

19th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.11.20

Isaiah 25:1-9

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.² For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.³ Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.⁴ For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,⁵ the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.⁶ On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations;⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (222)

Something happened for me a couple weeks ago. For the first time since the COVID lockdown, I looked forward instead of back. I had a flash of what it would feel like when all of this is behind us. A shaking off of a heavy dream. That giddiness that makes you want to hug everyone, especially all those people in that middle ring around you—those in your life whom you bump into and it's good to see but you'd never make a plan to see. They make up your life, these people, it turns out. They hold your world.

The masks, the six-foot distancing: all behind us. The muffled conversations that you eventually give up on because it's too hard to make yourself understood or to understand: gone! All these frustrating measures that are meant to frustrate the virus but that frustrate everything else too: finished. In that flash it came to me of what shall be. We shall embrace each other hello or good-bye, or just sit in the same crowded room. We shall sing together—hymns or choir concerts or hardcore concerts or karaoke. We shall ride in a car with friends to a movie or shopping or a basketball game where we'd be with a bunch of strangers with whom we have at least this one thing in common—this movie, or shopping, or basketball, or church.

It came quick upon me, this vision that was more of a sensation. But, quick as the moment was, I recognized in it that this was the first time I was looking forward in felt detail and not looking back. For the first time, I was yearning and not grieving.

It's better. Yearning is better than grieving. Looking forward to what shall be, leaning into what is coming, it's better than letting go of what it is no longer. I suppose that's obvious. Maybe that's even what makes a Christian.

I've read Philippians several times. I've preached on this, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, many times. I've made use of passages from it liturgically, sections as a Call to Worship or in the Prayer of Invocation. But I've never noticed what a sweet letter this is from Paul to the church, or churches, in Philippi.

Paul's not known for being sweet. He's known for being headstrong, even opinionated. This apostle whose sending out for the sake of the gospel amounted to the start of the church in the Gentile world: he's known for being faithful, even tough. This writer whose work makes up most of the New Testament in number of books, his adventures throughout the Mediterranean were daring, even dangerous. Working in partnership with Peter, who kept his mission in the name of Christ closer to home, preaching among the Jews only, Paul ventured out to the wider Gentile world after arguing with Peter and the others as to whether this message was meant for the world beyond the Jews.

It was.

So, Paul, having headed out, ended up shipwrecked, he ended up in prison, he ended up in the middle of lots of congregational in-fighting. He'd started those many congregations, and then had gone on his way. But congregations without leaders can fall easily into conflict.

Hence, the many letters.

In Corinth, that busy port-city where everyone in the world seemed to pass through, the question was how to hold it all together, and whether to attend to the loudest voices in the room, the so-called super apostles who bullied and goaded the people. This we can deduce from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and more so from his Second Letter to the Corinthians,

In Rome, that capital city where the imperial forces pressed down especially hard, the questions were about the validity of Jewish practice, where the Gentiles fit in, and how they could coexist under the heavy eye of the imperial guards—coexist, which is to say nothing of love. This we can deduce from Paul's magnum opus, his Letter to the Romans

In Galatia, where this mostly Gentile congregation argued about whether the Jewish law was to apply to them, it all came down most especially to the practice of circumcision, which has a real chilling effect when it comes to adult conversion. This we can deduce from Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

For all of this, Paul meanwhile was developing a whole new theology.

God, of course, had revealed Godself to Paul first as one, YHWH, the Living Lord, the Creator and King of the Universe. Paul, a Jew first, then a Pharisee, and one of the strictest, most persecutorial sort, had staked his whole life on this. But then God revealed Godself as three, Paul approached on the road to Damascus by a vision of the Risen Christ which blinded him to all other things.

So, with this new revelation ever fresh before him, Paul developed a whole new theology, from unitarian in the very strictest way to trinitarian in the most surprising way, even absurd way, not to say sloppily inclusive and prodigal way. Three in one? Law giving way to grace? These paradigmatic shifts amounted to as radical a shift as a person could ever be expected to make and has ever been recorded to have made. Paul imagined his way off the map. Few people in recorded history ever do that.

Here, though, in this letter—the letter to the church, or churches, in Philippi—the question as to why he wrote it is a lot less clear. Or so it would seem. What were the Christians in Philippi arguing about such that Paul went to the trouble of writing this letter and sending out Epaphroditus to deliver it? You'd think we don't know.

Because, of course, he couldn't deliver it himself. That's something he seldom could do—deliver his own letters. If he could have, he wouldn't have written a letter at all; he would have just presented himself. Why send a representation when you can simply be present?

As for this time, though, as regarded Philippi, he couldn't present himself, he had to send a re-presentation of himself, because he was in prison and was awaiting likely execution. For preaching this new paradigm, this new grace; for preaching against the law, which the Jews adhered to as the Romans expected: Paul was in the same hot point where Jesus had been. The hot point of where religion met empire, of where local practice met imperial expectation, and where defiance of both those amounted to criminal offence, Paul was now in prison, would likely soon be killed. A Roman citizen, he wouldn't be crucified, but he would be executed.

Most likely, he assumed.

He wrote this sweet letter under the dreadful weight of that safe assumption.

And then he sent Epaphroditus to deliver it—this man whom Paul called “my brother and co-worker and fellow-soldier,” this man who was also “your messenger and minister to my need.”

But it wasn't simply an errand Epaphroditus was doing. It was a reassurance, and a relief, Paul writing “for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.”

—which might have us wonder, is this why Paul sent the letter? To reassure the Philippians who were sad at the thought of Epaphroditus being sick? And to reassure Epaphroditus who was distressed at the thought of the Philippians being distressed, who wanted to reassure them that he had recovered and now they could rejoice?

Is this really the whole reason why Paul went to such trouble?

I think yes. I think yes, this is why he sent the letter, so he might send Epaphroditus whose longing would now find relief, which in turn would have Paul's longing find some relief, if less relief. For not only was Epaphroditus longing for the people of Philippi. So was Paul, as he said

right there, in the first line of the reading for today: “...my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for...”

Funny, then, that so much commentary about this letter seems to go looking for other reasons, seems to go looking for the sort of conflict that had Paul so doggedly writing those other congregations. So much commentary seems to focus, for example, on whatever disagreement had arisen between Euodia and Syntyche. What’s more, I suspect a lot of the preaching that’s to happen today will focus on this as well, a supposing as to what Euodia and Syntyche were of two minds about. Was it a difference of opinion about the order of worship, which isn’t unlikely? Was it a difference of mission as to what the work of the gospel might actually look like in Philippi, which would make sense? Was it about two house churches deciding upon worship times or seating during worship or who was welcome in and on what terms—one the house-church of Euodia and the other the house-church of Syntyche? These could all be, or it could be something else altogether.

And this commentary does, and this preaching will, lift up the solution that Paul suggested, that these two women remember their common cause and their shared aim. And this commentary does, and preaching will, suggest to similarly conflicted congregations, these of today, that the members remember their larger purpose beyond their little disagreements—who sits where, on what terms people come, what time it will all be.

This is a good preaching point. It’s good advice. It works.

But consider for a moment Paul’s spare mention of this “conflict.”

Consider his still less going into the substance of it.

Finally, notice how he makes mention of it only at the end of this otherwise letter of deep longing and of foretasted fulfillment.

Consider all that and notice how the whole thing seems to come to nearly nothing. Two people are having a disagreement. Meanwhile, there is love, there is distress about near-death, there is longing, and there is a gentle, sweet slaking of that longing. As a deer pants for a stream so Paul yearned for this congregation in Philippi—they who (according to elsewhere in this letter) had sustained him through hardship, had sent him financial support through days of hunger, had prayed for him as he was persecuted, and had expressed their concern and even distress when those whom they loved succumbed to sickness or danger.

I think Paul wrote this letter in longing of his longing in order to fulfill a small portion of that longing. This congregation alone, or at least especially, had regarded and remembered and appreciated and supported Paul through all his attempts and adventures and trials. And now, imprisoned, awaiting execution, Paul took this opportunity to express his love and his longing for all that this congregation was to him—and what it wasn't. A source of further worry, cause for deepening conflict, demand for further theological exploration: no, this gathering of people simply loved and supported and cared for one another, longed for one another across distance and separation, and yearned for the day of reunion, which would surely come, in this world or the next.

“Keep doing what you’ve been doing,” then, were basically Paul’s parting words. “Rejoice! Again, I say rejoice.”

So, why doesn't this seem like reason enough? Why do we go searching for further cause for Paul to get in touch? Why are love and longing apparently inadequate cause for reaching out? And why had I never noticed it before—that Paul wrote this letter for the simplest of reasons, just to be in touch with the thing whose greater fulfillment he was looking forward to, an eschatological hope that would be realized sooner or later?

How did I miss it?

I suppose I never read this book at a time quite like now. With yearning itself something I've only lately yearned for lately, with everything else basically settled in my life and in a quite satisfying way, all that's been left for me to long for is the sweet experience of longing—that early-in-life feeling of so much yet to be.

Not so lately. Suddenly I find myself in a place where perhaps we all find ourselves, longing for some satisfaction that we cannot yet have, yearning for some fulfillment that is only ours in the merest foretaste. To see strangers' faces! To gather together spontaneously. To share a meal of the sort Isaiah imagined, a big, sloppy gathering of everyone who ever was eating the best feast there ever could be. Simply to come to church, where who knows who might show up as well—those open doors meant to be open to all, and to attract anyone and everyone through the appeal of love.

Now, you call ahead. Now, you get the address of where's the gathering, you get on the list, you get the Zoom link. And it's not the same. But it will do for now. It has to. We are keeping fit

for when this distancing is no longer required. And we don't know how long from now that will be.

So, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, keep safe distance but keep in touch. Remember your place as members of the body of Christ and look forward to what shall surely be, when there will have been made a feast of rich food of which all shall eat, and when death itself will have been swallowed up.

Then, all tears will have dried, and all disgrace will have passed, and it shall be said, "This is our God. We have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have longed, and the life in which we are glad, in which we are saved."

This shall surely be.

Thanks be to God.