

The people within the church community are nervous about what is happening around them. It appears that the world as they have known it is crumbling, so their inner fears begin to make them act out in frustration, and they are beginning to notice this change of behavior in people around them. Times are becoming tenser, and who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Look what is happening around the church. The people who gather for worship talk amongst themselves and note some of the pressures that are affecting them. First, they are in the eighth year of the reign of an erratic leader. Within two years of taking office, he started a war with an unstable country in the Middle East. He consolidated power, taking more executive privilege than the government allowed. A much-loved city in the country is badly damaged, and the people find that their leader is surprisingly inept at addressing and helping the situation. The occurrence of war, a decaying infrastructure and a nearly destroyed city, run parallel to the desire of this leader to cut taxes, and the Senate has to warn him that he is on a path to bankrupting the government. Financial distress follows, and scapegoats are named among religious communities.

Of course, I am speaking about the circumstances surrounding today's scripture. Any parallel you might have been making is purely your own. The date is (roughly) 62 A.D. The ruler is Nero, who came to power in 54 A.D., and the war is with Parthia, which today includes Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nero is spending, while at the same time eliminating revenue, and this is recorded by one scholar, who said, "Italy was thoroughly exhausted by contributions of money" with "the provinces ruined." The culmination or ruin came in the burning of Rome, when Nero reportedly sat by playing the lyre—a "fiddle" has a better sound for the story, but it wasn't invented yet.¹

Into this turmoil comes the voice of St. Paul, writing from a prison cell. He knows that times are becoming more difficult rapidly, and he wants to bring a good word to the church at Philippi.

Look, things are bad. They may get worse. But what are you going to do about it? How will you be informed by your understanding of that in which you gather in the church to profess belief?

There's a big old church fight going on between two leaders, women named Euodia and Syntyche. Despite the words that are placed into Paul's mouth later in the Pastoral Epistles about women, they were valued leaders of the church, and these women were important to Paul. He is asking them to work out their differences and come to an agreement.

Perhaps recognizing that people are beginning to react to a new age of anxiety, he has words for the church to hear, words that he writes while in chains in a Roman prison.

Knowing that God seems very far away, even perhaps absent as instability and persecution of the church draws near, Paul tells the church to, "Rejoice in God always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. God 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..."

Find joy. Be gentle. Don't worry. Peace will guard your hearts. I am thinking that the church in our particular time might be able to understand a little better what these words from a

prison cell meant to a small church living out its mission in stressful times when no-one knew what tomorrow would bring, but the portents weren't good.

So that brings me to my question for you today. How are you doing? Is anyone feeling a little stress? I've been feeling it for a few weeks now, and it is affecting me. Is it affecting anyone else here? Help me out...let me know...

How are you dealing with that stress?

I lived in Manhattan for ten years. It is a dramatic city that contains millions of people who know they are living the drama of simply being a New Yorker. Within that culture, my friends were actors, artists and musicians, a subset of creative people even more attuned to the theatricality of life in the big city. Every day was a drama. Everyone had some story to tell at dinner, coffee, or after the show; well-rehearsed and grasping every superlative at hand in order to make theirs, "the funniest thing that ever happened," "The most bizarre occurrence you just would not believe if it were not true," or "the worst experience of my or anyone's lifetime, and let me tell you what happened."

It was as if they had suddenly dragged you by the arm up the ladder up to the top of the high dive with them, and then cannonballed with you into the deep end of the drama pool. There, you splashed in the waters to the ripple effect of the incredible story that was theirs alone to tell.

There are so many stories percolating in the news this week. Tell me, has anyone found themselves dipping their toe into the deep end of the drama pool?

According to a survey released today by the American Psychological Association, the majority of adults living in Southern California are stressed about money, work, the economy and housing costs. In fact, the number of people who are stressed in these areas are in the 70 + percentile, significantly higher than the rest of the nation. To balance that, people exercise and eat healthier foods here than elsewhere in the country. Stress about the economy went from 66% to 80%, and that was a couple of weeks ago.

Have you noticed a difference in people's behavior? Have you noticed a difference in your own? You can hear it in what people talk about at dinner. You can read about it in the news, and see how things that have been brewing for a long time are coming to the surface. Concerns about health care costs, housing costs, job security; these, when matched with the national and international news about our financial markets have ratcheted up the level of stress until people are thinking that the sky is falling. Just watch a candidate's supporters shouting at a political rally on TV, and there is no doubt that the fear-knob on the amplifier is turned up to "eleven" (if you recall the "This is Spinal Tap" amplifier had one more setting than "ten").

I listened to a local news radio interview with Long Beach psychologist Dr. Jana Martin on this topic, and hers were some of the best observations I have heard all week.²

Martin agreed with her interviewer that people are beginning to act out in this time of stress and uncertainty. She says that people may act differently. They may oversleep or over eat, or just the opposite. For the most part, there is a change in people's habits, such as indulging in smoking, drinking, or not following through with tasks, because of a feeling of hopelessness or despair. She also notices there is more irritability. There is an increase of violence in or out of the home. Some are resorting to very dramatic or desperate means, such as overextending the use of credit cards at high interest. People are having more depression, anxiety.

Dr. Martin noted the recent murder-suicide that was in the news last week due to the loss of a job with little prospects for another one to sustain a family. People are stuck believing there is only one solution or no solution at all, and so they choose a desperate answer.

This is very personal for Carl and me. I know that some of you heard some of what happened in our lives last week, so I will take just a moment to tell you about it. Last Friday I sent an e-mail to a friend's relative talking about getting an intervention together. Our friend of over twenty years could not sustain the job he loved as a stockbroker in a plush corner office overlooking the waves at Malibu. Health issues produced a loss of short-term memory and we later learned, a brain mass had formed that opened up a new set of concerns. He had to sell his home overlooking the ocean and move to an apartment.

He suddenly fell apart and became isolated and alcoholic. Sometime last Friday or Saturday, he ended his life with a gun. On Monday, his neighbors called the police, who found him. Carl was in charge of making arrangements for his body, and the friends gathered on Thursday to empty out his apartment. We are all in a state of shock. He was a lovely man.

It is so important for people to understand that there is always more than one solution, not to give up, talk to someone about what your concerns are and let people help you. But we are proud, and we are resistant to help, and that keeps us stuck.

Jana Martin talked about developing coping strategies that help us when the news of the week is grim, and she coined a wonderful word. She said, "Try not to catastrophize." True—there are things about which we have to be realistic. But don't make it more than it is and never forget to look at the whole picture. We only think of the negative, that's all we think—we don't think about the positive or the neutral. Think about how to deal with what it happening now, and don't create scenarios of worst-case situation.

Pause, don't panic. Take the time to remember to breathe. Things change quickly. Things can change for the positive just as quickly as they can change for the negative. We often forget to think about that. We think we have to do something desperate now. But difficult times ask us to think through what is a healthy, good solution.

Don't forget to have fun. Take a walk. Take good care of yourself and others around you. Make a commitment to create your own upward spiral.

Stick with what you know. What have you done in the past when you thought there was no hope, and yet, here you are? You will learn something about yourself that will be valuable. I think all of us have had the experience of going through something difficult that we would rather have not experienced, and on the other end, we have said, "If 'this' had not happened, I might not have learned, 'that.'" How will this become something that happens for me instead of to me.

I listened to this interview on my car radio in the midst of all that was going on around the death of our friend last week, and the interviewer asked the psychologist if in stressful times people turn to God and religion.

Dr. Martin said that people turn much more quickly to drugs and alcohol in order to blot out what is going on and create an immediate escape. Last week, someone I know from outside the church told me, "I drink a bottle of wine every day." Well, if you do that, if your stress level bumps up, so will your consumption. I promise you, it won't serve you well.

Times of crises help people draw closer to their faith, but in some cases, it makes people raise the question of theodicy, "Is there anything out there?" "Where is God when bad things happen?" The hymn we sang at the beginning of the service gives us the opportunity to express some of those feelings in a healthy lament or complaint, but it is directed to the God we ultimately do believe is there.

So, how is everyone? Taking care of yourselves? Taking good care of each other? Remembering to take time to realize how precious life really is? Are you going to go out and spontaneously do something fun, creative or challenging to the mind today?

Whatever you end up doing, please stay out of the drama pool.

Paul says, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. God is near. Do not worry about anything. He says, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds.”

Paul knows to whom he is speaking. He knows what these days are all about, having had time to think in a stone garrison of a prison on more than one occasion.

Yes. Surprising things are happening. Things don’t feel as stable as we would like them. We want to express our frustrations, even as Euodia and Syntyche let it out on each other. Yet, Paul finishes his thought to his church by saying something quite different, and this is the sermon we need to hear.

“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 and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 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.”

Keep on doing the good stuff. We need you when one of us falls apart. Take care of yourself, because we want you to be there. Think on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable, because we need to know at this time and in this place that such virtues still exist and that we are surrounded by people who exhibit them in noble flashes of excellence. You are important. You help keep the rest of us whole, just as we promise to do the same for you. May the God of peace be with you.

Sermon Resources:

1. Some references culled from Wikipedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero#Great_Fire_of_Rome
2. Dr. Jana Martin, Radio interview, KNX 1070 Wednesday, October 8, 2008

Scripture for Sunday, October 12, 2008, Proper 23 A

Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, 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. 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 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 and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 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.