

IT'S THE MESSAGE

Once upon a time, there was a man to travelled to a new land in the north, ...in order to be faithful to God's calling.

Well, it wasn't "new" to those living in that northern region. Their government had been in place for about 100 years, and there were people living there long before that.

Interestingly, this man came from another country, but he had the same citizenship with the northern people. He was familiar with the area, and claimed to be one of them, but he wasn't really,... and they knew it.

He talked a little funny. He sounded like he was from the East and the South. Plus, some of the locals had a second language that the man wasn't at all familiar with. That discrepancy was also a distinction.

Nevertheless, the man told the northern people that God had sent him to be with them.

When he arrived, the people told him that they were a group of many leaders.

The man wasn't sure whether they meant that they were full of gifted and talented people or that they were letting him who's in control.

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When he spoke to them, some appreciated what they heard, but others were not so sure about the strange man, with a questionable background. He was very different indeed.

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To remove the cloak, I'm of course referring to Paul and his trip to Thessalonica. This was Paul second big journey, and it was the first trip to Europe--that vast land to the north and west. It was around the year 50.

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Thessalonica was a major port city and the capital of Macedonia.

It had been a "free Roman City" for about 100 years. It was under the Roman government, yet no soldiers were garrisoned there.

That designation came with the burden to abide with Roman order and expectations in order to remain a "free city."

There were enough Jews in Thessalonica to merit a synagogue, and that was where Paul first went to present his message.

"God fearers" was the label given to people who appreciated spirituality and a higher moral standard. They usually were the Gentiles who converted to Christianity and also the Jews.

Paul's message about Christ was more readily accepted by the "God fearers", mostly because circumcision was Not a requirement.

Paul was message was received by many people; Christianity was growing in Thessalonica, and that greatly outraged the Jews.

Act 17 tells of the pushback: the rioting, the outrage and the persecution against Paul and the budding church. Paul had to flee the city. Vicious rumours circulated about Paul, and the church in Thessalonica suffered greatly,.....and many began to doubt whether it was all worth it.

So, Paul wrote them a letter. He wrote to bring them comfort, and he wrote to defend himself and to repeat the Gospel message.

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Scholars assert that the letters to the Thessalonians are the oldest of all the New Testament writings. Paul's theological was fairly simple in those letters. Moreover, part of his reassurance to them was the claim that Jesus would soon return, if they just hold out a little longer. He told them that Christ was coming to rescue them from their peril.

Paul's later writings contain no such claim about Jesus' quick return.

In chapter two, Paul continues to encourage them, and he also defends himself to counter all the vicious accusations the persecutors are spreading.

He notes that his ministry to them was Not in vain. It was bearing fruit.

Then he highlights the courage required to share the Gospel message in a land more pagan than he was accustomed to.

This is a strong statement on how important the message is.

The Gospel message must be shared, regardless of pushback and persecution.

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Verses 3 through 7 are Paul's defence against the charges against him.

He reminds them that he was called by God to preach the Gospel to them.

He did NOT come to them as an employee, nor did he seek their or public approval.

He asserted that he was faithful--faithful to God and faithful in presenting the message. He was "approved" by God, which is better translated as "tested". God was the judge of his ministry. They were not.

He did not try to trap or seduce them. He was honest and faithful to his calling.

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It is tempting for preachers to seek approval / to preach to please the congregation / to say what they want to hear.

Many pastors judge their performance by how well they are liked.

Routine voting to retain a pastor reinforces this unfortunate behaviour. It relegates a pastor to the role of employee instead of one who is called by God to be in the church for a reason.

I am very glad this church does not have a congregational vote every three years to decide whether to keep the pastor or not.

The absence of a vote encourages all to struggle with God's will for the church, to struggle with the relationship and to pray more.

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In the early 1950's, my father attended seminary in Louisville, KY, and he also pastored a church there. Years later, I asked him if he preached about racism and segregation. He said he had not because it would be too divisive and controversial.

I never forgot that. I've tried to Not let general opinion dissuade me from presenting a message that I believed to be true and relevant.

No doubt, I could have been more sensitive, and that is my error, yet ... political abuses and exposing injustices are part of the Gospel message. I tried to be faithful.

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Paul repeatedly stated that it's "The Message" that is important, and Not the messenger. I hope we always remember that.

Sometimes the messenger is elevated and revered, and sometimes "they shoot the messenger." Both extreme responses devalue the message.

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*I've tried to minister by the axiom / the mandate: "It's the message!"*

Unfortunately, too many times, I let my bias or agenda get in the way, but I tried / tried hard to faithfully present the message as I understood it ... based on God's leading and inspiration.

To be sure, and hear this clearly, the pastor is NOT the keeper of the message. The Pastor is not the only messenger.

God is calling and inspiring each and every one of us.  
WE...compromise the church, the body of Christ.  
All of us are custodians and purveyors of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, the preacher is called to frame and transport the message, in a unique manner, each Sunday.

Preaching is a sacred and fearful endeavour, and may God bless and inspire all who stand before you delivering a sermon.

And .... may you hear the message, even through flawed messengers.

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After defending himself, Paul got to the heart of the message.

In chapter 2, verse 8, Paul stated that he deeply cared for the church. He cared enough to faithfully share the gospel, which included himself.

They had become very dear to Paul. He loved them.

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All this is summed up in Chapter 4, verse 9.

The message IS love, and each and everyone has received, from God, that message--to love one another.

The Pastor is not the only messenger.

God is calling and inspiring each and every one of us.  
WE....comprise the church, the body of Christ.  
All of us are custodians and purveyors of the Gospel.

Directly from God and through messengers, we are given the message of love / to love.

The Message, sometimes called God's Word, is not just words.

The message is not static; it's Not a creed, dogma or a bunch of religious jargon that fits on a bumper sticker.

It's not a code, nor is it rules and regulations.

The message can expose injustice, and bring down tyrants.  
It is that powerful.

The message / the gospel message is not a weapon for judging others, yet.....the message may bring judgment.

The message can even enrage people just as easily as it brings people to their knees in confession and reconciliation.

The message is about Christ. It is a message that brings Peace.

And, the very heart and soul of the message is Love; it is God.

The message is Love.

The message is Love.

The message is Love.

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You are a gracious and loving church.

God has given you this message.

God has given you the message of love.

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In times of difficulty, doubt and suffering, we no longer declare that Jesus will soon come to the rescue.

We do NOT need to, because we know better.

We Know that love will rescue us.

Love will bring peace, healing and wholeness.

And,.....the strange thing about the message of love is that it has to be given away.

Love is love when it is given away.

And.....that is the message for today,.....and every day.

AMEN.