

## *Across the Miles*

### *1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

Mary Hinkle Shore

The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Brevard, North Carolina

Do you know the experience of missing someone? You know, like *really* missing someone, missing them so much that you could actually feel an ache at your core? Feeling another's absence this way is a mixture of longing and grief and impatience and the feeling of being bereft. Whoever you are missing, you love them, and while there may be a thousand good reasons why you are in one place and they are in another, you still ache to see them.

Years ago, when telephones had cords coming out of them, cords that eventually connected to wires on poles alongside roads that transmitted sound from one place to another, when you missed someone like this and the two of you were talking on the phone, you would sometimes say or hear, "I wish I could crawl through the telephone line to get to you!" Hearing the voice of the loved one, disembodied as it was, made things better and worse at the same time. It connected you to each other, and it highlighted the physical distance between you. You could hear them: "You sound like you're in the next room," you or they might marvel into the phone. But still, you were apart, aching. You longed to see them, to wrap them up in a hug, to hold on tight. In my experience Skype and FaceTime do not solve this problem. We marvel at the technology and still we are left with nothing warmer than a laptop to wrap our arms around.

With neither telephone nor laptop, Paul dictates a letter to the Thessalonians. He longs to see them. He writes two thanksgivings for them at the beginning of the letter—as if one paragraph of thanks is just not enough to speak his gratitude. Paul has been separated from them, and even though he has tried again and again to visit, his efforts to go to them have been thwarted, he says, by Satan (cf. 1 Thess. 2:18)! As he is telling them all this, he says, "For who is our hope or joy or crown to boast of before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not of course you? For you are our glory and joy!" (2:19-20). Paul loves these people.

At the end of the letter, Paul leaves his friends with nine verses of commands. "Rejoice... , pray... , give thanks.... Do not quench the Spirit...." If you don't have much use for the apostle Paul, you may hear these instructions and think, "Paul was so controlling! Always with the 'Do this' and 'Don't do that.'" But to read the letter that way is to misunderstand it.

When I was a seminary student, the school I attended was about a 14-hour drive from my parents' home. The trip included driving around Chicago, and in winter, it often included driving in bad weather. In spite of the fact that I drove the route regularly without incident, my mom never quite trusted that I would get from Minnesota to Ohio in one piece. At least that was the way I experienced her anxious imperatives over the phone: "Stay safe: take your time. Just get off the road if you run into bad weather." I would hear a speech like that with all of its instructions and reply with as much impatience in my voice as a daughter can produce, "*Mother*, I'm not sixteen anymore. I'm in my *twenties*! I've driven in snow for years. Everything will be fine."

I am now the age my mom was when she was giving advice over the telephone, and I wish I could thwack my younger self on the side of her head. “She loves you, you silly girl,” I would say. “She is not saying she doesn’t trust you. She is saying she loves you.”

Likewise the instructions that Paul leaves with the Thessalonians. He loves them. My mom knew I was driving home in a world with drunk drivers and ice storms. Paul knows that his friends have just recently “turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for God’s Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead...” (1 Thess 1:9f). They may be living at the turn of the ages, but idols are in their recent past, and suffering and grief are still their daily companions. Their new life includes alienation and even persecution from people they used to be close to, and even as they look for the return of Christ, they are troubled by continuing to lose loved ones to death.

This last bit points us to a deeper longing even than longing for a loved one from whom we are separated by time or space. Paul and the Thessalonians long to see each other, but more than that, they long for the completion of what has begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the beginning of life having the last word rather than death. The Christian’s hope is not merely for enough money or pretty good health, all things considered. We hope for *shalom*, for peace, healing, and wholeness. We hope for life, especially when all around we experience death. In the words of the psalm, we hope that “those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (Psalm 126:6). Our hope is that “the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” (Isaiah 61:11). “We look for the resurrection of the dead,” we say in the Nicene Creed, “and the life of the world to come.”

For those he loves and longs to see and who are themselves longing to see a whole new world, Paul offers encouragement for the meantime. As Paul and his friends wait, he commends to them joy, prayer, and thanksgiving, along with openness and discernment with respect to the movement of the Spirit. Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are not three items to add to your pre-Christmas to-do list. They are words for what God is up to in and among us even now. Dirk Lange has noticed that joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), prayer is work that the Spirit does on our behalf (Romans 8:15-16), and thanksgiving is the practice of the Spirit-gathered community in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>1</sup> Paul himself spoke of the Spirit as a down payment on all that God has promised in Christ Jesus (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). Discerning the Spirit and testing everything is a call to notice the future we hope for as it breaks into our present time of longing.

What does it mean to notice the future now? A friend tells the story of caroling in a rough neighborhood in Durham, North Carolina. Our church had offered a “Saturday Fun Day” for kids in Hearthside—kind of Sunday School on Saturday, with songs and lessons and snacks. Twenty kids would come for the fun day, but the congregation had not really made any deeper connections with the neighborhood. Some people from church decided Christmas caroling might help. It went about as you would expect. Strangers walking door to door were not particularly welcome in a place characterized by poverty, drug dealing, and occasional bursts of deadly violence. More people looked out through a slit in the draperies than actually opened a door to the carolers. Given this reception, my friend Paul was surprised when a woman in a

bathrobe opened the door and walked down her front steps to join the little group of singers in her driveway. They sang “Silent Night.”

Silent night, Holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright.  
Round yon virgin, mother and child,  
Holy infant so, tender and mild;  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

When they got to the words “Sleep in heavenly peace,” the woman lifted her arms and turned her hands up to heaven with tears streaming down her face. The group finished the song. She thanked them, and they walked on to another driveway.

What they did not know when they were singing was that two weeks before, the woman’s son had been shot dead in the driveway where they sang. “Holy infant, so tender and mild; sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.” There were thousands of days between one youngster’s holy infancy and his violent death in that driveway. His mother knew both events and the path between them. Her baby was gone, her longing for him ever-present. She heard in the carolers’ song the news that God’s own heavenly peace was his.

The news we share with each other in these short days is that our waiting, watching, and longing for a world made new is matched—and exceeded—by God’s own longing for the wholeness of all that God has made. The incarnation is God crawling through the telephone line to get to God’s own most beloved. The work of the Spirit is God keeping at it, healing, forgiving, embracing even now until, at the last, heavenly peace is wholly peace on earth.

#### Notes

Dirk G. Lange, “Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24,” *Working Preacher* (Dec. 11, 2011) URL: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1151](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1151), accessed 08/08/2014.