Philippians 1:3-11

This, the second week of Advent. We light a candle and pray for peace. And we have two readings, the Gospel and the letter from Paul to the Philippians, that start with greetings and introductions. Hello.

It's easy to gloss through this section. Scan it- yup, this is still saying hi, and wait for the theologically spicy bits before we really pay attention. Today, slow down and notice greetings and introductions as theologically juicy. What do we learn about God that our scripture starts the letters and Gospel stories in this way?

The greeting from the Gospel is formal. It is a statement of relationships. By listing Roman emperors and kings, Luke claims that this story has international importance. If we were filming a movie, we would start with scenes of power from around the world. The Gospel is an international story. And then, in that epic global setting, with everyone important from emperors to high priests already named, Luke introduces Zechariah. Hello Zechariah. He's pretty much nobody important. If you were filming that movie, you would have shown the well-known international leaders in business suits in world-famous locations. When you see Zechariah, he's a completely average older man in baggy jeans and an old sweatshirt living in the middle of nowhere important.

And that is important. This passage reminds us that God chooses to use ordinary folk who live in ordinary places to do the extraordinary work of God's mission in the world. Which is good news. Because the world needs the extraordinary work of God's mission in the world and ordinary folk like us are precisely the right people for the task. This week we gather. Us, not international politicians or business leaders, ordinary us. We light a candle for peace and pay attention to how God might choose to do extraordinary work with us and through us.

Hello Zechariah.

And this week, especially hello Paul.

Not everybody loves Pauls' theology. If there is language in the bible that is read to justify the misuse of power, Paul usually wrote it. But I do love Paul. So please excuse me. I digress a little from the specifics of the greeting in this passage to the Philippians and take a moment to introduce you to the Paul I know and love.

I love Saint Paul because I read the greetings and introductions to his letters like we read today. Paul starts all (but one) of his greetings in a very similar way. When I read these greetings, I hear a real man greeting real friends and authentic communities. When we read Paul, it is important to remember that Paul is advising specific communities, each of which has particular concerns. There is real love in this. Paul cares to get to know the particulars of each community and greets and advises each group.

But, then, we need to be really careful about reading Paul universally. Let me give you a controversial example, so you know what I mean. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells women to be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). This is why we celebrated the 45th anniversary of women priests in the Diocese of New Westminster last weekend. Only 45 years. Because we, the church, took some of Paul's words and applied them universally.

But Paul, in the same letter, also advised women prophets about how to speak in church. In other letters, he greeted women as apostles. So, now we are all going to be very careful about when we read Paul in a universal, or applied-to-every-situation-kinda way – right!?

With this cautious aside, let's return to the text before us this week – Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul says: I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you (Philippians 1-3-4).

This week let's really get into the text and put ourselves in this passage like actors preparing for a scene. Let me fill you in on the back story. You're in a house church in Philippi. A town currently in eastern Greece, right where eastern Europe meets western the Middle East. A crossroads, a gold mining town and, a wealthy community used to new ideas. Philippi is also a fortified garrison of Rome and a battleground. This is a community that knows the danger of new ideas.

Paul was with you early in the ministry of this new faith. Your little house church, a tiny knot of freshly faithful people, is among the first gentile communities to proclaim the faith. Paul had stayed at Lydia's house, you know, the wealthy widow who sells cloth of purple die. You recall with wonder at how, when Paul talked, the Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she believed. She was baptized that day in the river there, and she hosted all the teachers, Paul, Timothy, and Silas.

At least, until, remember how Paul drove out the evil spirits out of that slave girl. Oh, he was so annoyed about how that girl kept following him around and affirming that God was with him. And then she stopped fortune telling after he drove out the spirits. Remember the rage of her master when the fortune-telling money stopped? You can point to where Paul and Silas were publicly beaten. You can point to where they were imprisoned. But then there was that earthquake. Look, you can still see where the rubble of the prison remains. You can look at the jail guard. He converted that night when he saw Paul Silas singing hymns in jail, and he still worships among you. Anyway, that's when Paul left you, and ever since, you have muddled along in faith the best you can.

Paul taught you to trust the Holy Spirit was with you. A few traveling teachers have dropped by, but mostly you rely on letters of instruction from Paul, Timothy, and Silas. When a letter comes, you gather together in a group no bigger than -all those here today. Together, since only a couple of you read, you listen to the words, just like we listened to the words today. You beg to hear the words again and again. You have seen a copy of the Hebrew scriptures, but you are not Jewish. You are making your own way, and you wait, and you wait for Paul and his team to return to you only…

Now Paul's in prison again. You have sent one from among you to care for him. Because that's how prison works. The government imprisons you but your friends and family have to feed and clothe you. You sent medicine along too. Because you remember how Paul and Silas were publicly flogged when they were here. You know how Paul so publicly proclaims Jesus as king. You know he means spiritually because let's face it, Jesus is gone and is not out there raising an army, so it must be a spiritual kingdom. Though just to be safe, you are much quieter in proclaiming God's kingdom. It is dangerous to gather in a room a little smaller than this, in a group probably about this size, to study, worship, and pray.

That's the scene.

And now, a letter from Paul in prison arrives.

And he starts with, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." Paul is talking to this group in particular, but I wonder…

Who do you greet that way? I guess that there are people who you feel that way about. But who do you actually say that to? Paul says it.

I suspect Paul says it because God wants us, each of us, to be greeted this way. Can you hear that from God? God is saying to each of us, specifically, Hello. God saying, I thank all that is Holy every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.

It is common to meet this kind of greeting with a duck and a weave. We avoid it. No, we think, ducking. What could we have possibly done that deserves anyone to pray constantly with joy for us? We weave a path away from this truth.

But can you let this greeting settle in? Hello, I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you."

Today we pray for peace. And, today we read an introduction from our Gospel that reminds us that our faith is a story of international magnitude. Yet, on that global stage, ordinary folk like us are the people God chooses to make the action happen. We light a candle for peace and wonder what the world might be like if each of us could greet the world like Paul greets the Philippians, including one Philippian who was once his jailer. Hello, I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you. We light a candle for peace.