

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Have you ever written a love letter? I have. Lots of them. Received a lot of them too. Back in the time before email, instant messaging, text messaging, Facebook, Skype, Facetime and cell phones, when a long distance call was not something lightly made, Cynthia and I were dating and she was at a college roughly 65 miles away, we literally wrote to each other every single day, and the neat thing was our love letters were always delivered the next day. Those letters were wonderful as we talked about things past, the present, and the future, especially the future, both of us looking forward with delight and anticipation to our wedding day and our lives together.

All of this brings me to our second lesson today, Paul's love letter to the Philippians. And a love letter it is, written from prison, whether Rome, Ephesus, or Caesarea, the latter two cities where Paul spent considerable time on his way to Rome, where he faced a possible death sentence. Written in chains, whether literal chains or figurative chains denoting his suffering and imprisonment, or perhaps both.

In this love letter we have thanksgiving, encouragement, anticipation, things past, the present, and the future, especially the future, looking forward with delight and anticipation to the "day of Jesus Christ." Now we should note that Paul and his fellow Christians fully expected that Christ's return was imminent, meaning anytime now. Knowing he could be freed from prison, his persecutors, a potential death sentence, if only he recanted, denied his faith, I am struck by how in his imprisonment, light and life, the gospel, Jesus Christ are even more precious to Paul than before. I think it was Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa who commented along the lines that it must be difficult to be Christian in a place where Christians are not imprisoned for their beliefs.

Now whatever Paul is suffering, chains, imprisonment, physical afflictions and deprivations, it simply does not matter to him. He rejoices knowing that the Philippians hold him in their hearts, he rejoices and comments that they share God's grace with him, not only in imprisonment, but in "the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Brothers and sisters, think about this, we also share God's grace with Paul and with the Philippians. We share and we matter to each other, whether we are imprisoned with chains, or imprisoned with emotional, financial or even physical captivity. We wait together for the day of Christ, we wait together knowing that through the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us now, and is yet to come. This is part of what the season of Advent is about, looking forward to the celebration of Jesus' first coming, yet at the same time looking forward to his return. And in the meanwhile we are to live, we live our lives as if Christ is already physically among us. A retired pastor of a previous congregation shared the thought that we cried when we were born and those who were there were smiling, then he added we should live in such a way that we die with a smile on our face while those around us cry. I thought this was a great way to share how we are to live as disciples, as followers of Christ, as those who know he is with us now, yet at the same time, will come again.

Paul's love letter to the Philippians brings me around to our gospel this morning. Luke, the author of our gospel, is setting the stage for another love letter, I call it God's love letter to us. Luke gives us some historical background, mentioning Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas, noting that it was at this time that the "word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." John begins to proclaim a "baptism of repentance" for the forgiveness of sin. This baptism is not the Jewish purification ritual, and it not the baptism with which we baptize, but instead it was an event tied to repentance and the start of a new life. Repentance meaning in Hebrew understanding to turn around, go the other way. Call it a radical change of heart.

Talk about a radical change of heart. Instead of focusing on ourselves, our actions are focused on what God would have us do in responding to the needs of our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, with our eyes opened to see their wounds. Now think of this in terms of the terrorism in San Bernadino this past Wednesday, the terrorism in Colorado before that. We feel so helpless, so angry, we want to do something, to make a positive difference, to see this senseless violence stop. But what can we do? Sure, we write letters, post on Facebook and Twitter, but nothing happens, nothing changes. We ask ourselves, and others, when will the killing end? It all seems so pointless, we look for meaning, for comfort, we think of repentance, turning around, going the other way, a radical change of heart. But what about the folks who

are responsible for the killings, the violence? So what would God have us do in responding to the needs of our nation, native-born citizens, immigrants, and refugees? So what would God have us do in responding to the needs of those who have been affected directly or indirectly by the mass killings? What can you and I do? Really, what can we do when even together in our worshipping community, with countless brothers and sisters in the faith around the world, when we feel bereft, alone, wondering where God is. What hope do we have?

Our Gospel writer John points to the Savior, our Savior, our love letter from God, God's love and work unfolding in human history, at God's initiative, sending us the assurance that Jesus our Hope, is continually present among us, even as we wait for his return. Some time ago I heard a Lutheran bishop from the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. What struck me at that time, and since, is not so much how this bishop, the pastors in his synod, and other Christians in El Salvador ran the risk of imprisonment, but rather how they ran the very real risk of being killed for their faith. This was during a time when there was essentially a civil war in El Salvador. God's presence was strong enough to hold that bishop and his pastors, to give them the strength to do and to say what had to be done and said in the face of ruthless and relentless evil and brutality. I have read how he, and other Christians, were afraid many times, but how Christ's presence and assurance enabled him to live day by day and face the oppressors.

In our lives today, when things are going pretty good, it is easy to begin to take God for granted, to get complacent. In times of tragedy, disaster, terrorism, we wonder where God is, why God isn't doing something. But God is here and he is in us, among us, and works through us. Here's the thing brothers and sisters, we sometimes forget our role as the people of God, as people of the promise. We forget that we are stewards of this world not detached users and despoilers of it. And as people of the promise we have a responsibility from the giver of that promise, the one who sent us this incredible love letter in his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus. We are to tell others of God's promise, his love letter to us, we are to show others our response to it, to live in such a way that we literally demonstrate our trust in God's promise, that others see our response to it, that they may come to believe.

Imagine overflowing love, love that overflows, as Paul writes in his letter, overflows more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us determine what is best, best for us and for our brothers and sisters, through Jesus Christ, God's own love letter to you and me, that we may live our lives to produce a harvest of righteousness for the glory and praise of God! This then is to be the voice of we who are in the wilderness, the wilderness of the world, of worldly cares and concerns, our voice as we, with Christ in us and beside us, as we prepare the way of the Lord, that all flesh may see the salvation of God

AMEN