

Advent 2, December 6 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

You're a citizen of Philippi in 62 A.D.

Philippi, you would know, had reappeared in written history after the Roman Civil War around 30 B.C. as a place where army veterans were re-settled by a grateful Emperor, including some from his personal Praetorian Guard. Philippi was also made a center of Roman administration. Now, nearly 100 years on, Philippi had become a wealthy city with a strong military identity and presence. And you are grateful for that wealth, and grateful for the strong presence of the Empire's faithful military servants. You feel safe.

But (you would also know) all is not well with the world – and the “not well” part is impacting you. Word had arrived that (a year before) local ferment had exploded into violent revolt in Britannia, a revolt led by Queen Boudicca, whose army greatly outnumbered the Roman military presence there.

And, closer to home, a Roman army has just been defeated in Armenia.

Both of those things – military challenges – are, you know clearly, undoubtedly going to affect your home, in this military town.

Closer still, more troubles are evident: Mt. Vesuvius has just begun to rumble, with earthquakes significantly damaging some of the nearby towns.

In the always-fascinating political life of the Empire, you're hearing that the Emperor Nero is gaining a reputation for corruption - and, no doubt, the Senate can't be far behind him....those damn politicians!!

Everywhere you look there seems to be bad news. And now there's trouble in the Syrian Province, and especially in the Galilean Prefecture, where those tiresome Jewish rebels are fermenting revolt.

The world is filled with bad news: military defeat, terrorism, political instability and corruption, and the disturbing rumbling of the gods.

But you're a follower of The Way. You follow the teachings of a Galilean Jew who had been brutally executed about 30 years ago. His teachings offer a different perspective. You know about him through the teachings of one of his disciples - a man named Paul, from Tarsus in Asia Minor.

You're very fond of Paul! And – great news! – you've heard from another follower that a letter has arrived from him!

However, that letter, you discover, has bad news. Not only does an impending sense of death

permeate the letter, it does so, you realize, because Paul is in Roman custody in Rome (and not under house arrest as he was previously but – this time – in prison).

It would be easy to be depressed!

I'm struck by how similar 62 A.D. in Philippi is with the Puget Sound! Lots of military installations, retired military personnel. And the world outside sounds familiar, too: war and terrorism, anxiety and uncertainty, death.

That makes Paul's comments in today's Epistle all the more striking! In the face of all of this stuff that's going on in 62 A.D. that would have challenged the sense of well-being for any normal person, and especially for the Philippian followers of Jesus and Paul....AND in the face of the dark meaning of Paul's own imprisonment – one that ended two years later with his execution – Paul can still say to them this: ***“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.”***

Paul can say this because of his life is rooted in Christ. Over and over again he acknowledges the person he used to be, and how that rootedness transformed him into a different person.

And, he always adds, how that rootedness in Christ will also transform us, if we will allow it.

And here we are, a week into a season – Advent – that's traditionally a preparation for Christmas. Why, then, are we given this reminder right now?

I think it's because we're not particularly patient at this time of year! We are waiting and waiting isn't easy. We want Christmas now! We want fulfillment now! We want spiritual growth now! We want the world to change for the better now! We want our anxiety, and our fear, and our anger to go away now!

It doesn't work that way. The moral arc of history and our own spiritual arc just often move slowly, more organically, and at their own speed. Our own personal and communal growth takes time.

From his prison in Rome, Paul was more than aware of that reality – and so he reminds the Philippians – and, now, us – of those characteristics of life that will allow us to live with our temporal frustrations, waiting out that slow shift such that our individual lives and our common life can be enriched by the journey. Here's what Paul says:

- 1) God is the source of all good gifts;
- 2) God is working in our lives;
- 3) we can enhance the growth of God's gifts by individual and communal spiritual practices; and
- 4) these gifts can evolve into a great harvest.

This is true, Paul reminds us, in spite of all we see around us that seems to suggest that our world

is passing away.

The reading from Malachi adds to Paul's promotion of spiritual practices, reminding us that Advent is also a time of refining and simplifying. Faithfulness involves focusing on the deeper meaning of our faith. Advent invites reflection about God's incarnation in our lives, offering us a vision aimed at transformation and liberation of what is best in us and our communities. It involves a new heart and a generous spirit. By own spiritual values and practices, by our own generosity, we can midwife the birth of Christ in our families and communities. May it be so for all of us this Advent and this Christmas – and beyond. AMEN.

(I'm grateful for Pastor Bruce Epperly for his thoughts on Philippians that contributed to this sermon)

