

Sermon – October 30, 2022

Pastor Dan Hollis

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

“Every rose has its thorn / just like every night has its dawn / just like every cowboy sings his sad, sad song / every rose has its thorn.” Ever heard that song before? 1988. I missed it by *that* much. But I’ve heard it pop up here and there my entire life—so much so that I could sing the whole chorus by heart if I *really* wanted to torture you this morning. It’s a song that seems to say, ‘every silver lining has a cloud,’ which isn’t usually how that saying goes. But remembering that “every night has its dawn,” I think that sometimes the rose is *worth* the thorns.

I think that’s part of what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are trying to say to the church in Thessalonica. They’re obviously not thanking God for the *persecutions* and the *afflictions* those people are facing... they’re thanking God for the rose that flourished amidst the thorns.

It’s not clear what *particular* trials the Thessalonian church was facing; it was still early days in the Christian story, and the Roman Empire hadn’t yet outlawed faith in Christ... but we know in those days that this upstart, countercultural, boundary-crossing religion was starting to ruffle feathers in communities across the Greco-Roman world. It was still a tremendous minority, seeking to bear fruit in the midst of a world that didn’t want it.

Today... Christianity is not so small, and it stands atop a two-thousand-year history of cultural dominance the world over. Sure, it’s lost some ground the last hundred years, but when I approach how our reading today boasts of the steadfastness and faith of the Thessalonian church during all the *persecutions* and *afflictions* it was enduring... I’m not going to be talking about any kind of modern “war on Christianity,” because I don’t believe there is one. Certainly not here in America, and certainly not like what the... tiny early church had to deal with.

But every day, congregations do face their own afflictions, and every day, *people* endure pain and persecution. That’s what rings familiar to me when I read this passage from 2nd Thessalonians. Every one of us has yearned for steadfastness and faith in the face of suffering. Too many have had to grasp desperately for the strength to hold up under the weight of oppression or hate. And we’ve all had moments in our lives when *we’re* the one who’s powerless, beset on all sides by forces too strong and too sharp to overcome alone.

And this passage, this message from a group of disciples to a tiny church in an uncaring world, seeks to encourage us—us, you and me... to comfort us where we are, and to congratulate us for how we have fared, and to remind us of one simple thing... to be steadfast in our search for the *rose* in the midst of the thorns that surround us.

“Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

We all have days when we can't feel the presence of God. When we can't see God at work. When it feels like God's Spirit has left us, whether we've pushed it *out* or something's gotten in the *way* or God just doesn't have time for us or *interest* in us. Days when we're alone. Days when we're beset on all sides by the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune. Days when we can't *see* the love and the call and the glory and the grace.

Is something *wrong* with us, we ask? Is something wrong with *God*?

No. Because the transformative power of God was never out of our reach. It's trying to work within you now, and it always *has* been, even when you couldn't feel it. It's the only reason the Thessalonians were able to *make* something worthy of praise out of themselves in the face of unending persecution. Because they grabbed onto it and made it *theirs*.

The thorns scratched them, but did not scar. It was the *rose* that marked them, not the thorns they had to wade through to reach it.

There's an old folk tale where the cunning Br'er Rabbit convinces the *angry* Br'er Fox that the *worst* thing he could do to Br'er Rabbit would be to throw him into the center of a wild mass of tearing briars and piercing thorns. What Br'er Fox didn't *realize* when he then tossed the rabbit to his fate, was that Br'er Rabbit was “bred and born in a briar patch.” Thorns are nothing to a rabbit who's been navigating them all his life.

The Gospel of John says “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.” Well... the rabbit learned to dance in the briar patch, and the fox could not touch him. The *rose* blooms amidst the thorns, and the thorns will not overcome it.

You are not your trauma. Your suffering, your loss... it's not who you are. It impacts us, it teaches us, it *changes* us to be sure... but whatever blood may drip from your hand, you are defined by the *rose* you hold, *not* by the thorns.

"We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."

What was laudable about the Thessalonians was the *kind* of faith they grew, even as it was that faith that got them *through*.

An army that wins a *war* is one that... grabs hold of its spears and thrusts them into their enemies. But you're *not* an army and you're *not* at war. You're a... rabbit in a briar patch. **As followers of Christ, what we are called to grab onto is a living faith with love at its core: a servant faith, a faith that empowers the work of Good... a faith that transforms us for the better *even* as we transform the *world* for the better. A faith that glorifies God even as it is God that glorifies us.**

We should grab onto *that* rose for dear life to *spite* the thorns digging into our palms and the pads of our fingers.

Meaning, fulfillment, wholeness, and flourishing of life are always gonna be out of our reach if we aren't throwing our whole selves into it, like... Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. Or like the church in Thessalonica.

Every life suffers its own pain. Some days that pain feels impossible to overcome. Some days it feels like drowning. **May you find faith a life preserver in the ocean. A light in the darkness. A rose blooming among thorns. And may that rose not *just* be a bright spot for *you*... may you *care* for that rose so that it grows and multiplies and fills the whole damn briar patch with color... so that the *next* person who gets thrown into it finds more roses than they can *count*.**

Every cowboy *may* sing a sad, sad song... but let's make the song *God* sings about *us* be as proud and as boastful as this letter to the Thessalonians. To that end *I* pray for *you*, asking that our God will make *you* worthy of God's call, and will fulfill through *you* every good resolve and work of faith.

Thanks be to God. Amen.