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June 24th: 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:13 & Matthew 14:1-3

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Good news from Timothy. The death of John the Baptist.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Thessalonians 2.17–3.13 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person, not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you, I Paul, again and again. But Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.

For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear

that somehow the tempter had tempted you, and our labour would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love, and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you, for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction, we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day, that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints. At the end of 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, Paul moves from discussing the Thessalonians' initial reaction to the Gospel and their relation to Paul and his fellow missionaries during their time among them.

He turns to discuss their subsequent relationship with them, and their great desire to see them again. Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica secretly by night because of the threat from the Jews and the people and authorities that were stirred up by them. However, leaving the Thessalonians was an agonising break for Paul.

They had just received Christ joyfully through the preaching of the missionaries, who were like a nursing mother with them. Being torn away from the Thessalonians was like a mother being taken away from her newborn child, and the term that Paul uses at this point could be translated orphaned. The Greek term here can be used not just to refer to children who have lost their parents, but also to parents who have had their children snatched from them.

The Thessalonians were so young in the faith, so vulnerable, that Paul and the missionaries must have felt their departure to be incredibly agonising and heart-wrenching. Paul relates the fact that he had personally attempted on numerous occasions to return to the Thessalonians, but had been thwarted on each occasion by Satan. On other occasions Paul attributes his failure to return somewhere to God's preventative activity, but here he sees the hand of Satan as being involved.

If the Thessalonians wondered whether Paul and his missionary companions had simply abandoned them, Paul wants to disabuse them of any such notion. While their absence from the Thessalonians was only for a short time, it was at such a critical period of the Thessalonians' spiritual development that it must have been of the greatest difficulty for Paul and his companions. Paul expresses his joyful confidence that the Thessalonians will prove to be their victory crown at the coming of Christ.

This moment will be a joyful union with the Thessalonians after their separation. It will

also be a sign of the overcoming of the enemy who had tried to hold them apart. And all of this provides the background for the explanation of the sending of Timothy that follows.

Timothy had been sent to the Thessalonians. Because the missionaries could not bear their separation from them any longer, they longed to shepherd them in their vulnerable young faith. Little though they could spare him, they sent Timothy their co-worker from Athens to encourage, to establish and to exhort the Thessalonian Christians.

They were especially concerned that they would be equipped to face persecution, which the missionaries had told them was coming when they first were with them. They had taught the Thessalonians that persecution was something that Christians were destined to undergo. Christian faith is by its very nature in fundamental tension with the world, so believers should expect sharp opposition and persecution.

Paul also sent Timothy so that he could be assured that they were persevering in their faith, as he was deeply worried for them, lest Satan had successfully tempted them away from Christ. Paul keenly felt Satan's opposition in the situation surrounding the Thessalonians. He recognised that they were probably experiencing satanic assaults, much as he had been hindered by Satan from going to them.

Satan presumably wanted to bring the Thessalonians into bitter testing before they were ready or prepared for it, so that they might fall away as a result. However, Timothy returned with incredibly encouraging news. The separated parties have both, through Timothy, been made aware of the others' longing to be reunited with them, and their deep affection for one another.

Timothy is likely going to be returning to the Thessalonians with this letter. Worrying about the people that you love, when you know that they are in a position of danger, and you haven't heard news from them, can be agonising. It might have been even worse had the Thessalonians believed or suspected that Paul and the missionaries had just abandoned them.

Paul's relief upon hearing the news from Timothy is palpable. They had sent Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians in their faith. Now, as the news of the Thessalonians' strong faith is brought back to them, the missionaries are encouraged by the Thessalonians' faith in turn.

Indeed, so important was this to Paul that he speaks of the missionaries' assurance of the faith of the Thessalonians as giving them life. We might think of the way that Jacob reacted to the news of the apparent death of Joseph, the way that he will go down to his grave in mourning, and then how he reacted when he heard that he was still alive. It was as if he came alive too.

As Jacob's heart was knit to that of his son Joseph, so the missionaries' hearts are knit to those of the Thessalonians. Paul bursts with joy and emotion, which he addresses to God in thanksgiving. In his absence from the Thessalonians, the Thessalonians had never been absent from his prayers, and now in the news that assures them of the answer to those prayers, he overflows with a joy that exceeds his capacity to render sufficient thanksgiving, but fuels more earnest prayers that he might see them again in person and minister to their faith.

They still have a very great deal to learn and be prepared for, and Paul wants to be there to provide them with the training that they so require. Much of 1 Thessalonians is devoted to correspondence of a more personal nature. It is richly theological, but it's not the sort of teaching that we're usually expecting from a Pauline letter.

Chapter 3 ends this personal correspondence by transposing the material to this point into the form of a prayer. Paul prays that God the Father and the Lord Jesus would finally make it possible for them to see the Thessalonians again. Praying to the Father and the Son together here is evidence of Paul's high understanding of Christ.

He also prays that the Lord would cause the love of the Thessalonians to increase for one another, as the missionary's own love increases for the Thessalonians. One of the blessings of knowing God is that God can be near to our loved ones even when we cannot be, and we can make petitions to God for them accordingly. Finally, Paul asks the Lord that the hearts of the Thessalonians would be strengthened in blameless holiness, their external conduct needs to be unimpeachable, and their inner selves need to be settled and secure.

He alludes to Zechariah 14, verse 5, then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him, and he declares his hope that they will be found ready on that day, in a way that puts Jesus in the place of the Lord in the Zechariah quotation, once again suggesting the deity of Christ. A question to consider. How do you think Paul distinguished between the agency of the Lord in directing their travels and the opposition of Satan? What are some of the principles that should guide our understanding of Satan's activity in such situations in our lives? Matthew chapter 14, verses 1 to 13.

At that time Herod the Tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.

For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, It is not lawful for you to have her. And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an

oath to give her whatever she might ask.

Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter. And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison.

And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it. And they went and told Jesus.

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. Matthew 14 begins with the story of the death of John the Baptist, but it is introduced in a surprising way.

Herod hears word of Jesus' miracles and actions, and then wonders whether John the Baptist has been brought back to life. Then we hear the story of the death of John the Baptist, after which Jesus responds to hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist. It's an interesting way to tell us the story.

It highlights the theme of resurrection. Jesus is John the Baptist raised up again. And here we might think of the story of Elijah and Elisha, as the ministry of Elisha continues from the ministry of that of Elijah.

Elisha is anointed with the spirit of Elijah. He has the double portion of the spirit of Elijah and continues his ministry, completing it. Likewise, with John the Baptist, his ministry is a ministry of the desert that is completed by the ministry of Christ in the land.

There are other themes of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha that are in play here. Themes of widespread rejection, but also of a remnant. John the Baptist's story is very similar to that of Elijah.

They're both people of the wilderness. They're both dressed in similar garments. John the Baptist is one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah.

He's the Elijah that is to come. And in all of these ways, there is an association between those characters. But here we have a story that brings out further associations.

The story of Elijah and first kings is dominated by a conflict with King Ahab and his manipulative wife Jezebel. And here we have a similar pair, Herod and his wife Herodias, who are in conflict with John the Baptist. Once again, there's a manipulative wife who's trying to spur her husband on to destroy the prophet.

There's a further aspect of Old Testament background that might come to our mind at this point. It's a story that has two key women who influence their husbands greatly. In

that story, Ahasuerus, the king, offers up to half his kingdom to the woman who pleases him, Esther.

Herod does the same thing. Once again, it's at a feast. And Herodias is like an anti-Mordecai to her daughter, who's an anti-Esther.

She's someone who represents the polar opposite of Esther. The character of Herodias might also remind us of Zeresh, who spurred Haman on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow to him. In Esther 5, verses 9, we read, ...and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

It's a very similar dynamic that's playing out here. Haman, we should remember, is an Agagite, a descendant of Agag and a descendant of Amalek. Amalek sought to kill the Jews and Herod is an Idumean, a descendant of Edom, like Amalek.

And maybe there's a connection between their two characters. The descendant of Esau is trying to kill the descendant of Jacob. A question to consider.

Jesus' response to the news of the death of John the Baptist is to withdraw and to go to a desolate place by himself. Why do you think he responds in such a manner?