

An Epidemic of Good News #1

Hello dear brothers and sisters in Christ of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church!

This is Pastor Curtis sending you the first installment of a series on Philippians I am calling, “An Epidemic of Good News.”

Right now, the world is having an epidemic of bad news. Besides all of the wider conflicts and political divisions that mark our age, a new virus is spreading across the globe forcing governments to take drastic measures to try to stop the epidemic. Here in British Columbia, sporting and other public events are being cancelled or postponed, businesses are suffering, and churches are having to stop offering public worship services. So, for the sake of staying in touch with the people of Our Redeemer, I decided to unleash AN EPIDEMIC OF GOOD NEWS!

This will be a series of devotions done Bible study style, based on **Paul’s Letter to the Philippians**, sometimes called Paul’s happiest letter. Let’s begin with a prayer:

Merciful God, in the stillness of our souls we listen for your voice to know again that you are God. Quiet our restless hearts with the knowledge that you are near us, keeping watch over your own. Rekindle our faith and light the lamp of hope within our hearts. Then take us by the hand into each day that lies ahead, for where you lead, we can confidently go with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Source: Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care, p.182)

To get into our subject, let’s read the first few verses of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and assistants: grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now. (Philippians 1:1-5)

Although we call this a “book of the Bible” and it is divided into “chapters and verses”, we have to remember that this is a letter. The division into chapters and verses were not part of the original form of this document, and if you look at the most ancient manuscripts of Biblical texts, there are no chapters or verses. In fact, there aren’t even spaces between the words. All of those kinds of things we do now—dividing words, punctuation, paragraphs—are much later developments in written language. The chapters and verses in the Bible came into being over the centuries as ways for people to be able to look stuff up without having to flip around in the book so much, and also to be able to let other people know exactly where to find the part that they might be talking about. Instead of saying, “It’s about a third of the way through the letter,” they could say, “It’s at chapter X, verse Y.”

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So, this is a letter that Paul and his disciple (apprentice, understudy, assistant) Timothy send to the Christian community that gathered in the city of Philippi, sometime in the AD 50's. Paul probably dictated the letter, and Timothy may have functioned as scribe, as this would have been the normal way for things to be done in the ancient Mediterranean of that era. It is a letter to a group of people for whom Paul has warm feelings because they "get" this "life in Christ" thing. He is proud of them and thankful for them.

You may remember how this congregation got its start. In Acts 16:6-40, Paul, Silas, and Timothy are making their way through western Anatolia (modern day western Turkey, but back then this was a largely Greek speaking region). They were trying to get to the region called Bithynia, which today corresponds to the part of Turkey that is across the water from Istanbul, but, it says, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them," (Acts 16:7). Some days after this Paul has a vision at night (a dream, maybe?), about a man from Macedonia pleading, "come to Macedonia and help us," (Acts 17:9). So, they travel there, to the city of Philippi, which was the main city of the Roman province of Macedonia, in the northern part of modern-day Greece. There they meet a group of women praying by the river, and after conversing with them, one of the women—Lydia—asks for herself and her entire household to be baptized. After this, she invites the three visitors to her house. Lydia seems to have been a woman of some means, as she is a purveyor of purple cloth, a very expensive luxury good in those days. She is also said to be from the city of Thyatira, which was an important centre of purple cloth dying. Maybe she represents her family's purple dying business in Philippi. And Philippi would have been a good place to do business: it was a Roman colony, populated by retired legionaries and their families going back 100 years, it was near a gold mine, it was a port city, and it was along a major Roman road.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy seem to have been her guests for some days because a few days later they are back at the place of prayer by the river and there they are accosted by a young female slave who is said to be possessed by a demon. In the spirit of Jesus, who freed many people from demon possession, they freed her and cast out the demon. The problem was that this young slave girl was being used by her owner to make money by telling people's fortunes and the demon somehow helped her do that. So, the owner, now deprived of his income, drags them into the public square where he accuses them of disturbing the peace. The crowd turns into a mob. They beat Paul, Silas, and Timothy and throw them into prison. Paul, Silas, and Timothy use this opportunity to preach to the other prisoners. Their work in communicating the way of Jesus is so effective that when an earthquake damages the frames of the prison doors such that they swing open on their own, instead of running away, the prisoners all stay, awaiting their day in court. When the gaoler sees this, he too asks to have himself and his entire household baptized, after which he invites them to his house and feeds them.

The next day the local magistrate wants to let them go for good behaviour, but Paul complains that they are Romans citizens, and did not get fair treatment under Roman law. So, the magistrate and men-at-arms apologize and send them on their way. The three men go back to Lydia's house to recover from their ordeal before leaving Philippi.

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Lydia and her household, and the gaoler and his household formed the foundation for the congregation at Philippi. We don't know how large the group had grown by the time Paul wrote this letter, but we do know that they were doing good work. They had come to understand and embody certain key characteristics of what we would now call "the Christian life." What were those characteristics? We'll find out more about that in the next installments of...

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Let's close with the Lord's Prayer, using the traditional form:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And for give us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.