



January 2015 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

I thank my God every time I remember you... (Philippians 1:3).

This year I am inviting you to reflect on portions of Paul's letter *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1b)* as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Relying heavily on the writing of Rev. Dr. David Lose, each article will include a brief reflection on a Scripture passage, questions for reflection and discussion, and a prayer.

I encourage you, as we begin, to read Paul's letter in its entirety in one sitting. Remember as you read that this is a letter – of Paul – to a church. Fred B. Craddock (*Philippians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, © John Know Press 1985) teaches us that this congregation's setting was very likely a house church, the most common form of Christian assembly in the New Testament; and that the congregation received the letter while assembled for worship, which is to say that the congregation received it by the ear not the eye. Perhaps as you read the letter in one sitting you will choose to read it aloud!

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In this New Year it seems appropriate to begin...at the beginning: *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1-3).*

Philippi was a city established in Macedonia (Greece) near several gold mines. This, along with its strategic location along an important trade route, explains both its significance in the ancient world and the reason it was built as a fortified city. By the time of Paul, the Macedonian Empire had been replaced by the Roman Empire and Philippi flourished not only as a city but also as a military garrison.

Most of what we know about Paul's relationship with the Philippians comes from the letter itself, although we can glean a little more information from some of Paul's other letters and from Luke's description of Paul's visits to the Philippians in The Acts of the Apostles. From these sources, historians gather that Paul first visited Philippi around 49-50 AD and returned perhaps twice more. Paul's letter to the Philippians is usually dated to around 60 AD.

Why is he writing? As we will see, the Philippians had sent Paul gifts and a companion to help take care of him while he was in prison. This companion, Epaphroditus, became very ill while he was with Paul.

Once Epaphroditus had recovered, Paul sent him back to the Philippians in order to thank them for their gift and to offer counsel, encouragement, and instruction on matters both theological and personal. Paul begins his letter in the customary form of the ancient word: announcing first the sender, then the recipient, and then offering a formal greeting. In this case, Paul uses a greeting that became customary for him, blessing his recipients with grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Preachers since have often begun their sermons with the same words, in this way linking their preaching to the teaching of the earliest apostles.

Philippians is considered the first Christian community in Europe and represents the spread of the gospel through the ancient world. When you think about it that way, you begin to realize that these early Christians form something of a bridge between the teaching of Jesus in the first century in Palestine and all those who in the years and centuries to come would come to believe in Jesus because of the efforts of missionaries like Paul and congregations like Philippi.

In this sense, the Philippians are our ancestors in the faith, and what Paul writes to them he also says to us. For while the specifics of their condition and situation differs from ours, their questions – how to maintain confidence in the face of struggle, the search for peace and contentment in a turbulent world, the pursuit for hope in a world filled with despair – resonate with our own. For this reason we keep reading these ancient words, hearing in them the concern of a pastor for the growth and health of a young Christian congregation, first for those believers gathered Philippi in the middle of the first century, and now to countless communities of faith spread all over the globe in the twenty-first century.

Read and Reflect: Philippians 1:1-11

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, “I wonder about...”, or, “I noticed...”

How might Paul’s prayer for the Philippians (1:3-11) guide your prayer for your congregation, our Synod, our national Church?

Share a word of thanks to those gathered with you – to an individual and/or to the group. Be specific as you share.

Pray together: Gracious God, we give you thanks for the Apostle Paul, who spread the word of your grace and peace throughout the world he knew, and we give you thanks for the Philippians, early believers who cared for Paul and each other. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Philippians 4:23).

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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