

alive, what a time to try to make a difference in the world than in the time we're in right now. And Paul rejoices at the time and place where he is. And that joy that he has and feels is part of his secret. "Well, I learned the secret," he says, "of keeping my sanity. I know that the Lord is nearby. I pray. I focus on what is true. It enables me to handle advantages and disadvantages. I have friends who are watching out for me. And I'm grateful and joyous." That's Paul's secret.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this secret. Thank you for this wonderful letter to the Philippians we were able to read and watch unfold. May we learn this secret and may it make all the difference in our lives as well, so that we can stay sane and healthy and whole and keep our heads clear in the time in which we are alive now too. And all these we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

- 1 Lewis, C. S. *Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.
- 2 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensées*.
- 3 McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Earl Frank Palmer Copyright © 2009 All Rights Reserved

Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202/537-0800

June 21, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

The Advice of a Friend

Philippians 4:1-23

Rev. Earl F. Palmer
Preaching Pastor-in-Residence

This is our final sermon in this series that we've been preaching on Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Paul loved that church. It was the first church in Europe Paul and his friends came across from Troas to Philippi, and Paul preached the Gospel there. The first convert in Europe was a woman named Lydia, and then a Philippian jailer, and then the church, that started in their houses. And they loved Paul. They tried to support him in his ministry. When they heard that he was in prison in Rome, they sent a young man named Epaphroditus to watch out for Paul. And then Epaphroditus got sick and had to go home. And as a result of that, Paul wrote a letter to them, and we have that letter. The last letter that Paul wrote from his imprisonment in Rome to a church is the letter to the Philippians, and it's vintage Saint Paul. It is absolutely a magnificent letter. His last letter that he wrote from prison was to Timothy, his young friend, and that's 2 Timothy. But this is the last letter to a church.

And so now we have the privilege of reading the last chapter of that letter, and what a chapter it is. It's almost like a valedictory. Paul once again, will talk about his own life. He's done that already twice in this letter. He's spoken autobiographically about what's going on in his life. He will do it again. He's also going to talk about them. He will give advice, so you might call the last chapter the advice from a friend. And here it is, the fourth chapter of Philippians. Listen to how it starts. "Rejoice in the Lord always," (Philippians 4:4) "again I say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is nearby. Do not worry or be anxious, don't be anxious 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,” that’s the word that’s used, “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved...” (nd here we see Paul with one of his lists; he likes to create these rhetorical lists), “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, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The little word for think is *logisthy*. We get the word “logical” from that word; it means ‘compute these great truths.’ Put them in your hard drive. Remember. Think about them. And then, “Keep on doing the things that you’ve learned, and that you received, and you heard, and seen in me do, and the God of peace will be with you.” The word “do” is *praxis*, put into practice. This practical admonition is followed with the promise of peace.

And now he becomes autobiographical again. “I rejoice in the Lord greatly, and now at length, that you revived your concern for me, indeed you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.” Remember, for two years, after he got arrested in Jerusalem, he was put in a prison that was in the precinct of the palace on the Mediterranean Sea that Herod Antipas owned that was rented by the Roman governor. And so two Roman governors, Felix and Festus, lived there as did other Roman governors. In fact, the only inscription we have found of Pontius Pilate was found at Caesarea in that palace. The Romans rented it. There was a dungeon in the basement, and Paul was there for two years. He was not able to meet anybody there, evidently, and that’s why they couldn’t help him there. And that’s why Paul decided to appeal to Rome, to Caesar to get out of there. And they put him on a prison ship, remember? It crashed in Malta, and he finally ends up in Rome for his final imprisonment. Therefore he says, ‘You had no ability to help me there because I was incognito.’ And then he says, “You revived your concern for me, you always were concerned, but you had no way of showing it. Not that I complain of want or of need.”

And here comes an amazing autobiographical part. “Not that I complain of need for I have learned to be content.” I have to tell you about the word content here. “Content” is the English translation of *autonomous* which is the Greek word used here. We get the word “autonomy” from that word. It’s one of the Greek words for sanity. In other words, “I’m sane. I’ve kept my sanity. I’m content. I’ve kept my sanity.” So he said, “Not that I complain of want for I have learned to be sane and have kept my sanity in whatever state I’m in. I know how to have little, and I know how to have plenty. I know how to be abased and how to abound. In any and all circumstances, I’ve learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.” It almost sounds like our text from the book of Habakkuk

And then he is able to handle advantages and disadvantages. “I know how to be abased. I know how to abound in any and all circumstances.” It’s interesting. He keeps his sanity in any and all circumstances. Remember when we preached our series in Saint Paul, we saw that Paul uses advantages. He also uses disadvantages. The fact that he could only rent the hall in Ephesus between 11 and 4 in the afternoon meant he couldn’t probably reach the wealthy people as well, but that’s the one time of day that the slaves could come and hear Paul. And for two years and a quarter, he rented the Tyrannus Hall in that bad hour, the hour when everybody’s hot and people are falling asleep, and yet that’s when the slaves could come and listen to Saint Paul. And Paul reached so many slaves for Christ because of that disadvantage.

Or another disadvantage of Saint Paul is his imprisonment, so many times in prison. But let me ask you a question. When would Paul have time to write letters if he weren’t in prison? His imprisonment enabled him to write letters. And so his disadvantage became his advantage. Paul says, “I’ve learned how to handle advantages and disadvantages. I can flow with them. I can keep sane in the midst of them because of Christ.” So Christ enables him, that’s his secret, to handle the advantages and the disadvantages. Blaise Pascal has a great quotation. He says, “Do great things as though they were small because of Jesus Christ, and do small things as though they were great because of Jesus Christ.”² Jesus Christ has a way of leveling the ground, so that the great things are brought down to size, and the small things are brought up in importance -- so that you become mellow, and sane, and healthy in handling both the big and the small things. That’s Paul’s secret.

And then fifth, he has friends. I don’t want to let this slip through our fingers. Paul had friends who are watching out for him. Do you have friends who are watching out for you? Are friends watching out for your back? It is the most beautiful thing in life, to have friends who are praying for you, who care about you, who know your name, and are tracking with you, and trying to find out how things are going in your life. And the Philippians were those friends. Notice, he pays tribute to them. He says, “You didn’t know where I was when I was down at Caesarea. But the minute you found out I was in Rome, you sent Epaphroditus right away.” And those friends meant so much to Saint Paul. And he thanks them for it.

And then finally, Paul enjoys life. You can’t miss it. He starts and he ends, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he even repeats it, “again I say rejoice.” By the way, I just finished reading *John Adams*,³ this wonderful book by David McCullough. And John Adams at the end of his life shared his favorite verse in a letter he wrote to a friend, and he said his favorite verse was, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.” And there was a sort of joy in the life of this great man, John Adams. And it’s a wonderful gift to enjoy life. Can you think of a time that’s more exciting to be alive than right now? I can’t think of a more exciting time. What a time to be

to life, and that was wonderful. So we had just read that. And I remember with my son one day--in fact, this became a fun idea in our family. He was saying, "Dad, I think there are some monsters around. I'm gonna have a hard time going to sleep." He's a little guy. And so I said, "Hey, I have an idea. Let's just imagine something. I'm gonna take you right now. I'm gonna lift you up and put you on Aslan's back. Remember, Susie and Lucy got to ride on Aslan's back. Can you imagine that? I'm lifting you on Aslan's back." Remember Aslan is as big as the lions in Trafalgar Square; about 10 kids could get on the back of a lion in Trafalgar Square. That's what Lewis says. That's how big Aslan was. "we're on his back and now we're just going to walk around a little bit. Oh, look. There's a monster over there. There's a python over there. Oh, there's a dragon over there." But we're riding on Aslan's back. Who cares? And then suddenly, "Hrrrr...hrrrr..." He was sound asleep. If you're really worried about something, then ride on Aslan's back. If the Lord is nearby, if you're on Aslan's back, the great golden lion, son of the emperor from beyond the sea, what are you afraid of? What are you afraid of if the Lord is nearby? If the Lord is nearby, you don't have to be afraid. And that's why Paul can encourage us to be moderate. We can be steadfast. The Lord is nearby. We can be mellow. The Lord is nearby. That's how Paul keeps his sanity.

Secondly, he prays. In this text, we have a wonderful invitation to pray. He invites us to pray. He says, "Whatever you're anxious about, pray with supplication and thanksgiving. Let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God which surpasses all knowledge will guard your life." Pray. And when you pray, you have a chance to bring to the Lord what you're worried about. Paul believes that, and he prays a lot. Paul prays at the beginning of each letter. He began the Philippian letter by praying for the Philippians. That prayer is a part of his secret.

Third, he focuses. It's interesting that he would give--you might say the Pauline Doctrine of Meditation immediately after prayer. He says, "Finally, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, think about those things." That's the biblical (both Old and New Testament) doctrine of meditation. We don't have the doctrine of meditation of the empty garden where you empty your mind of everything and then create a mantra so you'll empty your head. No, don't empty your head. Our Lord spoke against that. He says, "Don't empty a house of evil spirits because if you'll leave it empty, they'll sneak into the side doors. But fill your house with what's true. Focus your eyes." That's the Jewish and Christian understanding of meditation from the Psalms and now here in the New Testament as well. We have the focusing tradition of meditation. We focus on what is true in the midst of what is harsh and what is dangerous and what's toxic. Focus on the faithfulness and the love of God. Whatever is true, he says, think about those things, put those into your computer hard drive.

that was read to us just a few moments ago. "Good harvests, bad harvests." (Hab 3:17-19)

"I can do all things." Now the word "do" could be translated, "I can take in stride." That's what he means. "I can take in stride all things that happened to me through him who strengthens me." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." He's referring to Christ there because, remember earlier on, he said, "The Lord is nearby." "So I can take in stride all things through Christ who strengthens me." That's a favorite verse for a lot of people. Many like to put that in their Bible. It's a good verse to put in your Bible. "I can take in stride all these things because of Christ who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to help me in my distress."

And now he points to the Philippians. "You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the Gospel, when I left Macedonia," (that's their province) "no church shared with me in giving and receiving except you." Think of all the churches Paul started, but this is the church that kept following him around, trying to send stuff to help him, care packages, maybe coffee, and things like that, so that he could keep in good shape. "For even when I was in Thessalonica," which is the capital of Macedonia, "you sent help to me once and again. You kept doing it."

And then he says an interesting thing. "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough." I love that. Have you ever said 'thank you' to somebody where it's just a simple and clean 'thank you,' and you don't fish for more? Have you ever received a thank you letter with no return envelope? That's what Paul does. He says, "Thank you. I'm full. You don't have to send anybody else." See, they had sent Epaphroditus, and Epaphroditus became ill. And you'd wonder if maybe he might say, "And by the way, your next missionary, I hope he's in better health." He doesn't say that. Watch what he says. Notice what a clean thank you this is. We can all learn from this. Parents, when you say 'thank you,' say 'thank you.' If somebody wrote you a letter, then say simply, "Hey, I'm so grateful for your..." Don't correct the spelling. Don't say, "Yes, thank you. But you misspelled several words." Don't do that. Say 'thank you.' Clean. Neat. Simple. This is a simple thank you. This is Saint Paul. This is the greatness of Saint Paul. "I've been paid in full and more than enough," notice, "I'm fully satisfied now that I received from Epaphroditus," he names that young man, "the gifts that you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable, pleasing to God." And then he does make a promise to them. "And my God will supply all your needs as well according to the riches of glory in Christ Jesus. To our God the Father be glory forever. Amen."

And now we know from Paul's other letters that at the end of every letter, he took the pen in his own hand because he would dictate his letter to an *amanuensis*, a secretary, who would write in very, very small print because of the expense of papyrus. And then at the end, he would take the pen and write his own greeting. He says in the Thessalonian letter, "This is my mark. I write my own greeting at the end." In fact, to the Galatians he says, "Look, with large letters I write this greeting." Because he had bad eyesight. And wouldn't it be great if we could find an original Saint Paul document that had a big handwriting at the end? Now he takes the pen in his own hand and writes his final greeting himself. "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those in Caesar's household." Don't you love that? We know that one of the five prisons in Rome where Paul may have been in the prison, is actually in the precincts of Nero's villa palace, right in the basement. He says that earlier. "The Praetorian Guard is guarding me." And now Paul has been winning some of those Praetorian Guards to Christ. And so he says, "They greet you too, especially those of the emperor's household, they greet you." "Now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." And that's the last letter Paul wrote to a church.

You know, there's one line in the letter that I really love. As I already alluded, many people call it one of their favorite verses. "I can do all things. I can take in stride all things through Christ who strengthens me, and I have learned the secret of facing plenty and want, of being abased and being abounding. I've learned the secret. Therefore, I can take in stride all things through Christ who strengthens me." What is the secret of Saint Paul? He's speaking autobiographically to us. He shared earlier autobiographically as well. He shared about his own coming to know Christ in the third chapter. He shared in the first chapter. He said, "Don't worry about me and my imprisonment. I'm doing fine. I get a crack at the Praetorian Guard. It's my goal to be out in the open and share my faith." He shared that in the first chapter. And now he says, "I've learned the secret. I've learned the secret of keeping my sanity." Have you learned the secret of keeping your sanity? He said, "I've learned the secret of keeping my sanity." What is the secret?

I believe the fourth chapter gives us six markers that show us his secret. Let me just track them with you. This is the secret of Saint Paul as I see it in the fourth chapter. First, it's something he knows. What do you know to be true? What is it you know to be true? It's interesting. It starts with something he knows. Notice. "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Let everyone know your moderation. The Lord is nearby." The Lord is nearby. That's why he says, "Through Christ, I can take in stride everything." Jesus Christ makes the difference for Saint Paul. He is a man in Christ. It's Jesus Christ. He met him on the road to the Damascus. It's Jesus Christ who gives him the strength to make it, who helps him keep his sanity, knowing the Lord is nearby.

In fact, it's interesting, isn't it? In his final advice, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance." Some translations translate *epieikes*, the Greek word used here with the word "patience." Here, it's translated, "Let everyone know your gentleness." It's translated that way sometimes. *Epieikes*, "moderation" is what the word means. Are you intrigued by that? Wouldn't you expect that from Paul as he writes at the midpoint of the first century when Nero is the emperor? After the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. there is a terrible persecution that Nero wreaks upon--especially the Christians. He blames them for the fire. They didn't create the fire. He did himself, but yet he blames them and throws them into the arena. Paul himself was probably thrown into the arena, finally, to face lions. And so it's a terrible time. Wouldn't you expect in a way Paul would say, "Let everyone know your zeal," (or your courage or the intensity of your faith) "in this tough time we're in?" Instead, Paul surprises us. He says, "Let everyone know your moderation." Paul doesn't want more fanatics around. He doesn't want 'Lord Ronald who leaps on his horse and rides madly off in all directions.' He doesn't want that. Paul wants people who are sane, who keep their sanity, who keep calm and cool in the face of danger, who are unflappable. Remember? That's what he said earlier on in the first chapter: "When you face danger, don't be startled. Don't panic." And now he's saying it again in a different way. He's praying for this. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Let everyone know your moderation. The Lord is nearby." If you knew the Lord was nearby, you wouldn't have to panic. You heard it in the Habakkuk text. He says, "The crops fail. Everything is failing, and yet I'm trusting the Lord. I trust the Lord in the midst of my life." And Paul is saying that. And that's the secret. It's something he knows. He knows that Jesus Christ is there. He's alongside of us. And if I know that he's there, then what am I frightened of?

Can I tell you a little story? It's a true story. When my son was a little boy--he's a big man now, and believe me, he's not afraid of anything now. But when he was a little boy, there was a little period he went through where he was afraid of monsters. And we always had to check under the bed to make sure there were no monsters. I'm sure it was--maybe movies he saw or maybe Sesame Street or something, but I don't know if he was afraid of the Cookie Monster or what. But there might be monsters that we were worried about that for a little while. My son who's a big, tough guy now; but he, as a little boy, was worried about monsters. At night, in our prayers, we had to definitely pray to be protected from monsters wherever they might be. And they might sneak in. So we had to be careful about those.

Then we read, as a family, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.¹ *The Chronicles of Narnia* are so marvelous because--of course, there are monsters there to cope with too. But in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Susan and Lucy get to jump on Aslan's back and run through Narnia. And all the little creatures that have been turned into stone by the wicked witch are coming back to life because Aslan just makes everything come