

# North Kildonan United Church

15<sup>th</sup> November 2020 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “Strength for the Day”

*I Thessalonians 5: 1-11*

*Matthew 25: 14-30*

*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

*“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”*

To say that we are living in strange and troubling times is no exaggeration. Of course, this is not the first time in history that people have had to endure prolonged danger, fear and dread.

Last Sunday we as a congregation joined churches around the country and the Commonwealth to remember the First World War, the Second World War, and all the other wars and conflicts down through the centuries. Wars which have taken so many lives, lives of civilians and service personnel, lives of countless animals pressed into military uses. Wars which have changed families and societies, altered and affected communities and countries. Wars which, looked back upon after the conflict has ended, now seem to be so senseless. Wars which, nevertheless, need to be remembered in the hope that our drive for peace is stronger than the urge to fight.

Every generation has had its own terrors to face, its own challenges to its health, serenity and life, and its own unique ways of meeting those challenges. In these days of Code Red and lockdown, each of us is facing the challenges of this pandemic in our own way, and it is safe to say that none of us is finding this challenge easy. This is especially true as we live through the lockdown, a clearly necessary decision by the province which we trust will help contain and control the virus.

We are people of faith and of hope, and we trust, we know that we not alone in our struggle. Each time we begin worship, we light the Christ Candle and we affirm our belief that Christ is indeed for us the light of the world, our hope and our salvation. Our belief that Christ is the one in whom we place our trust. We further affirm our belief in the words of *A New Creed*:

*“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.”*

A century ago, Annie Johnson Flint wrote a hymn that some of you will no doubt recognize. A woman of deep faith, she faced tremendous health challenges for much of her life, and because of those challenges, I suspect she had little patience with empty promises that say that God fixes everything for the faithful. So, she challenges the belief that faith leads to a problem free life.

Many people have found comfort and strength in her words and I would hope you might find the same this day.

1. *God has not promised skies always blue,  
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;  
God has not promised sun without rain,  
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*
  - *But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labour, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing kindness, undying love.*
2. *God has not promised we shall not know  
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;  
He has not told us we shall not bear  
Many a burden, many a care.*
  - *But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labour, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing kindness, undying love.*
3. *God has not promised smooth roads and wide,  
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;  
Never a mountain rocky and steep,  
Never a river turbid and deep.*
  - *But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labour, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing kindness, undying love.*

The early Church certainly knew its share of challenges and St Paul was no stranger to fear and danger. He knew imprisonment and oppression and ultimately experienced execution for his faith. But through his writings to the fledgling congregations at Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonica, St Paul encouraged these followers of Christ to see beyond their present situation and embrace the promise of God offered in the life, death and resurrection of God's son, Jesus Christ.

For those first Christians, there was a strong and lively belief that the Risen Christ would soon return to the earth, set things right, bring freedom to the captives and slaves, raise the dead from their graves, banish the powers of oppression and restore the earth to its full glory. Included in this was the belief that many who were alive in St Paul's time would live to experience this promised Second Coming of Christ.

We see this belief reflected in our reading to the Thessalonians. As we heard, the faithful, called the children of light and children of the day, would soon experience the return of Christ, the day of the Lord as Paul calls it. The Thessalonians are encouraged to remain vigilant and strong in the faith, spiritually awake and ready.

As days moved into weeks into months into years, the promised Second coming of Christ did not occur. With this realization, the Church was pushed to settle in for the long haul, to establish itself as an institution, as a community, able to meet the challenges of encouraging a faith in God not based on immediate rescue but on the continuing grace of God into the future. As the refrain of the hymn says:

*But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labour, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing kindness, undying love.*

As the years went by, and as the Church moved from being oppressed to become the State religion, the temporary meeting places in catacombs, caves and tents were in time replaced with solidly built churches, cathedrals and abbeys; worship was centred on the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion; and the Church set about developing practices and theologies to keep the faith strong and life-giving.

As we hear the lesson from I Thessalonians, we still take seriously the encouragement to trust in God, to, in Paul's words: *"put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."* And, in these painful days of isolation, we take to heart Paul's concluding words: *"Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."*

So here we are, the people of God, living in God's world, trusting in God's Word, faced with a pandemic. These have been trying months, fearful months, frustrating months, though glimmers of hope shine through to us. Hope that a vaccine will prove effective, hope that the numbers will improve in the days ahead, hope that as the mysteries of this virus become revealed, new and more effective treatments will be created.

We live with this hope, even when at times hope seems far away. Our ancestors in the faith faced similar dangers and challenges, and so too will we, trusting in God's loving presence and the support of our community of faith. We are not alone. God is with us. So too are our brothers and sisters of this congregation with us, as together we navigate our way through this pandemic.

In the meantime, we continue to wash our hands, wear our masks, express deep gratitude for the frontline workers in hospitals and care homes, hopefully treat others with kindness and understanding, and do all we can to help and comfort those who need us to reach out to them.

And pray God, the day will soon come when we can sing together: "*Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*"

God bless you and those whom you love, and may God continue to be with all of us this day and always. Amen.