

WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE

Scriptures: I Thessalonians 4:13-18; 5:1-11

“One day you know more dead people than live people.” That is the first line of a novel I read last week called *Citizen Vince*. I read it because it was the winner of the Edgar Allen Poe award for best mystery novel of 2005, and it takes place in Spokane, WA, in the year 1980. Having said that, let me warn you: it is filled with profanities and some really vulgar language, so please, just because I mention it does not mean I recommend it. I mention it, because I was haunted by the first line: “One day you know more dead people than live people.”

That got me worried, so this week I went back and counted all the funerals and memorial services I have done. I discovered that in 26 years of ministry I have done 315 funerals and memorial services. That does not include the funerals or memorial services I attended but did not conduct. There are a lot of people I have known who have died. Fortunately, our present church membership is over 700, so I am still okay.

But I wonder if the Thessalonians worried about knowing more dead people than live people in their church. Apparently they were concerned about this, because in our first scripture lesson Paul says to them, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” Apparently the Thessalonians were concerned that some of their church members had died before Jesus came back. They knew that Jesus was coming back to bring the Kingdom of God, a kingdom where death and suffering would be no more and God would wipe every tear from our eyes. They believed in Jesus, and they believed in that kingdom, and they were anxiously waiting for it to come. But they were worried about the people who died before it happened. Would they miss out on Jesus’ kingdom because they died too soon?

There were numerous times in those 315 memorial services when I felt that the person died too soon. Some of them were young people, which meant younger than me. That is most people’s definition of a young person: a person younger than themselves. But some of these people were quite young. One funeral service I did was for a logger in his 20s killed in an accident. His young widow was expecting their first child. Another was for a young mother killed in a car accident. In both cases I remember thinking that these people died too soon, not just because they were young or had young children, but because in both cases their lives were just beginning to straighten out after some rough times. They were even flirting with the idea of coming back to church. They were right on the edge of God doing some wonderful things in their lives, and suddenly they were gone. What would happen to them now?

There have been a number of times like that where I felt that a person died just when God was getting started in their life. I felt that way about the 14 year-old in Potlatch who drowned while on a family vacation, and the 3 year-old who was killed in a car accident, and the young adult who took his life in a moment of severe depression, and the four different children of church members I have known who died of drug overdoses. Those are all times when I felt that people died too soon, and I wonder if that is how the Thessalonians felt.

Here is Paul's response:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

In other words, death does not stop God from working in our lives to bring us into Jesus' kingdom. Death does not thwart God. Paul continues,

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

By the way, this is the main verse in the Bible where people have gotten the idea for what is called "the Rapture." The Rapture is the notion that Christians will be suddenly sucked up out of the world leaving everyone else behind to endure the sufferings of a godless planet. That is the central plot device for a series of novels by Tim LaHaye called *Left Behind*. In the *Left Behind* series all the Christians are beamed up to heaven, so to speak, leaving the rest of the world to suffer under an oppressive dictator. But notice, this verse does not say that Christians are caught up to be with Jesus in the middle of history. It says they are caught up to be with Jesus at the end of history when Jesus returns to establish the Kingdom of God. We are not waiting for the day when Christians are removed from the world and everyone else is handed over to evil politicians. We are waiting for the day when Jesus will return and the whole world will be handed over to him—the day when there will finally be peace on earth and good will to all people. That is the kind of rapture Paul has in mind: when the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.

But here is the point: Those who have died will not miss out on this kingdom; they will be included in it. Death does not have the power to thwart God's work in our lives. We are wanted by God dead or alive, because whether we are dead or not, God has the power to make us alive with Christ and to bring us into the fullness of life that God wants for us through his Son.

But here is the warning. What this means is that dead or alive you cannot escape God. That is the point of our second scripture lesson from I Thessalonians, chapter 5. Ready or not, dead or not, Jesus is coming. Verses 2-3:

For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant women, and there will be no escape!

Jesus is coming, ready or not, dead or not. So here is the question: are you living like people who will one day meet God? Are you making choices, even now, that reflect the eternal destiny for which you are headed?

If you choose to live in darkness, the light will come as a shock. If you devote your life to greed, lust, drunkenness, or efforts to maintain your superiority over others, then Jesus' kingdom will come as a shock. For suddenly there won't be anything for you to possess, only things to share. There won't be anything for you to brag about, only things to celebrate together. There won't be any drugs or booze by which to escape from reality; in fact reality will be more real than it was before. One day, dead or alive, we will all stand before our living Lord, and there will be no escape.

But that does not have to be a frightening thought. Verses 4-5: "But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day."

Here is the good news: Jesus has already come. So that when Jesus comes again, you don't have to meet him as a stranger. You can meet him as a long time friend. If you commit your life to Jesus, you can begin living with him even now. You can begin even now to replace greed with gratitude, lust with love, aloofness with community, and drunkenness with true delight. If you begin serving Jesus here and now, not even death will prevent God from finishing his work in your life and giving you an eternity to enjoy it.

- Ken Onstot