

October 11, 2020 (Focus: Philippians 4:4-9)

One thing I hear a lot of these days, the common lament as it were, is that every day brings some strange new thing, some news that we do not want to hear, some strange new behavior or quote, some new bad news, some beloved person's passing, etc. We are in a time of heightened awareness, I think, of the every changing landscape upon which we trod in this life, and it seems like so much of which we have to focus on right now is negative, is unwanted, is not what we would call the building up of God's kingdom here on earth.

And one of the things I hear in all this lamenting is something unspoken, we may not even be aware of it, but it is there nonetheless. I think we fear most how all this bad news will change us. Will we no longer trust in those institutions that we thought we could trust in? Will we ever trust our fellow human beings again to do the right thing? Will we be able to love those we oppose when they seem to have no heart and no moral fiber? Will we ever be able to wake up to a new day and not dread checking the news? And most of all, do we still trust God in all this chaos we seem to be living through?

One of the other readings for today, which I almost chose at the beginning of this week for our service today as I felt immersed in the chaos of the news is a reading from the book of Exodus, when Moses and the people he led out of slavery were wandering in the desert. Moses had gone up Mt. Sinai and had his little powwow with God that seemed to be lasting a long time, and the people waiting at the bottom of the mountain got nervous. What is happening? Where is Moses? Maybe something bad happened? Oh, no, if something bad happened, what are we to do? As we can know doubt understand from our own experiences, in that time of stress and uncertainty, they began to spiral in their thoughts in quite negative ways, so much so that they needed something to hold on to, and so they clamored for something to focus on, a false god, and those leaders who were with them also got frightened and gave them what they wanted, a golden calf. But all it was was a statue – it wasn't something that created, it wasn't something that loved them, it wasn't something that truly brought them peace. It was just something to put up on a pedestal and receive what they gave it, but it gave nothing back. Instead of waiting on God and trusting in God in uncertain times, they chose to worship a hollow shell of an image.

This sort of behavior, turning to earthly gods in times of uncertainty and chaos is something we humans have done over the course of history. Today one of the golden calves, the gods we have made for ourselves, is a vision of the past that we

seek to return to. Behind all these fears many of us have is a fear that the world is on a path that has been chosen and we cannot get off it, that people will not change, and that those forces in society that seek to take us back to the past will win out, that we will be forced back to a time when our society was more homogenous in every way. A time when certain people knew their place, which was not a place at the table with us but rather at another table, a table not of bounty but of subsistence, a table where we sent the scraps from our table down to when we felt magnanimous. A time when people had to hide whom they loved, and who they were, as we forced everyone to conform to one standard.

It feels like forces are at work to put us on that path, back to the past, back to some rosy-glassed vision of a past that was true for a few but not for most of us, but who cares about the rest, they don't matter. And when such forces are at work, we fear they will win, they will put us on that path, for these forces always feel so strong when we are wrestling with both uncertainty and fear.

Yes, there is much to worry about and lament about these days. But there is also a choice we need to make. It is a choice that is not special to this time and place and context. It is a choice both from time immemorial and a choice new for each day, or as I think Martin Luther once said, a choice for each moment. Each moment, really, we are called to make a choice – how are we to live in that moment? Will we choose to exploit, to think only of ourselves, to abuse, to oppress, to ignore, to close off our attention and our hearts? Will we choose to fear the other, to despair of the future, to leave it up to someone else, even if that someone else does not have the mind or the heart for the calling? Or will we choose the path of hope, the path of peace, the path of love? Will we choose to raise up all boats, even if that means we don't raise our own boat as much as we could have if we only thought of ourselves?

Will we choose the path of fear, or the path of faith in God and God's ways? In this time of uncertainty, this new day, this new moment, is one in which we can choose. We can choose to be overcome by fear, by despair, and we can give up hope. Or we can choose to remember that God's love is steadfast and true and for such a time as this. We can choose to remember that we are called beloved by God. We can choose to remember that we are called by God to participate in the creation of each new day, not just standing by to watch what other choose but to actively help in the building up of our world day by day. To paraphrase MLK Jr., "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments

of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy.”

So where do we stand in this time of challenge and controversy? It’s not something to say lightly or just out of habit or because it is expected of us, but I think we can say that in this time, we still rejoice in the Lord. And its not the easy thing to do, but let’s continue in the way set before us by Jesus. In the way he set before us, we let our gentleness be known to everyone. We offer prayer. We let the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And, as Paul further said to those friends in Philippi so long ago, as we continue to live into doing the things that we have learned from Jesus, we do that which is true, and honorable, and just, and pure in the ways of God. We do that which is pleasing to God, and commendable to God, made known to us in Jesus, the one who welcomed all, and blessed and healed all, and called all beloved of God.

So let us not focus on the story of the golden calf, of the people who are choosing to sacrifice themselves out of greed or out of fear to build up that golden calf. Let us not choose the way of fear. Let us choose the way of love, each moment. Let us focus on the path laid before us by the one we call Christ, who calls us to a life of love of God and neighbor, each moment. That is enough for us, to follow that path, to shine God’s light. A golden calf can only reflect light, it cannot generate its own light, and the light it reflects is dim at best. We are called to shine God’s light, a great and powerful light, a light that will dispel the darkness, a light for all, a light which will help others to see the way. Whatever is true, and honorable, and just, and pure in the ways of God, that is the light we can shine.

Philippians 4:4-9

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.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, as the seasons change, as the trees awash with colors and the yards awash with fallen leaves remind us of the glory of your creation, your gift to us, we give you thanks for all that you have blessed us with in each new day. Life always seems to be changing, and some of the change is wondrous, and some is strange and mysterious and unwanted, yet through all of it you are our God and we are your people, at least we try to be, and we are grateful for this blessed relationship of love and grace.

We are creatures who like to feel in control, that we can do something, and in doing, we feel less anxious. But there is so much right now that is out of our hands, so much uncertainty, and so we do worry, and fret, and lose sleep, and lose hope. Yet you have given us something to do, something mysterious and powerful, something that does make a difference, to others and to our own souls and bodies. Thank you, gracious and merciful God, for giving us the gift of prayer.

Most of us are not doctors or nurses and so cannot heal the sick, so we pray for their healing, body, mind, and spirit. We cannot bring back what has been lost, and so we pray for those who mourn. We are not powerful legislators, nor do we serve as great leaders in our country or the world, so we pray for those who are, that they may hear your still quiet voice of wisdom and courage and self-giving love. We pray for those greatly affected by the what the leaders do or don't do, that we can work together to help all lives matter by uplifting the lives of the poor, the marginalized, the neglected, the oppressed, the persecuted.

Breathe new breath into us, O Spirit of the living God. Fall afresh on us. Help us to breathe new life and new hope into our communities, especially in these uncertain times. With each breath we take, help us to be filled with your patience, your hope, your joy, your strength, your courage, your love.

Moment of silent meditation...

With each breath we take in and exhale, help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as we taught to us by the one we call messiah, son of the living God, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...