

“A Hopeful Attitude

Philippians 4:4-9

Jim Stockdale was the senior naval officer held captive in Hanoi, North Vietnam, in the infamous prisoner of war camp nicknamed “Hanoi Hilton.” His jet was shot down on September 9, 1965, while flying a mission over North Vietnam. He parachuted into a small village, where he was severely beaten and taken prisoner. For the next 7 ½ years, he was routinely tortured and denied medical attention. During his captivity, his leg was twice broken while being tortured. Eventually, Stockdale was one of 11 prisoners kept in individual windowless concrete cells measuring 3 by 9 feet with a light bulb kept on around the clock and was locked in leg irons each night. But throughout all of this, Jim Stockdale never lost hope that one day he would return home.

After the war, Jim shared the coping strategy he used during his ordeal in this Vietnam POW camp. His answer is often called the Stockdale paradox. These are his words:

“I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Stockdale was then asked who didn’t make it out of Vietnam. Here’s his surprising answer:

“Oh, that’s easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

Stockdale then added:

“This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

In today’s scripture reading, Paul ends his letter to the church in Philippi exactly the way he began the letter, with a call to rejoice. In Philippians 1:18 Paul says, “...and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...” Philippians 2:17, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” Philippians 2:18, “and in the same way also you must be glad and rejoice.” Philippians 2:28, “in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again.” Philippians 3:1, “Finally my brothers and sisters rejoice in the Lord.” And in today’s scripture reading from the last chapter of this letter, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice!”

Rejoice? Are you kidding me? Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter, and it’s clear from the words he writes that there is a very real possibility that Paul could be executed. So, was Paul just being a blind optimist? Was he not taking the threat on his life seriously when he said he was rejoicing and called the Philippians to rejoice?

Well, back in chapter 1, Paul wrote that he was not sure which he preferred—to be executed would mean that he would go and be with Jesus; to live would mean that he could continue to serve Jesus fruitfully in this world. Either one was fine with him. “Living is Christ and dying is gain,” writes Paul. “I don’t know which I prefer.” That doesn’t sound like blind optimism to me.

But here’s another issue: How can Paul rejoice in serving Christ when his opponents were making his life miserable? In the first chapter of this letter, Paul wrote, “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.”

These opponents of Paul were making his life miserable. But listen to Paul’s absolutely amazing response to his situation. “So how am I to respond? I’ve decided that I really don’t care about their motives, whether mixed, bad or indifferent. At least they are preaching the Gospel. Even when they are trying to show me up, at least Christ is proclaimed, so I just cheer them on!” Amazing! How does he do it?

This morning’s charge for Christians is to rejoice: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice,” and this is not a call to blind naive optimism. When Paul says, “Do not worry about anything,” he’s not foolishly saying, “Everything is going to be all right, nothing really bad is going to happen to you. You’ll be home by Christmas.” It’s very clear from Paul’s words in this letter that Paul understands that really bad things can happen to really good people. So how can Paul rejoice?

Well, he tells us how in this passage. “The Lord is near.” As Christians, that’s the source of our peace—the peace that surpasses all understanding, that guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. How does Paul keep from losing hope in prison? How can he maintain his disposition of gentleness, how can he keep his focus on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, commendable—anything worthy of praise? How can Paul keep on doing these things in the face of death and opposition? Well, because Paul knows that he is not alone. “The Lord is near.” And when he focuses his life on Jesus, living for Jesus, living ‘in Christ,’ the God of Peace is with him; therefore, he knows how his story will ultimately end. And, so, in this knowledge, he can rejoice—always – even when confronting “the most brutal facts of his current reality, whatever they might be.”

My friends, during the time I have served as your interim pastor, you have heard me say many times that the church in our country today faces a lot of challenges. Year after year, there are fewer people in every age group who recognize their need to be a part of a church, and this is increasingly so among young adults. I think that’s because many people in our world today have forgotten or never understood their desperate need for God in their lives. And perhaps one reason people have forgotten their need for God is because of the church’s reluctance to talk about any current issue of real substance out of fear that that conversation might be perceived as divisively political.

In my eNews article this week, I wrote:

“There seems to be so much to worry about in our world today—yet another shooting this time against children and teachers, coming on the heels of two racially motivated shootings, a war in Ukraine that could evolve into World War III, rising inflation, a polarized nation, a polarized congress, not to mention our on-going pandemic. “Do not worry about anything”? Yeah, right! And does it seem a bit naïve to say, “The Lord is near! Don’t worry.” If the Lord is near, why do these things keep happening? And how can my heart and mind be guarded by the peace of God while these things keep happening?

Folks, we are not the first generation to ask these questions. Perhaps this question was first asked when Cain killed his brother Abel, but God wasn’t finished with Cain and in fact God protected Cain, and I personally believe God eventually redeemed and transformed him. Certainly, this question was asked when the Walls of Jerusalem were breached and destroyed by the Babylonians and Israel was hauled off into Exile, at least until God brought them back to the Promised Land. And certainly, this question was asked when Jesus was crucified, until that question was answered on the third day with his resurrection.

In the words of an old hymn, “God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year...” Folks, it seems to me that we as a church can approach the major issues of our day in one of two ways. We can ignore and avoid them and have vague idealistic conversations about God’s love and God’s grace and how everything will eventually work out in the end for our world and our church. In other words, “We’ll be home by Christmas.”

Or we can learn how to love and trust each other enough to be honest with each other about how we see and feel about the problems and issues of world and how our Christian faith shapes and determines our views. Sometimes we may learn something from each other; other times we may need to agree to disagree. But my friends, “[We] must never confuse faith that [God] will prevail in the end—which [we] can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of [our] current reality, whatever they might be.”

Back in the day, churches simply put a Presbyterian Church sign at the front of their lot and listed their address and phone number in the yellow pages, and visitors would flock through their doors. Folks, those days are gone.

In today’s world, churches that optimistically go into the future, business as usual, ignoring the problems and issues in our world will eventually die of a broken heart. But churches who work and struggle to understand what it means to be a church in the world today, churches who open their eyes to the needs and concerns and problems and issues of the world outside of their doors, churches who faithfully and stubbornly “believe that [because God is near, God’s purpose] will prevail in the end,” while disciplining themselves to confront “the most brutal facts of their current reality, whatever they might be,” those churches will eventually find a home in the 21st Century.

The Churches who survive our modern day challenges will be the ones who build their hope on Paul’s promise at the beginning of Philippians where Paul writes: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

As this church moves forward in the years ahead, continually facing the challenging future that awaits you, I encourage you to go faithfully into your future by rejoicing, always—not with blind optimism, but in the faithful assurance that you are not alone, for the Lord is near; therefore, you know how your story [and God’s story] will end.

Fear not, be at peace and rejoice! for the Lord is near! Let us pray:
O Lord, my God, in the words of that great hymn I pray: “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Nought be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night, Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.”
Amen. (*Be Thou My Vision*, vs. 1)

David A. Cagle
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