

## **“The Lord Is Near”**

Philippians 4:2-9

November 15, 2020

Read Philippians 4:2-9

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation.

Rejoice. The Lord is near.

It does not always feel like the Lord is near. It does not always look like it. It does not always sound like it, nor do we always act like it. In prison, Paul wrote “the Lord is near.” In a pandemic, in a culture divide, in a post-election United States we read that “the Lord is near.” Did Paul really mean it?

As we have discussed, Paul’s letter to the Philippians was a pep talk for a congregation. In this part of the letter, Paul was returning to his expectations for the Philippians. He urged them to unity. Specifically, he urged two women – Euodia and Syntyche – to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” This was an echo of the whole exhortation of Chapter 2, in which Paul had written:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus

followed by the great Christ hymn.

Paul knew church people. We do not know anything more about these two women, nor do we know what was the disagreement. What we do know is that Paul urged them to be of the same mind because they were part of the same team. Paul did not take sides or provide a resolution to their dispute. He simply urged them to rejoice in the Lord always and to let their gentleness be known to all. Paul valued and remembered how both had struggled with (or alongside) him in the work of the gospel. He implored the larger congregation to help them get along. In short, Paul was reminding these two to remember with humility the riches of having your name written in the book of life.

The “book of life” is one of those phrases that just jumps out at me. My first impression is Peter at the Pearly Gates with the feather pen, turning the pages of something thicker than a phone book. In the Old Testament, the phrase seems to be more metaphorical, as in an artful way to talk about God’s sovereignty over history. God is writing a book and will save those whose names are in the book but blot out those who sin against him or his people. Jesus picked up on this image in the New Testament when he corrected the disciples for pride in their successes in ministry, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:20) Then, in Revelation 21:20, the description of heaven is “Nothing

unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Paul seemed to be using the book of life as a shorthand code to remind these two women that earthly disputes pale – and *need to pale* – in comparison with the joy of their salvation and eternal life. Hold fast to what is important. Release whatever is not important. Unite in the gospel. Don't divide for anything less. It is what leads him to these next paragraphs, these paragraphs of incredible wisdom for Christian disciples.

Verses 4-9 are the heart of the pep talk. They are the crescendo of Paul's locker room speech to get the team fired up to go out and accomplish great things. He was preparing them for a time in which things would look bad and they would need to persevere and hold on. In doing that, he gives them an imperative: "Rejoice" that he repeated, "Again I say, Rejoice." He told them how, "Let your gentleness be known to all." Then told them why: "The Lord is near."

### **The Lord is near.**

It was a statement of fact. It was Paul's way of recalling to their minds Jesus' conclusion of the Great Commission in the Matthew 28, "I will be with you, even to the very end of the age." "The Lord is near" is both a comfort and a powerful reality.

**The comfort is:** we are not alone, no matter what the circumstances. We are not alone, no matter what trouble or tribulations we are enduring. We are not alone in our joys and sorrows, in our health and sicknesses, in our being overwhelmed or under-appreciated. We are not alone. What a comfort.

**The powerful reality is:** God is in charge. "The Lord is near" is Paul's version of "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near," that Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry. And how did Jesus say we should respond? "Repent and believe the good news." Believe that God is in charge no matter the circumstances. Believe in God, no matter what trouble or tribulations we are enduring. Believe in God in our joys and sorrows, in our health and sicknesses, in our being overwhelmed and under-appreciated. God is in charge. Believe that God is in charge. Trust that God is in charge.

To paint the picture a little differently and perhaps make it a little more accessible for all of us: Upon what do we rely on a day-to-day basis? Imagine this pandemic if we were cut off from our cell phones or texting or email or Netflix or YouTube or social media or other electronic communication. How many of the things we have acquired have taken a sense of priority over our trust in God? How many of these things do we trust more than we trust God? Do we really need God when we have all these other things to keep our attention?

Let me ask you this: I am not looking for a show of hands; but if you had to choose, would you pay your tithe or your phone/data bill? If you had to choose, would you read your Bible or turn on the 24 hour news station (CNN, MSNBC, Fox, OAN or other)? (In fairness, those may not be mutually exclusive options and you may be choosing both, but play along for the purpose of this exercise.)

As you ponder your answers, consider what they reveals about your awareness of your dependence upon God. Think about what it says about your focus on being a good steward of the blessings God

has given you. Think about how you are doing devoting your time to serving the one you profess as Savior and Lord.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be known to others. The Lord is near. The life we have is a gift we receive daily. If we open our eyes, we *can* see how the Lord really is near. Can you see?

A number of years ago, I went to El Salvador with a group of other pastors with Compassion International – the child sponsor ministry. As part of the trip, we went to worship on Sunday at a Project Compassion church in San Salvador. It was wonderful. It was a two hour service; but it went so fast because I was sitting with Maria Jose and her family. Maria Jose was the 6-year-old girl our family sponsored. It was such a marvelous connection. She was every bit the 6-year-old who laughed, played, and fidgeted through the whole service.

As I mentioned, the church was in San Salvador, which was among the most dangerous parts of El Salvador because it marked the border of gang territory between the MS and MS13 gangs. This was Maria Jose's world – economic poverty, for sure; but the greater reality was the prevalence of violence. We heard about the violence everywhere we went.

In a different congregation we met a young mother who was widowed when she was pregnant. Her husband was murdered in a case of mistaken identity. The gang had intended to kill someone else. When we met her, her child was about a two years old. The all-white American pastor group exchanged glances at each other with that "can you imagine?" look. And yet. And yet she rejoiced in God for the blessing of her son, for the blessing of the community at the church, and for the opportunity and hope she saw because "I know the love of Christ."

How? How could she rejoice and not be bitter?

The simple answer was she had eyes to see the hand of the Lord at work. She trusted God's promise. She had an eternal perspective. The horror of her husband's unfair, unjust, awful death hurt – it was not that it did not matter. It mattered and she had tears telling the story. But she also manifested a peace that passed all understanding in the confidence in her Lord: nothing – not even death – could separate her husband from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

She repeated what we heard from the pastor of that church: even though the gangs surround them, it is territory the gangs do not own; it is territory owned by the kingdom of heaven. The Lord is near.

The Lord is near.

The promise that "The Lord is near" was not empty rhetoric. It was reality. It was their expectation. It was something in which the people put their trust. It was the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That is, not seen unless you have eyes of faith to see.

### **By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving**

Paul wrote, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

One of the most striking memories from my trip to El Salvador was the contrast between the environment and the churches we visited. In the midst of what was oppressive social poverty – the lack of any kind of confidence in justice or moral foundation for the culture – these Compassion churches were thriving. They were not simply surviving; they were thriving. They were an embodiment of Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians in our text today. One pastor’s wife said it this way, “Where there is light, there also is always darkness. And where there is darkness, light has an opportunity to shine brightest.”

The people in El Salvador prayed with expectation. Their prayers were big. Their prayers were urgent, but their devotion was patient. Then, as now, El Salvador was in the grips of gang activity and control – to the point that it was fairly well understood that the gangs exercised more authority over day-to-day life than the government.

What do urgent, devoted prayers look like? One pastor we met spent five years – five years! – discipling Norman, who was a leader in the MS gang. Slowly, the pastor gained his trust. Slowly, the pastor gained his respect by being present and persistent. Slowly, Norman learned the love of Christ. After five years, Norman – who told us he had ordered or been personally involved in more than twenty murders – Norman received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. He now works at the Project Compassion program church in San Salvador. We heard his testimony – it was incredible – with other active gang members who had just been released from prison listening with us.

That was a story with a happy ending. We rejoiced. We like happy endings. We rejoice when things are surprisingly good. But do we rejoice in God even in the midst of darkness? It seems an appropriate question on a day in which we have asked people to stay home and watch the live stream instead of coming together in the sanctuary for worship. Rejoicing in happy endings is one thing; rejoicing when all you can see looking forward is darkness requires a very different kind of faith. It requires a more mature faith.

We were invited to go to homes of several of the families the first afternoon we were there. So, in groups of four and five, those of us from the United States went to the homes of the families who have children in a Compassion Project program. My group went to Hector’s home. Hector and his wife had four children, three who still lived at the home Hector built out of cinderblock by himself. There was no electricity. Drinking water had to be purchased in large containers.

I asked, “What is a typical day for you here?” Hector said he got up at about 4:00 a.m. each morning to get to his job that started at 7:00 a.m., worked 10 hours for \$4 a day. He was thankful because he had work and that his work allowed him time at the end of the day to do things for the church. The meal we brought to their home – the El Salvadoran version of KFC – was the most substantial meal this family would have during the week. They would not let us help clean up after; our translator explained why later. The rolls and mashed potatoes we had quietly been encouraged not eat would be meals for the family later in the week. In fact, the bones of the chicken wings and breast we left in the boxes would be used for soup after we were gone.

Keep that in mind when you hear what comes next: we asked how we could pray for the family. They did not ask for anything material. Instead, the wife said, “Pray for our oldest two sons – this one here and the one who is living with his girlfriend – that they receive Christ and have salvation like the rest of us.”

Can you imagine? This was a family that had not wanted anything to do with the church 18 months prior. They registered their youngest son in the Project Compassion program because they saw what was happening. David was about 6 or 7 years old. They enrolled him in order to provide him the opportunity for a better life. Then, something happened: David received Jesus. After David, his thirteen year older sister. Then, David's mother. Then, Hector. Their lives were transformed. Now, they were rejoiced because they knew the Lord was near. They talked about what an honor it was to have us at their home.

Their prayer was not focused on assessment of their own immediate circumstances – either short term or long term. It was not an assessment of their earthly prospects – either short term or long term. Their lives were filled with joy based upon the foundation of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the relief and release of knowing their sins were forgiven, and the promise and hope of spending eternal life in communion with God in Christ Jesus. No gang, no government, no turns in the economy, nor any other power they experienced against them could take that salvation from them. And for that they were thankful. We marveled. Their total dependence upon God granted them a peace that passed all understanding that those of us from the United States could recognize celebrate with them.

Their prayer request was that their other two sons would know that peace.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is sometimes confused with living a life of denial. "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice!" "Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or worthy of praise; think about these things!" Did Paul not read the news? Did he not see the pandemic and earthquakes and the wars and the illnesses and the evil all around?

Yes, Paul saw all those things. Remember, Paul wrote this letter while he was in chains – a prisoner. He was writing to a congregation in which two prominent women were squabbling over something, threatening to divide the congregation. He was writing to a congregation that was living in expectation of persecution. He was not exhorting them despite of the things they saw, he was exhorting them because of the things they saw. It was not a life of denial of reality.

Nor was Paul teaching it simply "mind over matter"; that is, by the power of positive thinking people can *will* themselves to overcome hardship. No, instead Paul was exhorting them to keep the eternal picture in mind. Keep focus. Remember what God has done. Look to see what God is doing. Hope in what God has promised to do. Make your choices faithfully right now. That is what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and worthy of praise. Hardships are real, but *choices are made* in the midst of hardship. Loving God with all our mind means minding God with all our love, no matter the circumstances – or – better said, in all circumstances.

Look at what he says, while in chains, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice." Live it now. Use me as an example, he says. As I mentioned last week, Paul was saying, "Imitate me in not valuing the things that have no lasting value; imitate me in treasuring the very treasure of 'the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'" Imitate my focus *on Christ*. Imitate my passion *for Christ*. Imitate the hope I have found *in Christ* – and in Christ *alone*.

Paul's exhortation to look at his example is as relevant today as it was then. His example is not one we would see celebrated in most of our media today. He was a *prisoner* for Christ; not exactly the poster boy for success in our culture. Yet, he *was* a success and is an example for us because his vision was larger than cultural success and circumstances; he was seeking to know Christ and be fully known by Christ. His hope is our hope. His dream is our dream. His vision is our vision. Living our life with an eye on taking obedient steps every day is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable – excellent or praiseworthy.

I did not have to go to El Salvador to see examples of faithful lives. I think about the people of this congregation and marvel at the witnesses for Christ we have in our midst. We have people whose lives have been touched by God and who are running the race faithfully. Not perfectly – and that is part of the point – that God's grace has met and made a difference in the lives of believers who have stumbled and fallen. We are a congregation filled with people who have stories of how God has redeemed failure, forgave sins, and met us in our darkest times.

### **Conclusion**

So, let me put on my coach's hat again here for a moment and translate Paul for First Presbyterian Church: let's go.

Our mission is not a solo endeavor; it is a collective effort. We need everyone to help. We have to be united. We have to nurture one another, exhort one another, reach out into the community one person at a time or one family at a time. We must share the gospel one conversation at a time.

God has put you in this place for the purpose of using you for his glory. So, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

The Lord *is* near.

Amen.

Prayer

Closing Hymn "To God Be The Glory"

Questions:

1. What does "the Lord is near" mean to you? Is it accurate? How does the answer to that question impact how you make choices, what you prioritize, and how you see others?
2. Paul's sequencing seems to be backwards – wouldn't it be easier for God to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, give us what we ask so that we would be thankful, and *then* we would rejoice? Why do you think Paul structured this pep talk this way?
3. We are a congregation filled with people who have stories of how God has redeemed failure, forgave sins, and met us in our darkest times. Whose stories have inspired you?