

I celebrated my 70th birthday last month. I say this to support my claim that I have seen a lot of history go by – not as much as some of my elders and betters, but a lot all the same. I lived through the terrifying weeks of the Cuban Missile Crisis when it looked as though the great apocalypse of nuclear warfare would really happen. There were the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, of Malcolm X, of Bobby Kennedy, of Martin Luther King Jr. There were the wars, declared and otherwise, in Vietnam, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq, each marked by intense media coverage, and a civilian fascination with blood and battle. So, a lot of history.

But I have to say that the present moment is one of the craziest and most disturbing I have witnessed. There are presidential candidates whipping up and pandering to intense xenophobia against Hispanic and Middle Eastern immigrants. Churches and mosques are being burned. There has been a near weekly litany of shootings – in schools, community meetings, Planned Parenthood, on the streets of our cities and in churches – until it seems as though there is no refuge anywhere. Congressional politicians are discussing, not gun control, but the need for another war in the Middle East to stamp out terror ‘before it reaches our shores,’ as they put it.

It reminds me of the poem by William Butler Yeats, written after the First World War:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Is it any wonder that many people are filled with an almost existential anxiety of a kind they haven’t experienced before? One evening last week, it was Ivy’s turn to pray before dinner. When she had finished with an

amen she looked across the table at me and said, “We can’t guarantee, that when we leave each other in the morning, one of us won’t meet some terrible event before night. So I think we need to be intentional about remembering that we have loved each other forever, and will love each other always.” It was clear that this came out of her recognition of the current threats that seem so widespread. But it also seemed to me that it was a way to push back against the anxiety within and all around us.

It is a part of what the Apostle Paul is saying in this morning’s reading from the letter to the Philippians. I want to note that this is probably one of the most personal of Paul’s writings, filled with concern, but also profound love for the church he founded at Philippi. In fact, I would strongly suggest to you that when you return home today, you read right through this entire letter. It’s not very long - what we heard today was the last chapter. But I think you will feel the beating heart of the Apostle.

He writes from his prison cell, to a community facing impending threats against them, and in this context he urges 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.”

Now you may think that Paul is an incredible Pollyanna to make a recommendation like ‘rejoice in the Lord.... have no anxiety’. It sounds a bit like ‘don’t worry, be happy.’ But I don’t think he means, ‘so what if I’m in a Roman prison and may soon be put to death; so what if you are surrounded by possible attacks; just stay calm and rise above it.’

Instead his word to them is one of Christian realism. It is inherent in the fragility of human life that all will suffer loss and injury. Not only might the worst happen, but the worst will happen – and to all of us in due season. It is in this context and knowing that his own personal ‘worst’ may well be headed straight at him, that Paul tells the Philippians, and us, to rejoice always.

Karl Barth commented, “the joy that Paul describes is a defiant ‘nevertheless’, which draws strength from the gospel story and from laying one's deepest concerns before God ‘with thanksgiving.’ This joy seems to take root even in darkness.”

So in this season of profoundly anxious darkness, we are gathered here where we can seriously consider the Christian word for facing the stormy chaos that seems to surround us every day, on every side. Paul is saying that we need to focus on this: “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

He does not say that if we pray hard enough and live well enough we will get what we want, will be saved from suffering and mortality. Rather, the point is that prayer keeps us connected to the Lord who is near. In a time when anxiety often causes us to feel alone and cut off, it is the saving connection of love that holds things together, keeps things from spinning into violent chaos.

The Reverend William Loader of the Uniting Church of Australia says, “An openness to God in prayer keeps Paul centered – just as it kept Jesus centered in Gethsemane. When he speaks of God’s peace keeping people’s hearts and minds, he is almost saying: this will keep you sane! It is neither a disengaged serenity nor an intellectually worked out state of having answers to all the problems. ...Ultimately it is the...sense of the presence of God, the awareness of oneness with the compassionate one who is engaged in life ‘up to the neck’.”

When Ivy said after the evening prayer that we are connected in love, she was voicing one piece of what Paul describes – the remedy of connection. When we are here together in prayer and thanksgiving, we also are a part of the sane response to cultural insanity. For Christians living in these times, as for those living in the first century AD, this is about staying in relationship with each other and God. We are not left alone in this mess.

So when the world around us seems bent on tearing everything apart because 'the center cannot hold', we join more closely in hearing the word, in sharing bread and wine, in knowing God's peace which surpasses our understanding and our need.