

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

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October 15, 2023

Text: Philippians 4:1–9

Many of you may know that members of Plymouth have been planning and preparing for a trip to Israel-Palestine later this month. Throughout this year, we have been learning about the people, places, and tensions in the region. We have been learning about life for the most vulnerable and their struggles and aspirations in a combustible maze of checkpoints, illegal settlements, and fences and borders overseen by heavily armed guard towers. We have been briefed on the history of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and their hopes and fears, progress and failures in war and peace. In light of the Hamas terrorist attacks, the Israeli military response in retaliation, and what appears to be the makings of a protracted period of combat, we have had to cancel that planned trip. I want to thank Joan Deming for her leadership, thorough management, inspiring encouragement, and loving heart in helping us prepare for this trip. She never lost sight of the well-being of the people of the region or wavered in her commitment to peace. Joan has been instrumental in helping us imagine, anticipate, and accompany our neighbors in the region, even though we have yet to set foot on the ground. And although our trip has been postponed for now, I know this experience has changed us. Thank you so much, Joan.

While the terrorist attacks and the Israeli government's response are happening thousands of miles away, there is something oddly and eerily familiar in the emotional and political responses in the United States. We are in that state of being when, in the aftermath of the carnage of a horrific terrorist attack and the subsequent mobilization of military might to destroy the terrorists so they aren't ever able to attack again, we are left to wait helplessly as the violence increases and intensifies. We have to confront complex emotions that flood over us when nuance and contradiction make it seem as if we are equivocating in the face of competing claims and interests about the best way forward. We want to be fair. We want to say the right things. We want to be constructive in our response. And inevitably, the question presents itself: What is to be done? What is to be done when you know that more people are going to die? What is to be done when you have no power to affect the outcome? What is to be done when the political and ideological oversimplification of the situation makes peace hard, if not impossible, to achieve?

That was the question hovering over the saints in Philippi to which the Apostle Paul wrote his letter, a few verses of which we read today. What is to be done when the apostle who planted your church is in prison, and the church folks struggle to get along and work together? Paul was in prison, facing capital charges by Roman imperial authorities for his "defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7). The church is obviously concerned about Paul. They know the violent and capricious will of the empire that can train its power on the bodies of those it considers to be a threat to its order and power. After all, this empire crucified the One in whose name they gathered as a church. The church also contends with the internal conflicts that arise when diverse peoples gather in a community and the external pressures of living out the gospel in a world that resists their witness. So, they check in with Paul to see how he's doing, sending a gift to him and updating him on what is happening in their community. We don't know what they wrote in their letter to Paul, but we can see by his response that they want to know what is to be done.

Paul could dare tell the church what can be done from the dark confines of a prison cell, in the cold, harsh reality of an uncertain future, where death is a possible punishment. “I’m not able to be with you. And I don’t know what is going to happen. Yes, there are moments when my thoughts turn to death, and yet I am rejoicing.” He is rejoicing because his imprisonment is having an effect that the empire and his opponents didn’t expect: the good news of Jesus Christ is spreading further than they could have imagined and encouraging and empowering witnesses and disciples to spread the good news without fear.

What is to be done when it looks like you’ve come to the end of your strength? When it seems like there is nothing left to do or that you can do? When the forces that oppose God, good, and peace have confined us in the prisons of war, violence, disunity, and discord? According to the Apostle Paul, in these times, the saints in Philippi should stand firm in the way of God. Be united in their work and relationship with those struggling to spread the gospel. Rejoice always, knowing that they are part of God’s body and God’s reign so that all the world can see who and whose they are. Don’t be immobilized by fear and worry, but pray prayers of supplication and thanksgiving—tell God what you need. Keep doing what they have learned and received in their faithfulness as the people of God. And they can do all this because the peace of God rests, rules, and abides with them always.

Paul himself is worthy of their imitation. Confined to prison, Paul could be expected to be sad, angry, anxious, helpless, and hopeless. And yet, he rejoices and encourages the church to rejoice because the Lord is near. People who love and trust God and who imitate Christ respond to each other and the world as Jesus and Paul respond: rejoicing always, showing kindness and mercy to all, free from anxiety. A prayerful people whose hearts and minds are guarded by God’s peace that surpasses all understanding can be assured of the nearness of God amid the world’s chaos. A church connected to, partnered with, and standing firm in the Lord need not be worried about the world’s anger, anxiety, and cruelty. In its imitation of Jesus, the focus of the church’s attention will be on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.

Paul is worthy of our imitation. What is to be done in our position sitting here in this place at this moment when war abounds, and too many lives will be lost? I liked how one activist (Valarie Kaur) reframed the question, “What is to be done.” She asked it this way: What does love want you to do? What does love want us to do?

When the veil of hopelessness feels truer and more realistic than any dream of peace; when reason offers only the certainty of more hate, more violence, and more ugliness; when the objections and critiques of friends, enemies, and strangers sound the same even when they occupy different sides of the conflict; when the inevitability of death is all the world appears to offer, what does love want us to do. We anchor ourselves in the joy, love, and peace the world never gave us and by the grace of God, can never take away. We keep being a people who pray. We keep being peacemakers in a world addicted to war. We keep doing and pursuing justice. We divest from violence, resisting it in all its manifestations. I don’t know what the praxis will look like, what the actual work of our hands will look like, what lives we may touch, but I do know that our faithful witness and service are a force of good.

When we had to cancel our trip to Israel-Palestine, I wondered what would be done. I despaired that we were now losing the one thing we had in our power to do, which was to be witnesses on the ground. But I realize we can still be witnesses. There is no doubt that we are in for more bad news from Israel and Palestine. Despite our best efforts, we will see traumatizing images of death and destruction. Friends and neighbors will disagree with each other about what’s going on.

Despite all that is happening in the world, there is still love, beauty, and good things to celebrate. There is still truth, peace, and justice worth pursuing for the sake of all God’s children. There are still more of us

who know that lies, violence, corruption, and oppression are unacceptable. The church does not have to adjust to the worst features of the human will to power and propensity for hate and violence. We can find and reveal God to the world. God is near; stand firm in God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.