

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Hope for Anxious Times

1 Thessalonians 1:4

The columnist Thomas Friedman recently wrote an article that captures the shape of the anxiety that grips our world today. It begins with these words:

My friend...has a saying about Mother Nature that goes like this: 'Mother Nature is just chemistry, biology and physics. That's all she is.' And because of that...you cannot spin Mother Nature. You cannot bribe Mother Nature. You cannot sweet talk her, and you cannot ignore her. She's going to do with the climate whatever chemistry, biology and physics dictate. And Mother Nature always bats last, and she always bats a thousand.

There is a parallel with markets. At their core, markets are propelled by fear and greed. They're just the balance at any given moment of those two impulses. Over the long run, you cannot spin the market. You cannot sweet talk it into going up or beg it not to go down. It's going to do whatever it's going to do—whichever way greed and fear tug it. And the market always bats last and it always bats a thousand (*The New York Times*, October 12, 2008, page 10).

The church reformer, John Calvin, knew something about the pull and tug of greed and fear. He lived in a turbulent and dangerous time when the landscape of Europe was being transformed by forces no one could control. His preaching challenged people to look beyond the turbulence of events to find in them a more profound sense of meaning. The direction of his preaching in fearful times is expressed in a line from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He wrote, "when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work... (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, xvii.11)." The story of our tumbled world is always bigger than we think because God's purposes are unfolding in ways that are not immediately obvious.

I was reminded of this truth some years ago when I went to the YMCA to swim laps. As I stepped out of the locker room and entered the pool area I realized that something was very wrong. A tall young man was standing in the far lap swimming lane wielding a large baseball bat. He was swinging the bat violently to strike the water and send a wall of water flying across the pool. I had seen people perform a variety of exercises in the water, but I had never seen anyone do anything like that. I began anxiously surveying the pool in search of a lane where I would be safe from being hit if the bat should slip out of his grip. Then I decided that I really should lodge a complaint with the lifeguard for allowing such an obviously irresponsible form of activity in the pool. As I turned toward the lifeguard I heard a voice call out, "Hey, Dr. Lee." I looked back to see that the young man had the bat on his shoulder and was looking at me.

I walked over toward his lane and then I recognized him. I had officiated at his wedding to a member of our church the previous year. I knew that he was just starting a career in professional baseball. He explained to me that striking the water with his bat was a technique that he had learned from the Hall of Fame baseball player, George Brett. It was a way to build up his capability as a power

hitter. Then I realized that what had looked to me like a dangerous, chaotic, and senseless activity had a very definite purpose. This week that young man will be the starting right-fielder for the Philadelphia Phillies in the World Series. Jayson Werth knew exactly what he was doing, but it was a real mystery to me.

This is the point that Paul was making in his first letter to the Thessalonian church. He wanted to help the members of that church see how God was at work in the “aimlessly tumbled” world in which they lived. This was a world in which the economy of the Roman Empire was in serious decline. The political structures in Rome were becoming increasingly unstable. The danger of destructive raids by the barbarian tribes on the periphery of the empire was becoming significantly greater. While everyone in the Roman Empire was anxious, Christians had particular reasons to be fearful. They were being singled out as scapegoats for everything that was going wrong. Paul wanted them to know that in this tumbled mess, God was at work in ways they did not see or understand.

But Paul reminds the Thessalonians that there is one aspect of God’s activity that they can clearly see. They have made the most important transition that human beings can make. Paul said it like this, “For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you (1 Thessalonians 1:4).” They have been chosen by God and they no longer belong to themselves. Their times are in God’s hands. In a passage from *The Institutes*, John Calvin emphasized this truth:

Yet, when the light of divine providence has shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. His solace, I say, is to know that his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it. Moreover, it comforts him to know that he has been received into God’s safekeeping and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water, nor fire, nor iron can harm him, except in so far as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion. Thus indeed the psalm sings, ‘For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. Under his wings will he protect you, and in his pinions you will have assurance; his truth will be your shield [Ps. 91:3-6; cf. Ps. 90:3-6, Vg.; cf. Comm.] (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, xvii.11).’

Jesus spoke of what it means to belong to God when he was confronted by religious leaders in the 22nd chapter of Matthew. These leaders ask a question about taxation in order to set a trap for Jesus. No matter which answer Jesus gives he will be discredited with a major segment of the population. Jesus evades the trap by taking the coin and calling attention to the likeness of Tiberius Caesar. When he says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” he throws the question back to his inquisitors. In doing that Jesus also reframes the issue for his Jewish listeners. Every Jew would recognize the unstated implication of what Jesus was saying. They would understand that he was also asking, “Whose likeness is stamped on you?” Every Jew could answer that question. You and I are made in the image of God.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that they were God’s coinage. The same is true for us. When the world seems to be “aimlessly tumbled,” the best response that we can make is to be good stewards of that which belongs to God.