

Sermon 11/23/2025: Spokane Friends Church

Title: 'In Spite of it All'

Scripture: I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Statue of Octavian Augustus: <https://www.amth.gr/en/exhibitions/exhibit-of-the-month/1706#:~:text=The%20Archaeological%20Museum%20of%20Thessaloniki%20has%20the,the%20prestige%20and%20superiority%20of%20classical%20artworks.>

The beauty of fall color comes from loss. With the changes in the length of days and cooler temperatures, trees stop producing chlorophyll – the pigment responsible for photosynthesis. This breakdown reveals the yellow and orange pigments that were always there, masked by the green. Imagine that! One source told me that in some trees, “new pigments called anthocyanins form in the fall, creating brilliant reds and purples when sugars get trapped in the leaves.” Isn’t it strange and wonderful to think that those leaves, as they lose their spring and summer green have sugars – sweetness - trapped in their fall-colors? The orange, gold, red and brown trees are wrapped in sugar! And oh, how beautiful are the natural colors of the leaves! The green is lost, but what a rich panoply of color is found.

We are sometimes surprised by how quickly things change. Sometimes we labor with persistent problems that never seem to end. Frustration and loss come. Life is difficult. But when I consider the small and wondrous things that sometimes come in spite of it all, I find reasons to rejoice. I try to look toward the greening of my life that is yet to come. It hasn’t been and isn’t easy. In fact, it takes work. But... it can be done.

Paul writes to his beloved church in Thessalonica and ends his first letter in part saying this: “Be at peace among yourselves. And we (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) urge you to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” [I Thessalonians 5:13-19]

This church needed Paul’s encouragement – and Paul needed to send it. Thessalonica was the capital and most important city in Macedonia. A thousand miles from Jerusalem, it was the first place in Europe where Paul established a church. Macedonia was situated in what is now the northern part of modern Greece, and the Roman province included much of the surrounding area. The

statue of Augustus, the first Roman emperor (24 BC – AD 14), stood in the center of town, and had for quite some time. The statue showed him in the prime of his youth holding a spear, looking like a god. He was dead and gone but his Roman Empire had been established for 75 years by the time Paul's letter reached Thessalonica.

For Paul to have come there, teaching and speaking of Christ – his power and place in the lives of the Thessalonian culture – had been an obvious conflict. Paul and his companions had had to leave Thessalonica much sooner than they'd hoped because of persecution. They could not return. Paul needed the church to know how much he cared for them – he hadn't abandoned them.

It was critical that the church continue to practice their faith, holding on to hope, and Paul's entire letter to the Church at Thessalonica is one of encouragement and joy, as the church there continued to worship and live in faith in spite of Roman cruelty.

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets (prophecies), but test everything; abstain from evil, *hold fast* to what is good...” [I Thessalonians 5:20,21]

In all his writings, Paul's great hope is in Christ and his resurrection from the dead. It has always been. He waits for Christ's return but *celebrates* Christ's presence *with him* and *with us all* through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is emblematic in Paul's ministry. This is what he sees in the life of the church in Thessalonica, as we see in the beginning of Paul's letter.

[I Thessalonians 1:8-10] “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that *we* have no need to speak about it! For the people of those regions report about us what kind of *welcome* we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

Their church is living out God's presence and power, rather than waiting for the risen Christ's return. Christ has already come for them! They are “serving a living and true God”! People from other cities are talking about their faith! As my Quaker seminary prof taught me, “The Thessalonians and other Christians of Paul's day did not have *any reasonable expectation* that they could improve the world through a political or social reform movement, but their task as a

community was still relevant. They could *live out the values of God's reign already* within their community. They could then benefit from the new order even though they were still living in the midst of the old. In addition, they could serve as an example of God's reign for others." Even as they waited for Christ's return, they were serving a *living and true God! Christ had come! God's presence was with them!*

Think of it... it may have been a long, cold, windy season in Thessalonica, with dry leaves everywhere, but the Christ followers in Thessalonica discovered there was sap running in their veins. They were sugar maples, full of sugar, ready for the greening, and it was coming. The light of Christ was filling them with loving care for each other and for those around them. And once the sap starts running... Nothing could stop it.

This is just what the Quaker Way teaches us. We live now in the presence and reality of God's love and voice. We do not have to wait for the trumpet to sound, for statues or idols to be knocked down, for strong men to die. We live in the presence of God in our midst. We surround one another with the reflection of God's spirit in us. The sweetness of the sap of the Holy Spirit is *always* in us, and we *must* discipline ourselves to wait, to listen, and to watch for God's transformation... God's greening of us. But then, as we wait, we are meant to *become* the greening for others as well.

And how does this happen? How can we do this? Remember Paul's instructions? They weren't meant for one person. They were meant for each and all. For each person *and* for a community of persons.

1. Be joyful always. He DOESN'T say be joyful about *everything*. Just, be joyful... look for something!
2. Pray all the time. Quakers know that God is portable. You don't have to go to a certain place or sit, stand in a certain position to be *with* God. Take a breath, a moment, a word... start a simple conversation... aloud, if you like!
3. Give thanks – not for – but *IN* all circumstances.
4. Why? Because this is what God, living through Jesus' life and teachings, really wants *for* you. This is God's *gift*. It's a really nice, good way to live.

Try this experiment. I used to ask my parishioners – especially the ones who were really stuck – to try this:

Get a jar, with a lid. Every day, write down one thing you're thankful, or joyful about on a slip of paper. One good thing. Not two. Just one. Put it in the jar.

Close the lid. Repeat. Every day. Don't look at the papers. Bring them back to me (or a friend or a person you trust) in two weeks, 21 days, whatever time you need. Read aloud every slip of paper. See what you discover about your life. Your life may be greening, and you just haven't seen it coming. Wait... for Spring.