

Eyes on the Horizon: Philippians 4:1-9

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Dear Friends, I greet you in Jesus' name.

I have a friend who is dying of cancer. Every time I talk with her, I wonder if it's the last time. Perhaps it was similar for the Apostle Paul, who knew that his life could end at any moment. Would this letter to the Philippians be his last?

Our world seems very tenuous today. There are troubles all around us: Covid has affected everything: both lives and livelihoods. How long will this last? In addition, fires on the west coast are threatening homes; smoke blackens our skies. How close will they come? How many of my friends and neighbors will be affected? And then of course, is the matter of national unrest – no small matter. One begins to wonder: is the end of the world coming? Is God trying to get our attention?

What would Paul tell us under these circumstances? After all, Paul had experienced many disasters and brushes with death in his own life. Personal threats; beatings, imprisonment, starvation; storm and shipwreck. It's not surprising that he makes the comment: "The Lord is near." The early Christians expected the return of Christ, sooner rather than later. The end of Paul's personal world could come any day, depending on the angle of the sun and how Caesar happened to be feeling. At any moment, he might get news that would seal his fate. In the midst of uncertainty, what does Paul say in this letter?

Paul is telling us today: keep your eyes on the horizon. Don't dwell on the troubles around you. Lift up your eyes, and like a good driver, focus on a point down the road. Keep your eyes on the horizon. Doing so keeps you in the center of the road rather than drifting to one side or the other. Doing so lifts your attention away from your problems to the solution; to God's solution in Christ. Doing so makes you thankful. It leads to hope, joy and peace.

This is the last of our sermon series on Paul's letter to the Philippians, a congregation Paul had started and loved dearly. His letter begins with Paul's personal life motto: *To live is Christ, to die is gain*. Now I need to tell you that just as Philippians 3:14 makes Pastor Jonna smile as she remembers her Grandpa Al (as you heard last week), Philippians 1:21 makes me smile, remembering my dad. This is the verse my father chose for his gravestone: "To live is Christ; to die is gain." And guess what? My dad and Jonna's Grandpa Al were good friends; in fact, they sang in the same Gospel men's quartet in college. Both became pastors. We figured all this out after Pr Jonna was ordained and installed here at St Tim's. (Sometimes I think of them,

meeting in the Resurrection with fist bumps: a daughter and granddaughter serving as pastors in the same congregation. Perhaps that makes you smile!)

Two great men, who lived by the Gospel and taught their children to do the same. *To live is Christ*: reaching out with his message of love, forgiveness, trust. *To die is gain*: being in Jesus' presence continually. And while you are in this world, *carry on!* Keep on doing what God has called you to do, whether in good times or bad. These two verses could easily be the life motto of every follower of Jesus.

That's chapters 1 and 3. In chapter 2, Paul encouraged his hearers to *Have the mind of Christ among you*. The mind of Christ means not demanding my own rights, but rather putting the rights of others first – just as Jesus did. Jesus “emptied himself” of his own divine rights, and instead, was obedient to God's will, sacrificing his life. *Have the mind of Christ!* Keep your eyes on the horizon!

And today, Paul finishes his letter, full of joy. In spite of all that was happening to Paul; in spite of his chains; in spite of an imminent life-or-death decision on his future, Paul is full of joy, and encourages his hearers to share in it. *Rejoice!* He says. Then he says it again: *Rejoice!* Why? Jesus *is* near, and in two ways. His second coming draws closer daily. And, his presence is nearer than you think. So today, I want you to listen as Paul gives three final reminders: *be of the same mind; be thankful; dwell on good things*. Three reminders and then a promise: *God gives you peace* – even in the midst of disasters and ongoing trials.

First, *be of the same mind*. In chapter 4, Paul is talking about two women in particular – Euodia and Syntyche – good friends, women who have worked hard with him in ministry, but who have fallen out with each other. And oh! It is so easy to fall into disagreements. It is so easy to cause and to take offense – often when none is intended. We live, right now, in a highly charged world. Almost anything can be misconstrued, and to what end? No one wins in a falling out.

Especially within the body of Christ. We have to pull together, or we drift apart. Here at St Tim's, we are a diverse congregation. We have many opinions on many different matters. My guess is that no two people in this congregation would agree 100% on every single topic. And that can be a good thing. Diversity brings a wider, more challenging conversation. Diversity can bring new, un-thought-of solutions. In Christ, diversity is a gift. We need to listen to one another, finding common ground, pulling together. And common ground is found in what is most important: Christ, cross and resurrection. Keep your eyes on the horizon! So, the *first reminder: in the midst of disasters and ongoing trials, be of the same mind*.

Second, give thanks. Paul says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Notice the progression. Do not be anxious. Pray about everything – with thanksgiving. It’s all wrapped up together.

I wonder how often in Scripture we are told not to worry. It’s obviously a problem shared by everyone. Anxiety is one of the most common conditions of our society today, and it’s on the rise. Alarming, it’s on the rise with our youngsters. Children, teens, young people have less certainty in their lives than ever before. What can you count on, nowadays? The rug has been pulled out from underneath their feet.

The antidote for worry is *trust*. Even just sharing your concerns with a trusted friend, makes you feel better. Giving that worry over to someone with broader shoulders and more power than you have, really lightens the burden. So Paul says: Give God the worry. Pray to him. Let him deal with it. And while you are at it, *give thanks*.

A neuro-rehabilitation psychologist friend alerted me to a scientific study done recently in Berkeley, that showed the effects of gratitude on the brain. Here is the link; check it out: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain

This study shows that the practice of gratitude can help people become happier and less depressed. The study focused on college students who had sought out mental health support. Most of them were struggling with depression and anxiety. It was found that the simple practice of listing the things they were grateful for, either on paper, or verbally to a friend, or to God in prayer, had the effect of making actual changes in their brains. This exercise produced benefits, not only in the moment, but for *up to 12 weeks* thereafter. When you express gratitude, that very act shifts you away from negative thinking, actually breaking up toxic emotions. It “unshackles” you from negative feelings.

Such a study shouldn’t surprise us. Gratitude is mentioned in the Bible constantly, from the Psalms to Jesus’ words, to Paul’s letters. The Holy Spirit uses our prayers and thankfulness in a myriad of positive ways, accomplishing God’s will as well as improving mental health. So, Paul says, *in the midst of disasters and ongoing trials, give thanks*.

Third, he tells us to *fill our minds with good things*. I love the list: “...whatever is true, ... noble, ... right, ... pure, ... lovely, ... admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8) So let’s think. Truth. Seek out truth – and dwell on it. Nobility. Has anyone acted nobly in your life? Take note of that! And what is the right thing to do in a given situation? Do *that*. Purity. Once the smoke cleared, did you enjoy breathing clean, pure air again? What else is pure that is yours to enjoy? Surround yourself with loveliness, beauty: music, art, nature. In another text from Paul he says, “Be excellent in what is good. Be

innocent of evil.” (Romans 16:19) It’s a good summary. Say it with me: *“Be excellent in what is good. Be innocent of evil.”*

You see, God has given us his gifts of goodness, beauty and love. He has given us the desire to strive for excellence. These are good things; fill your life with them! One summer I was a counselor at Mt Hermon, at the senior high camp at Ponderosa Lodge. One of our speakers told the kids that their minds are like warehouses. They store up everything. “So why,” he asked, “would you fill up your warehouses with junk? Because whatever you put into your minds, stays there. Instead, fill them up with good things.” God works with good things.

Now, will we be perfect? Well, no. We know this. That’s why we confess our tendency to stray, doing the very thing we do not want to do – we confess our sins weekly in church, perhaps daily at home. And God, who is faithful and just, does the amazing thing: he forgives us. Amazing grace! Think on this, too. *So, in the midst of disasters and ongoing trials, let your mind dwell on all these good things – and most especially, on the grace of God.*

Be of the same mind; give thanks; dwell on good things. Those are Paul’s three reminders, as he writes what may be his very last letter. And then he gives us God’s promise of peace. *Even during disasters and ongoing trials -- such as Paul’s being in prison – God gives peace.*

Peace is not something you can just conjure up by yourself. You can’t command your mind, “Be peaceful!” It doesn’t work that way. It is God’s gift, pure and simple. Paul says, it doesn’t make sense. Who has peace during difficulties? But God’s peace is beyond human understanding. Peace, hope and joy – these things go together, and they are all gifts from God.

My friends, I am mindful of all these things as I preach my last sermon to you... at least, for the foreseeable future. You and I are surrounded by disasters and trials, but in the midst of all this: *God gives you peace.* So share these words to those around you – hopefully not as your last words, but your everyday words. Keep your focus on the horizon; not on the troubles of the day. Jesus is near! And may God give you peace. Amen.