**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles**

**November 17, 2024**

“Come Before Winter”

Text: 2Timothy 4:9-16

There is a story about a man who surprised all his family and friends when he announced that he was taking up mountain climbing as a hobby. He had never done anything like this before. But he began a training program. He worked hard and strengthened his muscles. When it came time to select a mountain to climb, he chose El Capitan in Yosemite, a popular but very difficult slope.

As the man was about halfway up the steep rock face, he looked up and realized that his rope was about to break. He looked down knowing that he was about to fall. It was then that he made an important decision. The next time he would buy stronger rope.

It was the right decision, but terrible timing. Life can be like that. It is about making the right decisions and making them at the right moments. There are a lot of decisions that we look back upon with regret. We waited too long. The opportunity passed. We wish we had acted differently. One of the challenges of life is making the right choices at the right moment.

Today’s reading comes at the end of Paul’s letter to Timothy. It would be easy to overlook the importance of this reading because of the many confusing names. But there is something very important in Paul’s concluding comments. Something that is deeply meaningful to us all.

The context of today’s reading is that Paul is very lonely. He briefly mentions all those who have left him, those who were once by his side, those he wishes were present. If we had read all of chapter 4, you would hear that it is filled with a deep sadness as Paul expresses his loneliness and his longing for his friends like Timothy.

Amid all those hard to pronounce names, there is a very important line that could be easily overlooked. It seems so mundane, but it is powerful. Paul misses his friend deeply. And he says, “Do your best to come before winter.”

That might seem like an insignificant line. But it is filled with importance. What we know of the geography of the area where Paul is writing from is that travel was extremely dangerous from November until March. The seas were rough, and most sailors were unwilling to even attempt navigation during these months. Thus, if you were to travel, you needed to do so during the summer months…or else it would be too late.

Paul knows that if Timothy doesn’t come soon, if he doesn’t come before winter, that window of opportunity will pass for another season. They will not be able to see one another until late spring. That simple phrase, “Come before winter,” captures that difficult reality. Don’t wait until it is too late.

Last winter, Diane and I were looking at the year ahead. I don’t recall which one of us saw it first, but we saw an ad for the Rolling Stones concert tour. We had bought tickets for a previous show that was cancelled due to covid. At with the band members being over 80 years old, we realized there are a dwindling number of opportunities to see them live. We made the decision to purchase two tickets for Soldier Field in Chicago.

Because we enjoy live music, we made the decision to take advantage of as many opportunities as possible this year. We saw a concert at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Denver. We saw the final tour of the Electric Light Orchestra. Spent a lovely evening in Indianapolis listening to the Indigo Girls and Melissa Etheridge. We dubbed it our year of great live music. There were a lot of wonderful concerts.

As for the Rolling Stones, they did not disappoint. Even at 81 years of age, Mick Jagger was moving non-stop singing and dancing. And I may see if Keith Richards is available to play for my funeral. The point is, we could have found so many excuses not to attend these concerts. Too busy. Too tired. The price of tickets is too high. There are always so many reasons not to do something. But I am so glad that we were there.

It is so easy to postpone such dreams. We keep saying, “Someday….” But then someday never arrives. “Come before winter.

Many of Anne Tyler’s novels revolve around a theme of people re-inventing themselves. They leave behind the life they have know and start over in a meaningful way. In her novel, “Back When We Were Grownups” the lead character, Rebecca, is telling her grandchildren about a gift she received as a young girl. An aunt gave her a beautiful, tall white candle with a kind of frill and lace running up it in a spiral. She thought it was a great treasure.

She put it away in her dresser wanting to save it for a special occasion. She was waiting for the perfect moment. Her aunt asked her if she had burnt it yet and each time Rebeccas would say she was waiting for a special occasion. Then, several years later, she opened that drawer and unwrapped the candle. It had turned yellow and was warped. The lace was falling off.

She said to her grandkids all these years later, “I’d never seen it burning, and now I never would. So ever since that time, I light candles any chance I get. I light them by the dozens, all over every room, at every party…. Multitudes of candles.”

These are wise words from someone who had learned from a missed opportunity. Light the candles. Find a reason to celebrate. Don’t wait for special occasions, make them every day. “Come before winter.”

Among the many articles and yellowed newspaper articles I have accumulated over the years, is a letter to Anne Landers, the former advice columnist. The article was not a question, but more of a gentle reminder to the readers. The letter spoke about a friend who had knitted a lovely sweater and gave it to the writer. At the time it was warm weather, so she put it away in her closet. One cold, January day, she remembered the sweater and got it out. Surrounded by the warmth of that handmade sweater she thought, “I must call Joan tomorrow and tell her how much I appreciated the sweater on this really cold day.” The next day in the newspaper, however, she saw her friend’s name in the obituaries. She had died the day before.

She wrote this letter to remind us all not to put off the things that are important. To whom do you need to say thank you? Who is it that has touched your life in a meaningful way? Who has shown you kindness in a time of need? Who would you like to tell that you admire them, are proud of them, appreciate them? Who have you been meaning to say, “I love you”? I hear Paul saying, “Come before winter.” Do it while there is time.

One of the familiar and beloved parables that Jesus told is “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” In this story a young son asks for his inheritance from his father and then sets out on an adventure in a new town. He is living it up. And for a while things went well. He was having a great time. But then a famine struck. His money ran out. So did his friends. He was left alone and hungry.

He found some work feeding pigs. He was so hungry that the food he was giving them began to look appetizing. It was then that he came to his senses. He would return to his father. He would apologize for how he had left and how he had hurt his father. He didn’t imagine regaining his status as a son, but if his father would accept him as a servant, he would be content with that.

The son made his way back to his father and there is a moment of delight when the father sees his son in the distance. He knows that walk. He knows those features. It is his son returning home. He runs to greet him and welcomes him back with joy. We know and love that story. It is a beloved story about forgiveness, acceptance, and enduring love.

But American artist Thomas Hart Benton put a different spin on this familiar story with a painting he did somewhere between 1939-1941. The painting depicts the familiar return of the prodigal son. But the image is disturbing. It is an image drawn from the Depression. The son has come home with his bag in hand. But the home he finds is now a worn-down shack. There is no father waiting on the porch to welcome him. There is no older brother in the fields. The fatted calf is represented by a pile of bones lying to the side of the homestead. Benton’s depiction shows that the prodigal son has returned home, but he has returned too late. “Come before winter.”

The old movie, “Nobody’s Fool” starring the late Jessica Tandy and Paul Newman tells the story of Sully, a 60-year-old handyman living in a small town. The movie doesn’t explain why but as a younger man, Sully walked out on his wife and infant son. Now the son is a grown man and has a son of his own named Will. As the film develops, Sully and grandson Will become close. The son watches this with surprise. Finally it comes to a head and the enraged son asked, “How come you are a Granddad to Will, but you were never a father to me?”

There is a moment of silence and then Sully replies, “You have to start somewhere.” We cannot undo the past. The things we said or did cannot be changed. But that doesn’t mean that we cannot live differently in this present moment.

As you look around you, are there broken relationships that you could mend? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness? Commonly in those moments both parties will say, “If he wants to make the first move, that is fine with me. But I am not going to be the one.” And so the brokenness continues because no one is willing to make the first move.

This week I was listening to Kate Bowler’s podcast, “Everything Happens” and I heard her tell the story of her diagnosis with stage 4 cancer. I have heard her talk about this and write about it in her books and I almost skipped it presuming that there was nothing new to learn. But for the first time, I heard her speak about some of the doctors and nurses who were a part of those initial treatments. Some of the doctors ignored her comments about excruciating pain. They sent her home with Pepto-Bismol. She eventually had to demand a more thorough scan, refusing to leave until they did so. Dismissively the doctors performed the tests, and the next day called her to say she needed to come back immediately as the tests showed stage-4 cancer. She also talked about the nurse who told her that she needed to just accept that she was going to die and the sooner she accepted this the better everyone would be.

First, I want to say that I believe such statements are not indicative of the kindness and care of most doctors and nurses. But I heard these comments and wondered, “how does one look back years later with forgiveness for such hurtful statements?” I was so curious that I wrote to her and asked this question. How does she not harbor ill-will or even hatred toward those who made such hurtful comments? What I am certain of is this. We can go through life holding grudges, angry at those who have said or done the wrong thing, even plotting revenge. But when does it become the time to let go of those things? When do we say, “Enough.” When do we begin to forgive rather than allowing the hurt and hatred to fester? There is never an easy moment to do these things. We have to start somewhere. Start here. Start now. Come before winter.

In his novel, “The Fall” by Albert Camus, he tells the story of Jean Baptiste Clement who one day hears someone jump off a bridge. As the reader we are left uncertain about what happened. Were they pushed? Did they fall? Was it an accident or was it intentional? What we know is that Clement did nothing. And it tears at his conscience. He finds himself walking near the bridges in town hoping for a second chance. If it ever happens again, he expects to be prepared. He concludes the novel by thinking, “O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may have the chance of saving both of us.” But his conscience responds, “What a risky suggestion. We’d have to go through with it. Brr…! The water’s cold. But let’s not worry! It’s too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately.”

What I want to leave you with is not a sense of missed opportunities. There will always be those things that we wish we could change or take back. That is normal. But the past is behind us.

The purpose of today’s message is to say that it is not too late. We can make a difference in this present moment. Whether it is rebuilding a broken relationship, giving time to the people and things that are important, telling someone how much you care, or simply by doing those things we meant to get around to someday. The weather may be turning cold, but winter is not here yet. It’s not too late. What is God calling you to do today? Come before winter.