

Living Faith

[Exodus 33:12-23](#)

[Psalms 99](#)

[1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#)

[Matthew 22:15-22](#)

We live in a world that profits from our discomfort twice: stirring it up, then selling us ways to quiet it. From headlines to advertisements, the message is steady: be afraid, or at least dissatisfied. Physical pain? There is a pharmaceutical for that. Anxious or tired? Coffee to get us going and wine to settle us down. We are taught to fill every moment with accomplishment, so our lives feel meaningful, and if we stop producing... heaven forbid we give our hearts room to process. Better to scroll the phone or turn on the television. Buy this thing and you'll feel better. Except the "thing" was never designed to bring relief. It was just a steppingstone to the next purchasable antidote, and the cycle only works if the discomfort never goes away.

Don't hear me say you should stop taking ibuprofen. And I enjoy a cold beer as much as anyone. Some ingestible remedies are a genuine mercy. A person who needs medicine to live well is not failing at faith. But it is one thing to enhance life by our choices and another to seek the avoidance of life.

We were made to be **alive**. God is living, and God gave us breath to live in the image of divine life. Anyone who has lived more than a moment on this earth knows that being alive involves discomfort. Living things grow, change, develop, and that can hurt. Struggle is not failure. Pain is often the evidence that life remains. If you've ever had a foot fall asleep, you know the worst part isn't the numbness. It's the pins and needles when the feeling returns.

That is what I want us to hold onto this morning: a living faith in a living God. A life that isn't numbed...trusting a God who can't be managed or possessed but can be known.

Let's start with Moses. Only a chapter ago, the people built a golden calf because they couldn't bear the silence of an unseen God. Moses has spent forty days in God's presence

and received God's law. And listen to what he asks now: "Show me your ways, so that I may know you." After all that time and instruction, he recognizes just how little he knows. He is willing to be led, but he refuses to go anywhere God doesn't go first. "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here." Then he pushes further: "Show me your glory."

Do you see what God does not do? God doesn't scold him for wanting more. God accommodates his request. But God also tells him the truth: no one can see my face and live. Just a few verses earlier, we're told God spoke to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend." Intimacy and mystery, held side by side. So, God gives Moses what he can withstand: God's goodness passing by, God's name proclaimed, and God's own hand covering him in the cleft of the rock.

Later Jewish tradition wouldn't speak God's name aloud at all, saying ha-Shem instead, "the Name." An opaque reference to the God of mystery. And God's words here, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious," echo the burning bush: "I am who I am." God refuses to be pinned down. Moses doesn't get perfectly crystalized answers, but he is allowed to ask, and even to push. What he receives is not a clear image of God. It is God's character.

Now set that beside a coin. Pharisees and Herodians, who agree on almost nothing, join forces to trap Jesus with a question about taxes. Say yes and you betray an oppressed people. Say no and you've committed treason. Jesus asks to see the coin, a denarius, stamped with the face of the emperor.

Caesar put his face on everything. He didn't want to be known. Caesar wanted to be recognized, feared, and obeyed. His image was fixed, reproducible, and imposed on public life, everywhere, and yet who actually knew him? Compare God: a face no one can see, and yet Moses comes to know God's character, because God's unavailability to sight comes with a willingness to speak, to respond, to be known.

Jesus asks, "Whose image is this?" Some translations say "head" or "likeness," but the Greek word is *eikōn*, the same word the Greek Old Testament uses in Genesis, where God makes humanity in God's own image. Mankind is the icon of God. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," Jesus says. The verb means to give back, to return what is owed. "And to God the things that are God's." Jesus distinguishes imperial claims from God's claims and then leaves the boundary provocatively undefined. He hands them the question. Who do they belong to and how do they live in response?

With an election mere weeks away, I won't tell you where the line falls. I'll tell you this: whichever face is on the yard sign, whichever party or channel claims you, they can stamp a face on a coin. They cannot establish ultimate ownership over people who bear the image of God. That should loosen the grip of anyone whose whole identity hangs on this election, and equally the grip of anyone who has numbed out because they simply can't care anymore.

Which brings us to a young church in Thessalonica, a Roman port city thick with imperial pride. Paul opens by stacking a Greek greeting, "grace", on a Hebrew one, "peace", in a city where Rome advertised its own peace through military power. Paul says real peace is found in **God's grace**. These believers belong to a particular city, but their deepest identity comes from somewhere else. Paul recalls their work of faith, labor of love, and steadfast hope. He says they received the word "in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." Their joy doesn't mean their suffering wasn't real. It means suffering hadn't extinguished their capacity for joy.

And it cost them. Religion was woven through everyday Roman life, so to turn from idols was to step away from much of what was normal. Paul says they turned "to serve a living and true God." Living. Their lives rang so clearly that the word rang out from them. That Greek verb gives us our English word "echo." If Exodus and Matthew show us competing

forms of power, a face unseen but known versus a face stamped on a coin, Thessalonica shows us what God's image looks like in human character: faith, hope, love, and joy.

Paul ends by speaking of the Son who rescues us from "the wrath that is coming." That phrase makes many of us wince. But hear it from people suffering real oppression, where the powerful so often escaped accountability. For them, the promise that God will judge evil is good news: violence, exploitation, and death will not be allowed to define their reality forever. And the one who makes that promise is the living God... who raised Jesus to life, from the dead.

This is where the numbing matters. We can't numb pain without numbing joy. The Thessalonians didn't find joy by avoiding affliction. They held both at once. Part of faith is trusting that our pain has something to teach us. If we listen to it, question it, and learn from it, trusting that God is in front of us, we learn more accurately how **God** feels. After all, we are God's body in this world. Doctors will tell you that taking a narcotic to heal from an injury is different from taking the same drug to mask an injury, which can make it worse and even complicate healing. The question isn't whether we ever take the edge off. It's whether we're using what we take to heal or to avoid finding out what hurts. Some of us numb with pills or wine or scrolling. Some numb with productivity. Some numb with certainty, a God captured so completely there's nothing left to ask.

If we want to truly live, we can't do it alone. We feel, hear, and sense God, but we cannot see God. So, we need one another to share stories, to encourage the pursuit, and sometimes to carry joy for us when our own has run out. We need one another to be living icons of an invisible God, inspiring us and the world with a vision of Christ's living body.

In a few minutes we will approach this table. What we take into ourselves is the living Christ, raised by the same power that transformed the Thessalonians and lets us serve a living God. We partake and are reminded that God now lives through us.

May we be a people of living faith. A people who refuse to allow the news cycle, political leaders, and our own physical and existential pain keep us from chasing after the God who desires to be known, trusted, celebrated, and followed.