

## **'A Community of Salvation'**

Talk by Ruth Rhodes at Sanctuary Service

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I'm going to start with a slightly tricky question, How much time have you got? You might be thinking, what for this sermon, about seven minutes at a push. But time is a strange concept, isn't it? A friend recently said to me, the days are long, but the years go fast. That was an interesting observation. It's funny that sometimes we can recall a key moment or even a word spoken decades ago. But if you asked me what I did last weekend, I can't tell you. And a wasted time is a bitter, bitter regret. We often think we don't have enough time, or we say things like, where did the time go? My son recently turned nine. And he said, Mum, I'm halfway through my childhood. That's returned to my first question.

How much time have you got? It's a tricky question, isn't it? But it's what is alluded to in this passage from 1 Thessalonians. How long have we all got? The day of the Lord will come as a thief comes at night. You know, for Paul's first readers, they felt the Second Coming was absolutely imminent, we get that through much of the New Testament, which is an interesting human perspective on God's timing, isn't it? But our God, who is outside of time, has his own schedule. And God's level of patience is so much beyond ours, isn't it. And so though, for us, the Second Coming remains an important reason to consider our time is limited. We might also not have felt that same urgency. And even if Jesus' return isn't scheduled for this generation, because it will be in God's timing, and not in ours, I think there's a call upon us in this passage, to live in readiness, and to have a ready understanding of the imminence of God. We know that time can be cut short in so many ways. Moments of all sorts can come upon our lives that change everything in an instant. This last week, I invited my year 7 class, I'm an English teacher, to write about a moment that changed everything. And they did. They poured out in their writing their lives and the things that have turned them upside down. We know, don't, we that normality can cease overnight. Sometimes it's global events. From a pandemic, for instance, to a Putin led invasion, to the ongoing effects of the climate crisis. For some of us, it's personal, a diagnosis, an accident, sudden news that changes everything and cuts normality horribly short. And Jesus gets it. In this passage, Paul quips about people mistakenly believing in peace and safety. This was a slogan of the Roman Empire that at this time felt so assured and stable, and which would ultimately be completely destroyed. So if we believe we have earthly security, we only ever truly have our foundations on the sand. So can we have any hope then, you know, our series is called 'Inspired by hope', where is our hope? Within God.

We're told in this passage he died for us so that we may live together with Him. And His love is unchanging, and His power to strengthen us is unailing. He is the rock beneath our feet. And we are people who belong to the day and need not fear the darkness. We're told we have salvation as a helmet of protection against the storms of this Life. And if we'll put it on, faith and love as our breastplate, protecting our heart from hardness in a sometimes brutal world. And Paul reminds us at the end of this passage that we need to encourage one another, and build one another up as a church, looking after one another. But this, I believe, isn't just a passage about us being complacent as children of the light, children of the day, children of salvation who know that we have the hope of heaven to look forward to. I think it's also an exhortation for us to remain in absolute readiness for Jesus. Now, for His Second Coming, yes, but also for his ready every day, this moment presence through His Holy Spirit.

Paul's writing here echoes Jesus. His parable of the ready servants. That's in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 12. I want to read to you a little bit of it, you'll see the similarities. It is on page 987. In the Pew Bible, if you want to look, Jesus said, be dressed, ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. I think as well as waiting for the second coming, God doesn't want complacent servants. He wants a Church of salvation, that waits expectant to hear from him, ready to go out and be his hands and feet; perceptive to his work in the world. And are we that?

Now, I draw quite a lot, when I'm talking with you, about my experience of my husband's liver transplant. But if you will forgive me this morning, I'm just going to go there again, because the parallels seem strong. When Gareth was put on the liver transplant waiting list, and that acknowledgement that he was on the list was huge, because it meant that through that surgery, his body would be saved. We were then waiting. And we were waiting for the call that would change everything. In order to be ready. We had to make changes to life. So the

first thing was that because his surgery would be in Birmingham, we were never allowed to be more than two hours from Birmingham. So that whenever the call happened, we could get back there. So holidays in Cornwall or Scotland were out of the question. In fact, if you go on holiday while on the organ transplant waiting lists, you have to inform them and they drop you off the list. So we stayed close. We had to be reachable, we had to be in phone contact all the time, so for both of us actively teaching, we had to get special permission that our phones could be on in class so that whenever the call came we could respond and as it happened the call did come when we were in school. It meant I could never be out of phone contact and the only time I realised I was, was when I would take my son Ted swimming. And then I'd say to Gareth we'll be swimming between half 11 and a half 12. If the call comes you ring the leisure centre in Bath and you get them to announce it over the tannoy and I'll get out of the pool. But it's that level of expectant waiting, listening. We had to organise life so that at the moment it happened we could just drop everything so everyday life was organised around this. All of Ted's favorite things, his nightlight at night, the thing that sang him lullabies; we bought second copies of them and kept them in a bag in the car. It's like having that bag prepared, the late stages of pregnancy, but it was like that for all of us all the time. We had my parents, who they're at the back, on standby. That if the calls in the middle of the night, they'd come and take over sleeping in our bed while we went, so that when Ted woke up in the morning, he'd find there were still people there. Everything ran, where we stayed close. We were perpetually listening out. And we were ready to go.

And as I was preparing this, I thought, actually, it's a real picture to me of how God wants me in my spiritual life. I know that when I'm close to God, when I'm faithful in my Bible reading, when I'm wholly present in my worship, when I am persistent in my prayer, I can see God at work. I perceive his voice, I sense his guiding. And when I'm not, it's eerily quiet. I don't want to live my life distant. I want to be close, to be ready, and to be available.

I want to sum up by saying, so when we face the turmoils of our lives, let us first remember our identity. We are children of the day, children of the light, and we need not fear the darkness. Let us encourage one another. And let us be ready. I want to be a good and faithful servant for however long I've got. I want to be ready for turbulence and change, that kind of change that uproots everything I know except the one and changing truth, God's love and mercy and justice. In closing, if you'll indulge me, there's two things I'd like us to do as we reflect on this. The first is would you read with me a prayer of St. Brendan, it's going to go up on the screen. I got this from this church. It's actually from a book called

when faith gets shaken by Patrick Regan. He spoke here some years ago. And I've kept this card ever since, I've found it so useful. So I just wonder if you would read with me the words of the prayer by St. Brendan. "I determine, amidst all uncertainty, always to trust. I choose to live beyond regret and let you recreate my life. I believe you will make a way for me and provide for me, if only I trust and obey. I will trust in the darkness and know that my times are still in your hand. I will believe you for my future. chapter by chapter until the entire story is written. Teach me to live with eternity in view. Tune my spirit to the music of heaven.