

Focus
Philippians 4:4-9
March 22, 2020
Dr. Ryan J. Baer

I

Earlier this week, I had a bewildering experience. I lost track of what day it was. Between the fog of helping Amy stand up a home school for two third graders and a kindergartner, working via teleconference with my colleagues on the church staff to sort through all kinds of issues, and my own fear and anxiety over what is happening in our world, I couldn't remember if it was Thursday or Friday.

And so I am so grateful that this is Sunday. This is The Lord's day, the first day of the week, when the church gathers to remember, even in these 40 days of Lent, that early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb only to discover that death and mourning and crying and pain did not get the last word after all.

And so I am so glad that you are here. And that you are here. And that you are here. We have made it through another trying week, but here we are again. I'm mindful that I'm preaching nearly empty pews this morning, but a wise mentor once invited me on those Sundays when there is low attendance to consider the volume of space in the sanctuary between the heads of those in the pews and the ceiling above their heads, and to think about that space as being filled with the saints of the church who've gone before us. He invited me to remember that the church of Jesus Christ is always far bigger than what we see with our naked eye, for we are surrounded by what the writer of Hebrews calls the great cloud of witnesses that cheers us on as we run this race that has been marked out for us.

So whether you're here in the sanctuary this morning or here with us online, whether you're watching by yourself or whether you're crowded around a screen with family, know that this is the day that the Lord has made, and we will rejoice and be glad in it, and I am so glad that you are here.

II

I suspect that I am not the only one who has become temporally disoriented this week. Every single one of us has already had our lives upended in some way, some of us more severely than others, and I fear there is still more disorientation and disruption yet to come.

This is not normal. Children should be able to go to school with their classmates and highly trained educators. Teenagers should be able to hang out. Grandparents should be able to hug their grandchildren. The people of God should be able to be together in the house of the Lord on the Lord's Day. Doctors and nurses and hospital staff should have all the tools they need to do their jobs. None of this is normal. It's all so very disorienting.

III

Focus
Philippians 4:4-9
March 22, 2020
Dr. Ryan J. Baer

If it's any consolation at all, we are not the first people of God to suddenly find ourselves reeling, disoriented, anxious and afraid. I was planning to pick up our walk through the Gospel of Mark again this morning, but once again, the Spirit had other plans. So this morning, we will be hearing an excerpt from a letter.

The man who wrote this letter is known to us only by his first name and hometown – Paul of Tarsus. Paul was the most prolific writer, preacher, and theologian of the first century. Of the 27 books that make up our New Testament, about half were either written by Paul or attributed to him.

Paul's fervent proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ often got him into trouble. On more than one occasion, he was beaten to within an inch of his life, and he was incarcerated more than once. In fact, the letter we're reading this morning was written from behind bars. Although, it's hard to say if there would have been actual bars. The Roman empire didn't believe in spending much money on prisoner comfort, and sometimes, Roman jails were really just open pits, without any kind of sanitary facilities. Prisoners were dependent on friends and family on the "outside" for even the most basic of human necessities, and it appears that some of Paul's friends in the Roman colony of Philippi had learned of his incarceration and sent him some much needed sustenance.

Much of Paul's letter to the Philippians, then, reads like a thank you letter, for that's what it is. But Paul wasn't just writing a thank you for much needed support. Paul also used the occasion to reiterate some things to the Philippians that he had taught them about God's amazing grace.

And so with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Philippians, chapter 4, verses 4 through 9.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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. 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When Paul sat down to write these words, he wasn't sitting at a nice desk in a big leather chair with a hot cup of coffee at his side. He was sitting in a Roman jail, or more likely, simply a Roman pit. I've never been incarcerated, but I imagine that being in prison is terribly disorienting. It's easy to lose track of what day it is, or even what year

Focus
Philippians 4:4-9
March 22, 2020
Dr. Ryan J. Baer

it is – that's why even in the cartoons the prisoners make little tally marks on the walls. I don't imagine when Paul looked around, he saw much that was pure, or pleasing, or honorable, or worthy of praise within his immediate field of view.

What Paul is offering us here is more than platitudes about “mind over matter.” No, Paul is offering us the peace of the gospel.

IV

Friend, your mind is an incredibly powerful, but also incredibly impressionable thing. Watch this. Whatever you do, in the next ten seconds, do not, under any circumstances, visualize a purple elephant. Don't think about purple elephants, don't imagine purple elephants, don't draw a purple elephant with your mind's eye.

And all you can see now is a purple elephant, right? Your mind is an incredibly powerful thing, and it has the power to affect your whole being. In my doctoral research, I discovered a theory that we human beings are heliocentric – that is, we tend to orient our whole beings toward sources of energy, much like the way a sunflower orients itself toward the sun as it tracks across the sky.

And as you may recall, energy can be positively or negatively charged – think of the positive and negative terminals on a car battery. We naturally orient ourselves toward sources of energy, whether those sources are negatively or positively charged.

Lord have mercy, my friend, is there an abundance of negative energy in our world at this very moment. The negative energy in our world is so powerful right now that you can almost feel it pulsing out there.

But even though he knew nothing of electricity, Paul knew about positive energy. And so even in the disorienting space of a Roman pit, Paul is able to rejoice fully in the Lord. While sitting in the kind of filth and muck I can't even imagine, Paul is able to assure the Philippians that the Lord is near. Paul has discovered the secret to the peace of the gospel – to orient himself toward the positive energy – toward the things that are good, and honorable, and pleasing, and worthy of praise, and to keep on doing the things he has seen and heard in the gospel of Christ.

As disorienting as this week has been my friend, as much negative energy as there has been, there has no doubt been beauty and positive energy, too.

Spring arrived right on schedule this week, virus or no virus, and God has been painting our Piedmont all kinds of shades of green and white and purple and pink. Neighbors are coming out from behind pulled shades and strolling in the streets, giving a six-foot berth, of course, but communities are coming together. Businesses and churches and classrooms are learning how to use technology in new and innovative ways to stay connected and engaged with each other. There is much in your life, my friend, that is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and worthy of praise, if you'll just take the time to look.

Focus
Philippians 4:4-9
March 22, 2020
Dr. Ryan J. Baer

This is a disorienting, bewildering time, my friend. There is no doubt about it, and very little that you can do in the short run to change it. But you do have a choice about what you will focus upon this week. So choose wisely.

V

Remember, my friends, we are all in this thing together. And so I have some homework for you this week. When you see something in your daily lives that is pleasing, that is honorable, that is true, that is just, that is pure, that is commendable or excellent or worthy of praise, snap a photo of it, and upload it to our FPC Athens Facebook page, and add the hashtag #focus. For that which we focus upon becomes our reality.

A colleague of mine posted this week that she is concerned about what the church will be like when all this is over. Will people come back? Will they get so used to worshiping online in their PJs that we all become unintentional televangelists?

I'm not too worried about all that. Because the church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people. I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together, all who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together.

So my friends, wherever you are, whatever you're doing, go be the church this week. For the world needs you to be the church, now more than ever. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in the church, and the God of peace will be with us all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.