

## THEME: THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Dear Christian Friends,

Whenever we begin a new venture (and you'll have to admit that beginning a new year is a new venture), there's always the question: Where is it leading? How is it all going to come out?

Looking forward into a New Year is kind of like looking into a long and twisting tunnel, isn't it? You know it leads to the next year, 52 weeks from now, but you can't see that far ahead from this perspective. We may feel like the folks in tonight's Gospel reading, stumbling about in the darkness, not knowing which way to go, and arguing about it along the way.

The Second Lesson gave us another view of the problem. Like so many of us at the turning of the year, the Thessalonians were concerned about what happens when a person dies—the ultimate end of the tunnel. For them, the problem was that somehow they had come to believe that the Lord Jesus, who had suffered and died to pay for our sins, then rose and ascended into heaven, was about to return to take his faithful followers with him. We believe that, too, of course, but the Thessalonians believed it was going to happen very soon. They were peering into the tunnel, expecting to see the Lord barreling toward them.

But things were not working out the way they thought they would. While they were waiting for the Lord's return, their fellow Christians were *dying!*—more and more of them as time went on. What was going to happen to *those* people when the Lord returned and they weren't here to greet him? What's going to happen to *us* if we happen to be among them? The Thessalonians were looking into the tunnel that was the future, and it was *dark* in there! What are we going to do?

I'm sure you've heard the expression that talks about A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL, and that, quite simply, is what this New Year's message is about. The message of Christmas, especially as John's Gospel tells us, is that in the coming of Christ the light has already begun to shine. **"The light shines in the darkness,"** the evangelist writes, **"and the darkness did not overcome it"** (John 1:5). *NRSV*

That's the way it works in a tunnel. If you have ever taken a tour through one of the great caves in our nation, you may have seen that demonstrated. The guide will warn you about what is to come ("Maybe you have never seen absolute darkness before, but you are about to.") The electric lights are turned off, and it is just as the guide had said. You can't see your hand in front of your face. The darkness is so thick you can almost feel it.

And then the guide strikes a match...and it isn't totally dark anymore. What a relief that tiny little speck of light gives! It is not as bright as it is going to become—not as bright as when the guide turns on the electric lights again—not as bright as the world outside when you come to the end of your tour—but it is no longer totally dark either. At that moment, as a Christian, you almost automatically think of John's words in his Gospel: **"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it"** (John 1:5). *NRSV*

While we are traveling in the tunnel of a New Year, we can't usually see the light at the end, because of all the twists and turns along the way. We don't know what this New Year of 2011 holds in store for us right now. Maybe everything will continue pretty much as it has in 2010. Maybe there will be another terrorist attack. Maybe the economy will improve. Maybe we will experience a serious illness. Maybe the employment situation in Michigan will improve. Maybe we will suffer the loss of a loved one. Maybe a family member or friend we've been praying for and working on will become a believing Christian. Maybe we'll undergo a lifestyle change, losing some of our personal independence and freedom. 2011 may be a year we'll want to always remember, or a year we would like to forget; we just don't know at this point. But one thing we know...we don't need to worry about it, even if death comes calling this year.

It is our Lord Jesus Christ who is leading us, after all, and he has already been through the tunnel. **"He died for us,"** Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, so that even if we die along the way (that was the very thing that was bothering the Thessalonians, remember), **"so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him."** And the emphasis is on that word LIVE.

Why? Because Jesus lives! We walk away from Christmas this year, knowing that *Easter lies ahead*, a celebration of life eternal that comes at the end of a tunnel, the long, deep darkness of Lent.

Someone once said that as Christians we go into the future like a person who has read the last chapter of a mystery novel before reading the rest of the book. Thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, we know how it's going to turn out...our sins are forgiven and eternal life in heaven is ours. That's the glorious light at the end of our tunnel. Now we just have to see what the Lord has in store for us along the way to get us there. But as Christians, we know that we will have a blessed New Year, a blessed 2011, no matter what, because of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—the Light at the End of Our Tunnel. Amen.