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Christ Church Exeter

### **Too Much Light: Too Much Darkness**

*Philippians 4:1-9*

*1My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

*2I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

*4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*8Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep 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.*

I find that my prayers and preaching often return to the challenge and rhythm of living daily in a world where there is both light and darkness. Hope and despair. Gain and loss. Joy and Sadness. Call it what you will: paradox, dissonance.

How we make sense of it all and live out our days makes all the difference.

The ancient world was very familiar with speaking in terms of lightness and darkness. The images fill the Bible. John 8:12 - Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Matthew 5: 14 - 'You are the light of the world.'

There are times in our world today when too much light can be a problem.

Last year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched a campaign to 'Dim the Lights at Night for Migratory Birds.' They reported how artificial light is scattered across the country, and birds are frequently attracted to lighting, especially during migration. I always know the season of fall has arrived when I look overhead and see geese and other birds flying south. Unfortunately, lights can cause confusion, disorientation, and exhaustion - directly impacting bird's ability to migrate.

With so much light on the ground, the night sky is a concern for astronomers. In a recent article in the journal *Nature*, on some nights, one of the brightest objects in the sky is

neither a planet nor a star. It is a telecommunications satellite called BlueWalker 3, which at times outshines 99% of the stars visible from a dark location on Earth. The satellite's huge array of antennas and white color mean that it reflects a considerable amount of sunlight back towards Earth, making it shine even at twilight.

Our planet today is circled by thousands of satellites in the sky. The spaceflight company SpaceX alone has launched more than 5,000 satellites into orbit, and companies around the globe have collectively proposed launching more than half a million satellites in the coming years — a scenario that astronomers fear could hamper scientific observations of the Universe. One astronomer (Patrick Seitzer, an emeritus astronomer at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) said: "I'm concerned that we're going to see a very large number of large satellites launched in the next decade, and it will change the appearance of the night sky forever." "Then the night sky will be irreversibly changed".

There may be few things that humankind can agree on. One of those things that cannot be challenged or debated is that we all share this one planet and look up into the same sky. Darker, lighter, it is the same sky across nations, borders, languages, and cultures. In times of peace and in times of war, the same blanket of stars overhead.

It has been a week of dark days as the world absorbs that what happened in Israel last Saturday. The largest loss of life – murder -- of Jewish persons since the Holocaust. Commentators are asking how this could have happened, who is to blame and what could have caused such acts of terror. Others are looking at the recent history of the Middle East and the conditions of the people in Gaza and the West Bank. Militaries and troops have been called up. Our own country is sending arms and moving ships off the coast. We cannot turn away from what is happening.

Our bishop Rob was quick to write the Diocese: There is no cause righteous, just, or honorable that ever justifies, or is in any way furthered by, the acts of sheer horror and brutality that we have seen levied on the civilians of Israel by the terrorist organization Hamas over the weekend. As we watch in shock the violence unleashed by these actions, we followers of Jesus are called to pray, fervently, for a cessation of these hostilities, for protection for the most vulnerable on both sides of the Israel and Gaza border, and for a recommitment by the international community to find the way to a lasting and just peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Let us pray also that the rage that exists on both sides of this deep-rooted and bloody conflict may not infect our own hearts and that God may heal us from the sins of antisemitism, anti-Judaism, and Islamophobia.

I remember the days after 9/11 – 22 years ago. We were living in suburban Maryland just 10 miles as the crow flies to the Capital and White House. For days we heard jet fighters in the sky over our house. At my parish we held vigils and special worship services. The congregation I served as rector was made up of more than 30 nationalities and in those early days people came together in their shock, disbelief, and sadness for the innocent loss of life of that day.

In the days after tragedy, especially one so unsettling, emotions are raw. It is the right or the wrong time to offer perspective, analysis, and context? Assumptions, agendas, prejudice, and disinformation can easily filter in. And we know that injustice cannot be ignored forever.

And there is something -- almost akin to cultures holding space for loved ones to bury their dead -- when the first hours and days may not be the best time to make major decisions with long term impact. As we are seeing one tragedy is fast bleeding into a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read 8:26 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. May there be angels still present to watch over the sea of humanity fleeing for safety and grieving the loss of family and friends.

As people of faith, I believe we should bring an ethical measure to what we support and condone and what we oppose and protest. We should be guided as much by the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as we are by the Ten Commandments. In that sermon Jesus gave us this: Matthew 5: 38-39 - 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." What outrageous, disturbing and inspiring words. Hard enough for a believer to live into, nearly impactable for a political leader to survive.

In the early years of the church, just a few decades after the Resurrection of Christ, we know that communities of Christians were being formed from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. This was when for followers of Jesus were only a handful compared to those who worshipped other gods. They were often under stress and attack. So, it is no surprise when given the opportunity to send them word, the apostle Paul, would often return to the theme of unity. He gave us the image of the Body of Christ, the church.

Paul knew all too well about division and conflict. He knew that in times of stress, there could be tension within the leadership of those communities. When he spoke and wrote about salvation -- the entire point of all of Scripture -- his beginning point was not the personal salvation of individuals alone but the rescuing, redemption, and salvation of an entire community. (*Jean Lancaster Patterson commentary in WorkingPreacher*)

So, when there were disagreements in that community, the risk for the body and the whole was great.

Why do we read these ancient letters in church today?

When a group, a church, a nation, is under stress and pressure there is often likely to be tension in the ranks of leadership. Today we just have to read the newspapers or online or watch on the news how internal divisions are playing out in the halls of Congress. When a house is divided, bad things can happen. Jesus said: 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. Matthew 12:25.

The letters Paul wrote from prison speak to the encouragement that can come from sitting in the darkness when he did not know whether he would live or die.

Paul wrote: “stand firm in the Lord.” This is not the time to go wobbly. My translation. “Be of the same mind in the Lord.”

And when the early believer felt overwhelmed and anxious, Paul offered up a check list to move them from darkness to light. To refocus. These words would become a NorthStar, an internal compass for believers:

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

4:8 whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

One commentator Jane Patterson tried to put these words in a way that might resonate more with us.

Rejoice. Don't just expect joy to arrive on its own. No one is at their best right now, so be gentle to everyone. Take moments to experience what is larger and deeper than you. Don't obsess about your worries, but don't brush them under the carpet, either. Share them with God, all the worry and all the gratitude together. Turn your attention to things that really matter.

During one of the darkest periods of our nation, many escaped slaves looked to the night sky and the North Star to find their way to freedom. It is said that Harriet Tubman was skilled at navigating and finding that star which always remains at almost exactly the same point in relation to all other stars -- as she guided so many on the Underground Railroad.

We all need a North Star – a fixed point of stability and purpose when our world is spinning, faltering, and challenging us.

May God watch over the innocent and turn the hearts of those still in darkness.