

Come before winter!

II Timothy 4:9 – 22

According to tradition, this letter (the second in a series) was written by the Apostle Paul while he was in jail. He had lost his second appeal to the high court in Rome, where he was imprisoned. Word has reached him that his execution for proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ is very near. He writes, “*For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*” Paul’s young friend and colleague, Timothy, is in Ephesus, a port city located on the Aegean coast of modern day Turkey. Hundreds of miles separate the mature apostle and the young man. No straight line between them – only a treacherous journey around the rocky coast of the Greek peninsula, out into the Ionian Sea before heading in the hazardous open waters of the Mediterranean.

As winter approaches us, come with me into the closing words of Paul to Timothy. Come into these verses to hear the urgent words of a man who knows that he is living his last winter.

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus.

When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.

So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. Erastus remained in Corinth; Trophimus I left ill in Miletus.

Do your best to come before winter. Eubulus sends greetings to you, as do Pudens and Linus and Claudia and all the brothers and sisters. The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.

In his last letter, Paul records the details of his present and lonely circumstances. “Demas has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica, Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.” The cry for human companionship is everywhere in this little letter. More than 20 people are mentioned by name – most of them friends but not all. Beware of coppersmiths named Alexander wandering around the neighborhood! How poignant, how real that in the waning days of life, this spiritual giant remembers and calls out the names of those he loves. Their faces become clearer and dearer: Priscilla! Aquila! Erastus! Onesiphorous! How human that, as the grains of sand pour out the fading hours

of his days, Paul asks for very specific things: his cloak, some books, and especially “the parchments.”

Recalling the names of friend and foe, Paul’s mind is on the past. Paul’s thoughts are on the future in asking for clothing to protect him from the coming cold and for books to feed his spirit. Suddenly, he interrupts his writing, remembering the sole purpose of his effort to pen his urgent message to Timothy once again. This time with more preciseness, with greater stress - **“Do your best to come before winter!”** The exigency of Paul’s request is understandable when translated along these lines: “Look! I’m asking you to do whatever it takes on your part, the best you have to give, no holding back. There’s not a minute to waste. The time is now!”

Why before winter? That’s not difficult for us in Western New York to understand. Any real estate agent or home builder, the gardeners among us, know there is a limited window of time for certain tasks. Once winter comes, the work becomes harder, or even impossible. If not completed before winter, certain things are postponed. And with any postponement, there come other challenges to time and energy. Since I grew up in Central Florida, I had no idea what demands this season makes upon you. My first Thanksgiving here gave me a great lesson.

That holiday weekend, I visited a seminary classmate of mine living in Sacketts Bay, up past Watertown. Deb was new to the area, and she wanted to do some exploring of her new surroundings. In good spirits, we decided to take the scenic route to Kingston, Canada. We headed to the ferry crossing, the shortest route to our destination (we were getting hungry!). Down the lonely road to the crossing, we finally reached the dock only to read, “CLOSED FOR THE WINTER.” We turned around, headed back and then up to the bridge crossing into Kingston – about a 45 minute drive. Turning back was merely a hassle for us, our tummies rumbling a little louder. Just a bother, that’s all, an inconvenience - certainly not the end of our adventure.

But for Timothy reading such CLOSED FOR THE WINTER at the boat launch in Ephesus meant a delay of some six (6) months. No alternative route, no bridge to cross. No direct, non-stop flight from Ephesus International to Leonardo DaVinci Airport. Once winter came, all sea travel stopped, and would not reopen until spring the following year.

Imagine some delay that kept Timothy from leaving on time to make the connection with a ship headed to Rome. Standing on the shore, the last ship sailing before winter sinking slowly from his sight; the vast, open seas carrying him to his beloved mentor and teacher suddenly becomes a slammed, locked door. Imagine the sea door opens again in the spring, and Timothy boards for Rome. He makes his way up the Appian Way, finally reaching the Imperial City. Imagine Timothy inquiring of fellow Christians about his friend Paul only to hear, “The Apostle is dead. He was executed last winter.”

“Come before winter,” Paul urgently writes. Winter always comes. And in that constancy we are assured of God’s good order and providence that the seasons come in their turn, one rightly following the other. But these words from Paul tell us that there is only this winter, this day. Doors slam shut and windows do not open in their place. It is a glib response in the face of finality, disappointment, of tragedy to say, “God never closes a door that God doesn’t open a window.” It’s a sweet line from a wonderful musical but it denies the reality of human finitude, of death, of sin. Say that to the wife of a man who falls 30 feet to his death in an industrial accident. Whisper that line at a party when another business in town declares bankruptcy. Think that same line about the suicide

bombing of a wedding party in Amman, Jordan. Such a statement denies the reality of our human condition and makes a mockery of Christian hope that comes in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Is it morbid to say that winter comes? That life comes to an end? That time is open now which, come next year, will have closed forever? Is it morose to say voices are speaking to you this day, which next November will be silent forever? It may be difficult to hear but it is not morbid. How well many of you know this. Hear again, in Paul's plea for Timothy to "come before winter," God's gracious words to respond to each of us to live in this moment, in the power of now. Before winter, are there words of love still left unspoken? Words of forgiveness never voiced? Is there a husband or wife here this morning who needs to say the hard words, "I forgive you," or speak the even harder words, "Forgive me, please." Is there a child here, regardless their age, who has yet to tell a parent or grandparent, a teacher or older friend, "Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself." Is there no parent here who has not yet told their child, "I am so proud of you." Perhaps there is a neighbor, a business partner, a committee member or officer, who have not completely honored their word in their commitments?

Are there actions not taken out of fear of looking weak or vulnerable? And whose life today would be better off if some radical transformation were to take place within us? Some mending done to our character, some direction if not changed may undo us? What those areas may be in your life, you know full well, as I know mine: habits that are weakening the fabric of your soul? Less than noble behaviors which are destroying the best you know and the best you want to be? Routines that seem so inconsequential at first but over time bring disorder to our lives and to those around us?

In every life, in the life of every congregation, there comes a moment to decide, a season to choose life: who to be, how to act. On the eve of entering the land which God had promised, Moses recalls to the newly-formed nation of Israel who God was, how God had acted and still was acting on their behalf. And then Moses asks the people to make a decision – for themselves and on behalf of their children and their community. In the last days of his life, Paul reminds Timothy to stand strong in the faith which he has been given, then urges him to "come before winter," to act now. In this season of stewardship, we recall God's way of being with us, God's choosing us, God with us and for us. And then we are asked to act. In this season, we ask, "Who am I? Who are we?" Who will I be and how will I act as a player in the Eternal Now of God's life? are each asked to in this hour – in this moment – God speaks to us, calls to us to act with courage, with diligence, with integrity for there is only now.

Now, before winter, take your pride and place it at our Lord's pierced feet. Now, before winter, put your fears and anxiety into his wounded hands. **Now**, before winter, do that which in your higher moments your soul has urged you to do. Beloved, that noble impulse comes from God. Before winter, live into the Eternal **NOW** of God whom we call the Christ. It is He who speaks to you today, saying, "Come follow me. Come, before winter."