

After church today we're having our Mission Fair and I hope everyone will stay for some barbecue and take the opportunity to visit our mission partners for conversation about our Missions and Ministry. We will also be hearing and discussing the T2.0 report that was developed from interviews that the guiding team has done over the last several months. Now, if you were not interviewed and wanted to be, the Guiding Team apologises; the Guiding Team had a long list of people to interview and wanted to get a good cross section of people. But there were time constraints as well as a limited number of people helping with the interviews, so they weren't able to get to everyone they wanted to. Ideally the guiding team would have liked to interview everyone, but even in a congregation of our size that would be difficult. So please don't be offended if you weren't interviewed—there are still plenty of ways you can be a part of T 2.0 and have your voice heard! And I hope that everyone will come and take part in our event today.

Our first reading today came from the second letter to the church at Thessalonica, a church that faced persecution but, unlike some other congregations in the beginning years of Christianity, was not racked with controversy and conflict. The first letter to this congregation was written by Paul to comfort and encourage them in their persecution; this second letter is a follow-up to further offer support. There is some evidence that this letter wasn't written by Paul, but is written in the style of Paul, perhaps at his direction or by someone writing on his behalf. This wasn't too unusual during that time and isn't too significant, but is interesting to make note of.

Many people don't like Paul because he tends to have a reputation for being harsh and stern, but this is Paul at his pastoral best. He opens with a fairly standard greeting formula, offering the grace and peace of God and Christ to the church in Thessalonica, and then gives thanks to God for their growing faith, giving weight and seriousness to the letter. The last verses from our reading, the last two verses of chapter 1, offer prayers to the Thessalonians for God to make them worthy of God's call and able to do the work God was calling them to, in order to glorify Christ. All of these verses taken together create a sense of care and reassurance from Paul to the Thessalonians in their time of need.

In between these sets of verses, however, the fiery Paul appears. And the words, which are not included in the lectionary selection, may be hard for us to hear. Let's listen:

⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. ⁶For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his

might, ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

So, wow! We aren't too used to hearing language like this about the judgement of God, even against our enemies or those who are acting with injustice or persecution against us. And when we do hear it we tend to dismiss it; for example, Pat Robertson often ascribes natural disasters with God's judgment, as he did after hurricane Katrina. But I think this isn't really the same thing: Paul isn't blaming the Thessalonians' behavior for the trouble they're having; indeed, he is saying that their endurance in the face of the torment and harassment they were suffering is evidence of God's righteous judgment. Not judgment against the Thessalonians but judgment against those who were persecuting them. Paul predicts that God will repay those who were mistreating the Thessalonians with mistreatment by sending down his fiery angels, bringing vengeance and punishment to those who are outside the faith.

Our God is a God of love. But that doesn't exempt God from being a God of justice. What we have to do, though, is unpack what that means for us today.

First of all, we have to realize that our situation as Christians in post-modern America isn't the same as the situation of the Thessalonians (or other early Christian churches, or even churches in other parts of the world today for that matter.) There are those who want to believe that the Christian church in America today is persecuted, but really, we're not. We don't face arrest for practicing our faith; we don't face a punishment of death for practicing our faith—both things that could happen to people in the early church and both of which can happen today in places like China.

So when Paul writes about God using the persecution of the Thessalonians to make them worthy, and that God would send down fiery angels, they probably found real comfort in those words and ideas. It helps to know that at that time the return of Christ was seen as imminent and that their endurance something to endure until Christ would return.

The Christian faith in America doesn't face the same kind of trouble that the early church did; in fact, if we face anything it's apathy. We certainly don't face the same expectation of Jesus returning at any moment with fiery angels (even though we are taught that and look to that as a "sometime in the future happening.)

But still, we need to know that God is for us in our efforts, our challenges as we seek to do ministry in our context in our time.

Whether we believe that Jesus will return with fiery angels to rain vengeance on those who are apathetic about our church, we need to remember that we don't get to decide who the true believers

are. But we can know that as long as we are working to bring glory to God, God is with us; as long as we act with God's justice, as long as we share God's kindness and as long as we walk with God then God will surely be with us.

Today at the mission fair we can see how we as a church are doing kindness and justice through our mission efforts. In worship each week we and at our Bible study opportunities and our private prayer times we see how we walk with God. I look forward to you being able to read the report from our listening interviews because it is a very positive look at who we are as a congregation. God is surely with us at Community of Faith in all of these things.

But we know that all is not well in the larger church today. And for us as a congregation, well, here is the thing. We have issues that aren't going away: some that really have nothing to do with the way we are as church -societal things, changes in the way people regard church. The "spiritual but not religious" trend. We may not be persecuted, but we're often ignored—which can be worse.

We also have issues that we will have to face as time goes on: an aging building, an aging congregation, diminished financial resources, diminished energy. And I'm mentioning this now because as we move through this Transformation process I want us to also be open and honest with each other about who we are and what our situation is. Because Transformation isn't just a new way to get people in the doors, in the seats, bolstering our budget. Transformation is about changing the culture of the congregation from an "if you build it, they will come" to a "we need to be going out, meeting people where they are." And it's hard to say what that will mean, especially in the long term—except that I hope it will mean that we will be growing in faith and endurance of the issues that we do have before us.

And the other thing I know? God is with us in this. Always. Amen.