

# Story and Meditation: Avoiding Surprise

November 15, 2020

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

by *Eric Anderson*

Most birds, I would guess, like things to go pretty much the same today as they did yesterday. Most i'iwi, I would guess, would say the same. Or sing the same. This one particular i'iwi definitely did not like surprises. He wanted today to look like yesterday and tomorrow to look like today. As far as he was concerned, the best life was a predictable life. Surprises were not welcome.

He couldn't have things all his way, of course. Ohi'a trees bloom when they bloom, and he had to cope with that. It would have been better if the weather were organized, so that today it rained, and tomorrow it's sunny, and mostly cloudy on Thursday, but he had learned to cope with that as well. Other birds were definitely inclined to the chaotic, such that he sometimes didn't see the same 'apapane or 'amakihi in the same place at the same time for days at a time. He grumbled about their failures to keep to a schedule, but he coped with that, too.

But nesting, now. There was only one spot for a nest.

He and his wife had found a perfect spot for a nest. The ohi'a branches high in the tree divided in such a way that it really supported a nest beautifully. The foliage was thick enough to discourage curious visitors – no i'iwi likes visitors around their nests – but not so thick that you couldn't fly in and out. It tended to blossom at the time the eggs were being warmed, so he didn't have to go far to get food for his wife.

Perfect. They used it every year.

One day when they had just started gathering materials for this year's nest, the night brought a terrible windstorm. It was strong enough to drive them from the nest site to take refuge elsewhere, out of the gale. All around them in the forest they heard the creaks of the trees and the cracks of branches breaking. When morning came, they returned to the favorite branch, and found that it was simply gone. The wind in the night had carried it away. It lay, forlorn, on the ground at the base of the tree.

The two birds stared at it for a while. The male i'iwi, who didn't like surprises, had nothing to say. He was struck speechless with shock. His wife, after some time, suddenly shook her wings. She hopped onto a different branch in a neighboring tree, examined a cluster of branches. She hopped about a bit more, seized a twig in her long curving beak, and laid it across the gap in the cluster. Then she picked up another twig.

“What are you doing?” he asked her.

“I’m building a nest,” she said after placing the new twig.

“But our nest site is gone,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” she said sadly, “I won’t lay any eggs there again, and I’ll miss it. But I’m not going to lay eggs without a nest. They won’t do at all well being laid in midair!”

“But you can’t,” he started, and stopped. He watched for a while as she went through the familiar process: twigs and more twigs, weaving them together, adding some mosses.

After a while he joined in. “I don’t like it when things change,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “I don’t like this change at all. But there will be eggs, and there will be hatchlings, and there will be a new generation of i’iwi in this forest. That’s the change I like. That’s the change I’m working for.”

He nodded. “I’ll work for it, too.”

I simply have to admire the rhetorical gall of the Apostle Paul, who opened this section by telling the Thessalonians that they didn’t need to read any words about times and seasons, and then he wrote those words anyway. This is, incidentally, a technique I have been known to use as well: I’ll tell you that you know something, then tell you what you know, and then tell you that you knew it all the time. It’s something you might want to keep on the lookout for.

What Paul and the Thessalonians alike were hoping for was change. A big change. A radical change. A sea change, if you will. The life of human beings in the first century was, basically, pretty uncertain. Most people were very poor, scratching out subsistence agriculture as tenants on land owned by someone else who was very rich. They lacked most of the food preservation technologies we rely on, which meant that food-borne disease was a major problem. They did not have germ theory or antibiotics, let alone vaccines, so they were vulnerable to pandemics and also to infections after injuries. Their political systems tended to violently protect – and I do mean violently – the privileges of the landed nobility in opposition to the daily needs of the larger populace. The Christians to whom Paul wrote had suffered directed persecution for their faith from the authorities – Paul referred to it in the opening of the letter – so that these people had, in fact, added to the uncertainty of their lives by adopting the Way of Jesus.

The i’iwi disliked change. The Thessalonians, I suspect, longed for it. One of the major themes of the Christian message in the first century – it’s found over and over in Paul’s letters, in the other letter writers, in the gospels, and in the Revelation to John – is the major change coming to the world because of Jesus Christ. The world they knew was one that came with a lot of hardship, a lot of uncertainty, and a lot of grief. The world they prayed for was one with relief, with consistency, and with comfort. Kathryn Matthews writes at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), “The unknown is

unnerving, and believers throughout the centuries, today just as much as in the first century, if not more, would like to know exactly when the return of Jesus might be expected.”

For the Thessalonians, the known was plenty unnerving. The unknown but hoped-for had great appeal. It was the when – that completely unknowable when – that confused, distressed, and unnerved them.

For most of my life, I have had relatively little gut-level understanding of this. I have lived, in the main, a pretty comfortable life. I have known plenty of griefs and losses, and those have hurt. What I have not done is experienced a life with near-daily discomfort. I have not endured the near-constant indignities experienced by African Americans. I have not felt the sense of anxiety of a woman walking alone at night. I have not been discounted for my failure to speak a certain language well. I have not listened to people tell stories about my heritage that I know to be lies.

But now it is coronaseason, or to put it another way, the 259<sup>th</sup> day of March 2020. We are living in a season that was going to last two weeks – do you remember? Initially, we were only going to worship online for two weeks. It’s been a long two weeks, hasn’t it?

I have a much better grasp of how much the Thessalonians – how much Paul himself – longed for Jesus to come and set the world aright. It’s what I’d love, too. But as Haruki Murakami wrote in *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, “‘For a while’ is a phrase whose length can't be measured. At least by the person who's waiting.”

Given that reality – given that waiting is a time that can’t be measured – how do we avoid the surprise of a change in life’s conditions? How do we avoid being caught unready for any new day, for a day of challenges or a day of renewal? How do we prepare for God’s new day?

Jane Lancaster Patterson writes at Working Preacher, “The action that Paul most explicitly commends is mutual encouragement (consolation), a repeated practical theme of 1 Thessalonians (2:12; 3:2,7; 4:1,10, 18; 5:11,14). What stands out forcibly is that the building-up of community in Christ is, for Paul, evidence of holiness of life. Holiness is not an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us.”

One aspect of changes in situation is, we hope, deliverance, but another aspect is accountability. When things change, people look at what we’ve done during that previous time, and there may be questions to answer about that. So in this corona time, our preparation is also our compassion. Our preparation is our concern. Our preparation is our assistance. To repeat Dr. Patterson’s words: “Holiness is not an individual endeavor, but a daily practice of building up the people around us.”

This has been my message for all these two hundred and fifty-nine days of March. It continues to be my message: act as if you might be infected with COVID-19 and don’t want to give the disease to someone else. Act as if the people you meet might be infected with COVID-19 and so that you don’t become infected yourself. Keep a physical distance. Wear a mask. Keep close

interactions as brief as you can. Help those struggling with limited mobility. Care for one another. Care for yourself.

Even with exciting progress toward a vaccine, this March has a long way to go. Let's welcome our surprise if this season ends earlier than we feared. Let's not be surprised by terrible grief and loss if the risks of this virus become realities among our neighbors, loved ones, and 'ohana.

Amen.