

**Pentecost 19A, Proper 23. Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9.  
October 11, 2020.**

Faith does not protect us from hard times. It is not some impenetrable wall that keeps out misfortune and grief, sheltering the faithful or lucky from the haps of life. Christians, more than most, should remember this. After all, we follow a man whose final confrontation with the powers of the world led to his death. Resurrection defeats death and maybe even undoes death, but it does not make it so that pain, death, and grief never happened. Faith, virtue, love, even blessedness do not protect us from pain, death, and grief. Rather, they are what enable us to encounter pain, death, grief, and fear with integrity. They are what make it possible for us to move through the worst of life and even death while continuing to become who we are called to be.

We know how hard this can be. When we are under tremendous strain, it is easier to act out of character than it is to act the way we would normally describe as natural. Tragedy, trials, or fear disrupt our narrative of where our life is going, and the next steps start to seem blurry. The foundation of how we understand ourselves starts to tremble. The hard times don't just threaten our physical well-being; they also threaten our very identity.

We want faith to lead to Isaiah's vision of salvation, and sometimes it even does. We want the wicked nation smashed and then for us to be invited to the rich feast on the holy mountaintop, where we get to eat the best food and be a part of all peoples reconciled in love and awe of God. This is a great vision, not to be scorned, but to be prayed for and worked for. This earthy, corporal image of the divine banquet, with all peoples united in the flesh in faithfulness and food before God is Isaiah's vision of the end of things. Of that last unending time when we all enthusiastically embrace God's loving will.

Sometimes a glimpse of this coming banquet is the promise and the enemies lose and the food is rich and the mountain is holy. But more often, I think, the promise is more like what we get in Paul's letter to the Philippians. We have been reading this letter for about a month now and are finishing our time in it today. We think that the church in Philippi was facing some kind of external threat, and throughout this letter Paul urges them to seek internal unity. Now, in the final chapter, we finally hear something of what that disunity has been about. Two church leaders, probably heads of house churches, maybe presbyters, the women Euodia and Syntyche, are fighting. And Paul not only urges them to be of the same mind, but also urges others in the church to work to make this possible.

Faced with an external threat and internal division, the church in Philippi is going through some of those hard times we have mentioned. Paul's instructions on how to live in these circumstances couldn't strike a stranger note. He says, "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Rejoice and don't worry: I can't think of harder guidance to follow in a time of fear, pain, or grief. I can't think of harder guidance to follow right now.

But Paul thinks that these are essential components of the faithful life. Rejoicing, gentleness, a kind of humble trusting supplication to God, and then later contemplation of the good and imitation of Paul are all part of this last word of how to live faithfully that Paul is dashing off here at the end of this letter. I think it must be an almost defiant rejoicing, that refuses to ignore all the small signs of life, the little moves against destructiveness, that are every bit as real as the grief and the pain and the fear. It must be a very courageous and resilient gentleness, that refuses to let itself be hardened by the way of the world.

I'm not sure that this is an exhaustive list of how to be a Christian. It may be just that part of Christian life that most needed emphasizing in Philippi when this letter was written. But notice, my friends, what the promises here are. Paul never says, "live in this faithful way and all your endeavors will succeed, the illness will be cured, the right candidate will win, she will come home, the enemies will be defeated." No, the promises are "the Lord is near." "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." And "the God of peace will be with you."

One day the world will be as God intends it and we will all eat together in joy and faithfulness. And sometimes we see glimpses of that even now. Sometimes the bad guys lose and we find ourselves reconciled and the rejoicing comes easy. But the divine promise that we hear through Paul today is not that final victory is imminent or that the strife is over. It is instead that God is near, yea though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, especially as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God draws as near as our next breath in loving presence. And as God draws near, God doesn't necessarily protect us from all the pains of life and death. Instead, God guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, making it possible for us to continue, even in the deepest valleys, to become the people we are called to be. Through any grief or tragedy or fear—God is with us, and God is drawing out of us the people we will be. Amen.