about Moses leading the slaves out of Egypt.

Maybe he would draw strength from the story of Samson or find comfort in the suffering of Jeremiah. God’s prophets were never immune to suffering. When we are suffering, it helps to know we are not alone.

Maybe he needed the psalms to sing through the long and cold nights of prison. *Bring my books, he writes. But above all, bring me the parchments.* Parchments were probably Christian writings; words of Jesus; stories of his ministry.

Maybe Paul wanted to read again about John the Baptist. John knew what prison was like. Maybe he wanted to read about Jesus in those last hours and his lonely walk to the cross. Jesus knew what it was like to be abandoned.

But even more than the books, even more than the cloak, do your best to come before winter. I need to see you one last time.

You can hear the heartbreak: “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me. ... Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.”

Do your best to come before winter. The apostle needs a pastor now.

So why did the church keep this letter? Here is what I think. The church kept this letter that we might be wise about time. What is being lifted up is the truth that there are moments that come and go. And with some moments, once they pass, we don’t get them back.

Timothy was busy. He was a pastor. There were things to do, people to serve. He has meetings to attend and folks to visit and sermons to write. So did he drop all of that? It’s hard to just drop everything just because you get a letter.

Or did he look at the calendar and realize he had some things he needed to get done? He would go as soon as some time opened up on his calendar. The leaves were turning, but winter was still a ways off.

We do that sometimes. We postpone important things because we are captive of urgent things. But when we do, sometimes the weather can catch us by surprise.

Timothy rushes down to the harbor, but the ice has set in — no more boats until spring. *Come back in the spring*, they tell him.

All winter long, Timothy prays that Paul is OK — that he's not cold without his cloak; that his mind isn't going crazy without his books and parchments. He catches the first boat in spring. He goes to the church. *Why, you're Timothy? My, how Paul loved you. He spoke of you every day. He died during the winter; you know. He would be so pleased to know you came.*

I hope it didn't happen like that. Time matters. I worry about our society, which has lost control of time. There are moments that, once they pass, we don't get them back.

One day I walked into the kitchen, and there was a birthday card on the table. I said, "What's this?" A friend in church had mailed a birthday card. "What's this?" I asked.

Carol said, "A birthday card."

"For who?" As soon as I said that, I knew I was in trouble. It was Carol's birthday, and

there was no covering up that I had completely forgotten. My face betrayed the truth. It cost me a dining room table.

There are moments that can't be postponed.

I am reading with bewilderment about the standoff between the Supreme Court and the Kansas legislature over funding education in the state. The court has said, "Fix it by the end of this month, or schools could be closed down." Can you imagine that? The legislature has said the courts don't have the power to close down the schools.

It seems to me nothing less than an abdication of responsibility to gamble with our kids like this. These young years matter. Their education matters. This community has historically been a gem, and one reason is that we have valued education. It is getting increasingly difficult to tell what we value these days. But we can't just postpone doing right by the children.

There are moments that come, and once they do, you don't get them back.

On a global scale, scientists are suggesting that the window is closing on climate change. So when do we get serious about it? After we have run out of fossil fuels? After cities like New Orleans and Miami are under water? Maybe we will develop a way to pull the carbon out of the atmosphere so that all of this is much ado about nothing. But to assume such things could find us realizing the ship has sailed, and

we live on a different planet than we have heretofore.

That's why the church kept this letter: because Christian faith is wise about time.

There are days that come and go; and they bring opportunities that, once missed, we can't get back easily.

I had a meeting to go to. I don't remember what the meeting was about, but meetings are pretty much my life. I like them, for the most part, because I have learned that when people who care about something come together, good things happen. My daughter Sarah was in a choir performance, and she had a solo. It was one of her first solos. I told her I would come from the meeting to hear her sing.

But the meeting went longer than expected. I arrived at the school just as they began the song after her solo. I missed it.

I was like the guy Harry Chapin sang about in that old song *The Cat's in the Cradle*. Do you remember it?

My child arrived just the other day; he came to the world in the usual way. But there were planes to catch and bills to pay; he learned to walk while I was away.

I don't want to be that guy.

Paul asked Timothy to come. It's not easy to do because we don't want to be a burden. We don't want to impose on others. I am so conflicted about that that I don't even like to ask the folks in Home Depot where the garden hoses are.

But Paul asked — because more than anything, he needed Timothy, his pastor, his son in the faith, his friend.

So Timothy drops everything. He clears the calendar. He goes to the harbor. He catches the first boat to Rome. *Paul, I'm here. It's going to be all right now, I'm here.*

I hope that's what happened. But the church kept this letter — not to speculate on what Timothy did. The church kept this letter, and returns to this letter, because Christian faith is wise about time. We know that too often winter comes, and we missed what we should have been about.

So I want you to take a moment and think about who might need you. Real friendships require time. They require attention. Is there someone in your life that you need to call or visit or write a letter to and say those things that you should say?

Don't push that down the road. Be wise about time.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.