

Proper 23-A
October 15, 2017
St. John's Cathedral
The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip

About 32 years ago, I sat in the very front pew here in this cathedral and listened to Jeff Terry preach the sermon at the service where Keith Axberg and I were ordained to the priesthood. I remember quite a bit about that sermon, but the part that I remember most clearly was the charge at the end.

"Preach hope," he said. "Remember that the word enthusiasm comes from the root 'theos' – to be possessed or inspired by God. Our world needs the message of hope and possibility desperately."

I remember those words almost every day. I try to live into them. And I think they were not just words for those being ordained, but rather for everyone who was in the cathedral that day and everyone here today. Living hope, preaching hope, sharing hope are vocation we share.

We've been living through a difficult season in many ways in the past months. When we watch or read the news, we see the suffering of people across the nation and the world whose lives were disrupted: natural disasters – earthquakes, hurricanes and tropical storms, floods, and this past week a series of raging wildfires that have left neighborhoods, business and agricultural areas in ashes and carved a path of terrifying destruction across northern California. A horrific mass shooting in Las Vegas. Add to that a more than contentious and anxious political climate where cable news rails with outrage day in and day out.

Where is the hope? Where is the hope in Puerto Rico, where so much was destroyed by Hurricane Maria. Where is the hope in Northern California among those whose homes and business – whose neighborhoods were wiped out.

Enter St. Paul as he wrote his letter to the Philippians.

“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.

These words are not a cheerful, but empty ‘Don’t worry, be happy sort of thing. They express a depth of faith – a strength of hope that is built through a lifetime. Built through a relationship with the living God. A relationship with the risen Christ.

These words were originally written to a relatively young Christian community in its formative stages – having some of its own struggles and growth pains. It is also written to us – words of wisdom and faith. But more significantly, Paul wrote this from his own place of struggle – as a prisoner near the end of his life, a prisoner who had been in captivity for long time. How, we wonder, does he rejoice as a prisoner who no doubt faced execution.

When we hear this part of Paul’s letter we might use a contemporary expression to say that he is being for the Philippians a non-anxious presence. His perspective from his own life of faith can transcend the difficulty of his own situation and share peace and wisdom with those in Philippi. But we also know that

it was his own resurrection faith – his own encounter with the risen Christ – that shaped his life and his ministry as a great missionary.

Be open and trust God, he says. Say your prayers, be gentle, and receive the peace of God.

I couldn't help thinking as I read this, of the letters of a 20th century saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor, scholar and teacher who was also part of the resistance movement that opposed the Nazi regime in Germany. He was arrested in 1943, spent 18 months in a prison in Berlin and then was moved to Flossenburg prison in Bavaria where he was executed in 1945.

In many ways, Bonhoeffer was a remarkable prisoner. He prayed with and for his fellow prisoners and guards. He offered kindness and received respect. He had a significant amount of correspondence, some of which you can read in a book, "Letters and Papers from Prison."

Many of his letters were to his parents and other family members. He also wrote to friends and colleagues. Like Paul, he brought a strong and hopeful faith into his prison cell.

He wrote to his mother, "Thank you for all the love you have brought into my cell during the past year; it has made every day easier to bear. I believe these years, hard as they have been, will have bound us more closely together. My New Year's wish for you and Papa and indeed for all of us, is that it may bring us at least an occasional glimpse of light, and that we may have the joy of reunion one day."

In some of the gloomiest of places in one of the most terrifying periods of history, gratitude and thanksgiving comes into his letters frequently.

He wrote, "In normal life we hardly realize how much more we receive than we give, and life cannot be rich without such gratitude. It is so easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements compared with what we owe to the help of others."

This is a profound insight to come from someone in the midst of a prison sentence and in a system that showed little mercy. A British army officer who was in the same prison remarked that Bonhoeffer "seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive."

You and I have known people who have this gift and this faithful insight into life, who are so profoundly thankful for the gift of life itself that everything else takes a back seat. For me, some of them have been people whose lives were, in other ways, rather bleak because of poor health, disability or displacement.

I remember so well a man in his 90s who I visited with communion about once a month in the 1990s. This was a man with severe arthritis who could barely shuffle around his apartment. Every time I went to his home, he greeted me with a smile and litany of thanksgivings: That he had a helper who enabled him to live independently. That he woke up that morning. That he could sit at his kitchen table, pray Morning Prayer and puff on his pipe.

He was a man who lived with both gratitude and hope – a hope that he shared with everyone who he saw every day.

