

Come Before Winter!

Text: II Timothy 4: 9-13

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Imagine a quiet pond on an autumn morning. And then conjure a tiny stone being tossed gently toward the surface of the water. It quickly makes its mark with a splash, and in a near instant, ripples begin to rise and reach from the center.

Just as simply, I want to toss the truth of our scripture lesson upon the quiet waters of your soul today. Surely, not all of the words in those thirteen verses (the splash would be too large!) but a single sentence of seven of Paul's words: *Do your best to come before winter.*

But, before I toss the stone, consider some context.¹ Scripture always makes more sense when we have some idea about what was being said, and by whom, and to whom.

So here it is. Paul and Timothy were soul friends ó bonded together in the deepest of ways. Theirs was a kinship forged on the grounds of faith as they tended the birthing of the early church. In fact, Paul was fond of calling Timothy õmy son in the faithö, which surely fit because Paul was every bit a generation older than his younger companion.

Paul was in a Roman prison as he wrote. He was discouraged some, worn down by the large tasks of bearing witness to the Good News. More to the point, he was feeling his age. He knew that his days were quickly fading and within a few months he would die. As such, and understandably, he desperately wanted his young protégé to come from Ephesus for one last visit. And time was of the essence because winter was coming and the storms on the Mediterranean Sea would soon prevent navigation until spring.

And so he wrote: My dear Timothy, *Do your best to come before winter!* The careful ear hears a plea of urgency! Because Paul knew, as we all do, that sometimes, waiting and planning for an eventual tomorrow is not the right thing to do. Sometimes, procrastination, putting off, is the thief of time. Some things demand the present moment and not the distant one, and some circumstances shout with the phrase, õdo it now!ö

So, that's the stone and here's the toss now to the quiet of your soul. Watch the stone climb and drop . . . those words and their urgent code . . . see the splash . . . and count a few ripples as they rise.

Come before winter! And let's start with something near and dear to us. Something we all can quickly understand. It's absolutely true about the precious energy we call love. Because time goes by so very quickly as life makes its way. And human-merely-beings as we are, we don't always take the time to express as fully as we might its depths and its power. Sometimes we just assume that even those near and dear know that we love them!

A generation ago, my mentor in ministry, Tuck Gilbert, wrote these words after his 20-year-old son died from Cystic Fibrosis.² “Over and over in life we think the loving thought, we feel the loving feeling . . . and then . . . we keep it to ourselves. We always trust that there will be a better time.” We did not do that with Mark. We knew his days were quickly passing. We savored his hours as long as we could. We had the gift of time, and we seized that gift while he was here, and life was more precious because of it. “That was the gift. And the lesson to be learned: don’t wait to love.”

My dear Timothy, please do your best to come before winter! Don’t wait till spring. It may well then be too late. Some things are better spent, meant to be expressed, die when they are tucked away or kept for some illusive tomorrow.

Or, consider the wisdom of Paul when it comes to the brokenness in relationships. Honestly, humbly, truthfully, it can happen to any of us. Something is said or not said ó and probably in equal measure. Distance grows. Misunderstandings magnify in the silence that grows deeper and darker.

I have been thinning some files of late and found this Ann Landers advice from a *Boston Globe* clipping in 1984!³ “Dear Ann Landers, I sat in church with my family this morning. The only thing that was wrong is we no longer sit together. Behind me by two rows sat my father. Five rows back on the other side were his brothers and a sister. My own sister sat down front. We came in separately. We left separately. We did not say a thing. None of us talk together anymore. We don’t even look at one another. Whatever has grown up between us happened over my brother’s death, but that’s never talked about either. Can you help us be a family again? Signed, Broken in Saginaw.”

“Dear Broken in Saginaw, How often I hear different versions of your story! Unfortunately there is no way to turn back the clock. But there is still a choice and hope for healing. The only way forward is to seize the moment to patch up old quarrels and wounds now. The sooner the better. It won’t be easy. But the longer they linger, the more poisonous they become.”

My dear Timothy. Do your best! Come before winter! Springtime will be too late!

Or, throw it wider, this truth of winter’s waiting. Paul’s urgent plea also echoes with the Gospel’s call for action when it comes to the needs and hurts of our world. In the phrase of our Jewish neighbors, “tikkun olam”⁴ ó the urgency of repairing of the earth simply cannot wait.

Thursday morning, I attended the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast in Hartford. The theme was “Praying for Safer Streets.” A panel of two, Hartford’s chief of police, James Rovella, and one of the foremost activists in the city, the Rev. Henry Brown, were moderated by journalist Susan Campbell. It was good to be there with new and old friends.

I was particularly moved by the Rev. Brown and, among his words: “We need to give hope back where it is lacking. It cannot wait. Look at yourself. Then look as some

family not so fortunate as you have been. And then do something. Get involved, somehow. We are in this together.ö

Martin Luther King⁵ reminded us that tomorrow is today when it comes to the measures of human need. He implored us with the truth that there is such a thing as being too late. And he said, somewhere along his way, öWe may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.ö We are up against these issues together.

My dear Timothy! Do your best! Come before winter! Love should not wait. Brokenness need not tarry. Justice is for now if it is for anytime. And the plea is to all of us.

I leave you with this. A pastor by the name of Clarence E. Macartney⁶ once preached a sermon by this same title on this pleading phrase of Paul. The response was so overwhelming that he preached it every single year for forty years, and to the same congregation ö and no one complained that he was repeating himself!

Among his words are these: öSo . . . come before winter! Come before the haze of Indian summer has faded into the fields. Come before the November wind strips the leaves from the trees entirely and sends them whirling over the fields. Come before snow flies in the uplands and the meadow brook is turned to ice. Come before the heart is cold. Come before desire has failed. Come before life is over and you stand before God to give account of the use you have made of your days.ö

Whatever you do, come before winter! Amen.

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¹ Leander Keck, ed. The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XI. Abington Press, 2000, pp. 854-860. See also: Thomas Oden. Interpretation: First and Second Timothy. John Knox Press, 1989, pp. 183-184.

² Chandler W. Gilbert. öThe Treasures of Darknessö au unpublished sermon preached at Trinitarian Congregational Church, October 1981.

³ Ann Landers, Boston Globe, 1994.

⁴ For more on the Jewish understanding of tikkum olum see: Wikipedia, 2013.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King. Harper One, 2003.

⁶ Arnold Kurtz. öCome Before Winter: A Sermon with a Historyö in Ministry: International Journal for Pastors. September 1976. Also see: Come Before Winter as an internet search.

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