

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

How is your fatigue level? How is your confidence level? How is your enthusiasm for the future? We have been, in a sense, imprisoned against our will by this virus for six months now, and still face an uncertain future which we are forced to endure, and a confinement to which we will need to adapt. And there is no predictable end in sight to this incarceration, really. We have been trying so hard to make the best of it, to keep our spirits up, to have some kind of vitality in our altered relationships, to recognize the blessings which must certainly, after all, continue to be showered upon us, right? My memories actually are growing tiresome, in a way. The past seems to tease and taunt me with recollections of how wonderful things were, how little I appreciated the way things were, and with the freedoms I have lost. Are you beginning to feel that way, too? We had such grand plans, such optimism for each new morning, such unfettered, unchained possibilities. And now? I mean, who would have thought it would be so hard and complicated and even dangerous to gather together for a family funeral, for heaven's sake! And, frustratingly, we have only random circumstance to blame for our virtual imprisonment.

St. Paul, that great missionary of the first century, knew a lot about what it meant to be imprisoned, to be jailed for random reasons. He was arrested and confined frequently, as were other Christians in those early days of the church. When Paul would come to a new town, called as he believed by the Holy Spirit to witness to his faith and gather others around himself into a new, faithful community, he predictably got himself into trouble. These towns, large and small, had their traditions, their accepted ways, their own dreams of civic order, their own established beliefs, and yet here was this stranger, this drifter, this foreigner, who presumed to upset the applecart with curious tales and promises. Sooner or later, he would typically run afoul of some local ordinance and spend a night or two in jail. Or he might even be accused of sedition and face more serious legal penalties, even death. His Roman citizenship often worked to his advantage, both for interstate travel and for reluctant prison release, but it must all have grown tiresome for him, too. He must have suffered from terrific fatigue. At least, one would think so.

What we know of Paul comes almost entirely from the narrative of his life and times in the biblical Book of Acts, and from a handful of letters he wrote to the churches he had planted in various far-flung places. And from these sources he is credited with almost single-handedly spreading the gospel of Christ, the good news, beyond Jerusalem into the outside world. Some of the letters he wrote, thankfully, were preserved and widely distributed among the early Christian churches as inspirational readings and thought-provoking discussion-starters. And they became part of the New Testament canon when the Bible was cobbled together a couple centuries later. On our lectionary plate these next 3 weeks, we will hear readings from his letter to the Philippians, a favorite for many. It's only 4 chapters long, but it recalls some very special things about the church at Philippi and Paul's relationship with its parishioners. When you read this letter as the personal message it certainly seems to be, you come away with an insight into the personal struggles and joys of those early days, and what faith in Christ may actually and unexpectedly achieve.

Philippi was a city, a region, really, in northern Greece, in Macedonia, the home ground a couple hundred years earlier of Alexander the great. It was named for Alex's father, Philip, and in more recent times it had become a Roman colony. It was, in fact, a kind of retirement community for Roman legionnaires and dignitaries, set in a beautiful, idyllic countryside away from the stresses of Roman politics and intrigue. It was, however, clearly Roman, devoted to the religion and culture of the Empire. And it was clearly in Europe, a continent upon whose soil Paul had not yet meant to spread the gospel. No one had. It had no Jewish heritage, no ancient Jewish rites or codes, but was thoroughly gentile. Some of the early apostles, including Peter and James, were of the opinion that the ministry of Jesus was intended only to reform and refresh the Jewish faith and restore the piety of the Jewish homeland, not to extend efforts to gentiles living in Europe, of

all places! But Paul felt an augmented calling from the Holy Spirit, and with the tacit approval of the others, he accepted an invitation to go to Philippi, where he coincidentally met a business woman named Lydia and found fertile ground for his gospel witness. Of course, he got into trouble with the local authorities and was briefly jailed there, but his church planting bore good fruit, and he developed great affection for that place and its people.

So, some years later, after following his missionary call further into Greece, to Corinth and even the capital city of Athens, he writes this letter to the Philippians. He is in prison again when he writes the letter, we don't know where the prison was or what the exact charges were, but you can hear in his written lines that he is tempted to just 'give-up'. He has run the race for so many years now, and has expended so much energy and effort, has made such a personal sacrifice, has had such great dreams for the glory of God, that he wonders if it isn't just time to hang it up and retreat to the Lord's merciful care. But that would mean abandoning his connection to the churches at Philippi and elsewhere, and retiring from his ministry altogether. He writes, "I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you." So, here he is, in the confinement and deprivation of prison, with an uncertain future and dreams which may have come to a grinding halt, or at least a significant pause, and is trying to discern just what to do. And then, amid all the disappointment and frustration, he picks up a quill and starts a letter to his old friends at that wonderful little church in Philippi, the friends he has loved so much and with whom he experienced such joy in former days. Personally, I think the strength of this letter, the reason it has been so inspirational to so many for so long, is that it is therapeutic. As we hear some of its content over the next 3 weeks, you may notice how Paul's attitude grows more optimistic as he writes it, how he seems to find healing and encouragement in connecting with his beloved old parishioners.

If you were to take a little extra time this week and read the whole letter to the Philippians, and maybe virtually attend our Bible study Thursday evening, you might find that the overriding tone of this letter is joy. Despite imprisonment, despite disrupted plans and goals, Paul repeatedly writes about joy and rejoicing in this therapeutic letter. He even takes some satisfaction that his witness, both by preaching and modeling, has had, go figure, a positive effect on his jailers! Paul must have been quite a person! Just think of it: giving up practically everything he might have personally achieved and virtually all physical personal comforts, he devoted his life to 'showing-up' in unfamiliar territory, to strangers who spoke unfamiliar languages and lived culturally different lives, and somehow drew them into God's own dream, into God's own kingdom of heaven. And he derived such joy from the mission! He enjoyed such inspiration from the work! His rejoicing must have been contagious.

It kind of makes you wonder about the laborers who grumble and complain in Jesus's parable we heard this morning. For them, it's all about the wage, and the fairness of how they are treated. For them, it's not about the joy of being called, it's not about the satisfaction of serving the master and accomplishing the master's work, it's about their own personal gain. The contrast between Paul finding a way to be joyful while sitting in a dank dangerous dungeon, and the resentment of those day-laborers is really stark. And as we try to make some sense out of our own situation these days and in these strange times, I wonder if that contrast might be a bit instructive. Yeah, I am fatigued, as you probably are, too; our plans and dreams have been disrupted, interrupted, corrupted, and maybe have even needed to be discarded. We are imprisoned, so to speak, unfairly and unexpectedly. And joy can be an elusive commodity these days. But, friends, I believe I can assure you that God's dream, the kingdom of heaven, has not been disrupted at all. We all can find reason to strive side by side, as Paul writes, and not be intimidated by our shadowy opponents, and, praise God, find cause for rejoicing. Read the letter. Amen.