

Online Bible Study for Sunday, October 12th, 2008
Rev. Jim Brommers Bergquist
Phillipians 4: 1-9

The text for this week is a good and famous one, and one that I look forward to preaching on this Sunday. Below are some of my thoughts and reflections so far.

Those who put the lectionary* together knew what they were doing when they put this passage here in the sequence of texts. At least that's my assumption. Because the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures the last few weeks have focused on the Israelites escape from Egypt – and how quickly they started to complain.

After years and years of torture and inhumane treatment, God works the miraculous through Moses and the slaves are released. After a few too many long days in the heat of the desert, they start to complain. In Exodus 16 the Israelites say, "If only we had died by God's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat net to pots of meat and ate our bread till we were filled! But now you have brought the whole community out into this wilderness to die of hunger."

And a few days later, after God has provided manna, we read in Exodus 17, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test God?" But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

Then our lectionary gives us this text, Phillipians 4, two weeks later. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" (verse 4)

¹For these reasons, my sisters and brothers—you whom I so love and long for, you who are my joy and my crown—continue, my dear ones, to stand firm in Christ Jesus.

²I implore Euodia and Syntyche to come to an agreement with each other in Christ. ³And I ask you, Syzygus, to be a true comrade and help these coworkers. These two women struggled at my side in defending the Good News, along with Clement and the others who worked with me. Their names are written in the Book of Life.

⁴Rejoice in the Savior always! I say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let everyone see your forbearing spirit. Our Savior is near. ⁶Dismiss all anxiety from your minds; instead, present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances. ⁷Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, my sisters and brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, decent, admirable, virtuous or worthy of praise. ⁹Live according to what you have learned and accepted, what you have heard me say and seen me do. Then will the God of peace be with you.

One of the expressions I often here in the Christian Faith is: God never gives you more than you can handle. I've always taken offense with this saying, because it makes it seem like God is somewhere, figuring out who can take more than others, and then handing out the misery accordingly. I remember thinking, "I should make sure that my faith is rather feeble, and that I can't take much of anything. That way I can guarantee a rather smooth existence?"

My belief is that life happens. For some it's a life that is rather smooth and tragedy-free. For others, there is more pain and grief than anyone should ever have to endure. Yet even in the midst of the sorrow, we have opportunity to see the way that God is at work.

Many years ago I was at a Six Flags amusement park in the Chicago suburbs, and a crazy Midwest thunderstorm came right across the top of the park. Ominous black clouds, with massive amounts of rain and bolts of lighting, just kept coming. We hunkered down in buildings for a couple hours until the storm finally passed.

When we came out, I looked south and knew I had to take a picture of this blue and purple sky, reflected off the tail end of the storm clouds. As I turned to look north, the sky was turning blue, and there was a double rainbow, just above the massive rollercoaster. Depending on which way I looked, my understanding of my circumstances and what was occurring was significantly altered.

I worked with a minister** who once wrote, "The grace of gratitude comes when we pay attention to the good that is ours in life. And it comes when we learn to embrace all of life, the beautiful and the hard, as fundamentally a good gift. Gratitude comes not only of a certain focus, but of a certain faith that no matter what happens to us it is good to be and to have been.

Matthew Arnold asks, "Is it so small a thing to have enjoyed the sun, to have lived in the light of another year, to have thought, to have loved to have done? Is it so small a thing?" This is implied in what Paul appeals for. He doesn't say "make your needs known and God will meet them." He says "Make your needs known with thanksgiving, and then the peace of God will come." We find peace and joy in learning to thank God even in and for our needs, our troubles, our shortcomings.

Corrie Ten Boom lived with her family through the Nazi holocaust, and hid Jewish people in her home to keep them from being taken to the camps. When found out, her family was sent to the camps themselves. Long after, she would tell the story of how she and her sister Betsy ended up in a Nazi prison camp that was such a flea-ridden,

terrible place that she couldn't stand it. One day Betsy said, "But I have found something in the Bible that will help us. It says, 'In all things, give thanks.'" Corrie said, "I can't give thanks for the fleas." Betsy said, "Give thanks that we're together. Most families have been split up." Corrie thought, "I can do that."

Her sister continued, "Give thanks that somehow the guards didn't check our belongings and our Bible is with us." She gave thanks for that. But Corrie said that she would not even think of giving thanks for the fleas. Later they found out that the only reason they were not abused or harmed by the guards was because their captors were so repulsed by the fleas that they would not enter their cell. Corrie allowed as how this taught her to give thanks for all things, because you never know...

This kind of approach can sometimes verge on being Pollyanna: "Hey, don't worry about the stock market meltdown. Now we'll all remember how lucky we are to have what we have." It can also be theologically unsound: "You lost your job. God must have a better plan for you." Yet how often do we hear our family and friends look back on what they learned from a difficult time—or how it shaped the course of their life in a different way—with a sort of reverence and gratitude?

There is a whole school of psychotherapy (Cognitive Therapy) based on needing to move from a "negative schema" and worldview to a more positive schema. Even Oprah was pushing the Gratitude Journal a few years ago, where we look back on each day and note the points and events that we should be grateful for.

Paul sums up his notion of gratitude in verse 8. "Finally, my sisters and brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, decent, admirable, virtuous or worthy of praise."

Questions to consider:

1. What do you have to be grateful for?
2. How does gratitude help us experience the divine?

* *The lectionary is a schedule of readings from the Bible for church services during the course of the year. There are three different years (A, B, and C), and each week contains, a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the New Testament, a Gospel reading, and a Psalm.*

** *Rev. Gilbert Bown at Kenilworth Union Church, Kenilworth, IL*