

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 October 8, 2017; Exodus 32:1-14; Phil 4:1-9 – Proper 23A
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Monday morning I got up as usual, poured that first cup of coffee, turned on the computer, and the morning news – and watched stunned as the reports of yet another massacre unfolded in front of me. This time Las Vegas – the numbers of victims were staggering, weren't they – becoming the largest killing spree in modern American history.

And mixed in with these reports were more pictures of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands: the devastation, the desperate need for food, water, fuel - we live in an anxious world these days, don't we.

All of these problems seem so vast, so depressing, so systemic, that it can just feel hopeless. So much needs to be done to help – it's overwhelming. Where do we start? What can we do?

And here at St. Paul's we continue to work on the question of how we will live out our mission and ministry – yes, we face a deficit budget and shrinking reserves here at the church, and we wonder about our future – there does seem, though, an energy to do new things – expanding our presence in the community as we host the Food Bank and Food Distribution hopefully soon as Family Services begins their needed renovations. And 5 people have signed up for the Nutley CROP walk!

We're looking forward to 3 baptisms this month: 2 next week with a new family, 1 at the end of the month with the great grand-child of Mary Melilli. Babies: the promise of God that God hasn't given up on us – that our mission and ministry here isn't done yet. Good times amidst bad news all around us. A glimmer of hope that does shine.

But still, the bad news gets to us: who among us isn't horrified by the violence in Las Vegas. Who among us doesn't hurt alongside the hurricane victims, desperate for basic needs. Who among us doesn't think about potential for nuclear war. And who among us isn't worn down by family members, church members, friends who suffer. We all have something on our hearts, don't we.

I'm remembering an experience shared by our 8th grade Sunday School teacher in Glen Ridge: he took the Bible in his hands and asked the class, this book was written thousands of years ago – does it still have relevance today? One student answered right away – yes – because people are still pretty much the same. A pretty profound observation from an 8th grader, isn't it.

So let's imagine that the people waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain are in a dark place too – they're struggling to find and enter the promised land – and like us today, they want it now! Enough of this anxiety and waiting – enough of wondering where the next meal will come from. Even though God had always provided for them. Them and us.

Moses has been gone for quite a while now. The people grow restless and press Aaron, “come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.” They're tired of waiting for Moses. And they say with one voice, “We don't know when Moses will be back. Aaron,

come, take our jewelry and make us a more suitable god than the one whom Moses told us about.”

And that’s what they do – they get organized, pool their gold jewelry, and creatively, imaginatively, make a golden calf. The next day, the worship begins with lots of wine, food and dancing. Praise the gods (small g) who brought us out of Egypt.

Do we really think that we have at last progressed to the point where such idolatry is impossible for people like us? Let’s think again – because we know better, just like those 8th graders do. We too get confused about the object of our worship, don’t we – we want a god on our own terms, more to our own liking and comfort. The golden calf was the sort of god who asks for little but wine, food, and a good time – but there’s Moses up on the mountain with God who tells him, you want to worship me? Fine. Write this down on your tablets – you will not worship other gods. I want you – all of you – therefore you will not steal, you will not kill.... And the list goes on. Pretty demanding God, isn’t it.

But so are our own golden calves. Maybe the difference is their attraction, their demand, is so insidious – all of a sudden we find ourselves, or we suddenly realize somehow, that our allegiance has changed: to money, power, our drug of choice, our things, expectations of the society around us, any number of distractions – not unlike those people waiting there at the foot of the mountain. And the other difference is this: those idols don’t last! Those small “g” gods take and take and take – turning us into slaves to them. And while we may get some short term rewards – they just don’t last. We can’t trust these idols forever.

Back in the 80s there was a movie “Dad” – the young man is talking to his dad who he has not known very well since his parents’ marriage had ended and the Dad was gone most of the young man’s life. The son confronts his father and says, “Why? Why did the marriage end?”

And the father answers, “Making money made me feel like a man. Making money made me feel like somebody. And the more I worked, the worse our family life became. And I felt like a failure.”

Maybe that’s a good definition of what the bible calls “idolatry” – out of our great need to be somebody, to establish our lives by ourselves, we give our lives to some false god. We give ourselves to something, totally, completely, hoping that something will save us. We hold onto our things, our money, our whatever...hoping that they will save us. Well, how’s that working for us?

After a hurricane storm blew through this area a couple years ago, there was a lot of damage – one woman who’d had a tree fall on her house, causing great damage, told me, “I learned a long time ago after the sudden death of my husband that things aren’t important – the roof will get fixed, the damage will be repaired – it’s not the end of the world in the overall scheme of things.”

How different is that outlook from those people at the bottom of the mountain? How different is that from our outlook? How does that trust work for us?

How do we get our heads straight? How do we get ourselves out of the mire of fear, of anxiety, of worry, of an insidious focus on what’s best for us and us alone?

Now, for some answers and some hope, let’s look at Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It’s really so beautiful, isn’t it. Our spirits are lifted by this elegant love letter to a church he obviously cares deeply about. But there’s an irony under all this:

Paul writes the letter from prison as he faces death for preaching the gospel, for disrupting the empire and its values. He's not writing it on a good day – a day when he's surrounded by friends, when things are going well. No – he's writing from a deeper place, not a dark place though but from a deeper joy – because of his knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ. Eugene Peterson describes the source of Paul's joy – and what can be ours – too: Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this spilling out quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess.

Isn't that a great way to describe joy: joy is life in excess. Isn't that what generosity and evangelism, and warm hospitality are about: sharing an overflowing joy, "life in excess"?

Doesn't this make you think of the breathtaking stories we heard of heroism, of bravery, of caring for each other in Las Vegas? Doesn't this make you think of neighbors helping neighbors in Puerto Rico and other areas where nature's devastation rages? In the midst of such horror, of such tragedy, there have been and continue to be moments that will bring us to tears as we witness incredible hospitality, amazing grace.

When we don't pay attention to moments such as these, when we're anxious, worried, afraid, we pull in – we feel small and overpowered by what goes on around us. We don't have a prayer of knowing God's peace, the peace that passes all understanding. The peace that calls us to an action to do what we can because that's what Jesus calls us to do. Those small "g" gods just can't do that for us. Jesus can and Jesus does. Jesus can and will get our heads straight!

Jesus calls us to break free! Jesus calls us to a life of joy! We know that certainly doesn't mean everything will be great all the time, that sickness won't strike, that death won't come unexpectedly, that terrible storms – nature made and human made won't happen.

Paul tells us, Rejoice, do not worry about anything! Pray. The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Some time ago I was on call for Mountainside Hospital, covering for Ed Clydesdale who was away on vacation. The hospital called me – there was a patient in Intensive Care who'd asked for a chaplain – the operator tried to put me through to the doctor but after being on hold for a while, he came back on and said he'd call back when he was able to reach the doctor for the name and location of the patient. Well, he never did call back and I was haunted by the needs of that patient and his family. The next morning I called a friend who does volunteer pastoral care there and told her what had happened. She was able to track him down – a lovely man fighting cancer and undergoing dialysis and met with him. He told her, "I just wanted to pray with someone." They prayed there together while he received dialysis – it was a remarkable encounter with the holy – not just the "spiritual" please, but the holy. Rejoice in the Lord: the God who is neverchanging, always there, always loving, always present, good times and bad. We can count on that.

Friends, that story put my head straight! Joy is life in excess! Joy is turning away from all those golden calves we all worship one time or another and turning toward the God who is always there, who we can always trust, who will always welcome us, love us – no matter what – and is the source of a peace and joy the world just plain cannot give us.

In the midst of all the trouble the news brings to us, in the midst of small towns in the mountains of Puerto Rico, in the midst of anger and sadness we feel over the chaos in our world, in the midst of mourning the suffering of 500 people in Las Vegas: remember these words of Paul: 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.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. The God of peace will always be with you. Let's think about these things. So may it be. Amen.