Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a huge sea turtle she ran across once. Having laid her eggs on the beach at night, the turtle became disoriented because of all the electric lights nearby. Instead of heading back out to sea, her disorientation had taken her further inland, into the dunes. By the time morning came, the turtle was lost in the dunes, exhausted and baking in the morning sun. Barbara found a park ranger and he brought his jeep with him. He flipped her on her massive shell and strapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to a trailer hitch on his jeep. Over the dunes back to the ocean’s edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up. After some time the waves gently welcomed her back home and slowly she was saved. And then Barbara says this, “It’s sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.”

I don’t know about you, but in the tragedies that have besieged us in recent weeks, it feels like my life has been turned upside down. Perhaps you feel that way, too. At any time there is always something distressing happening somewhere in our world, but recently, disasters have come in droves. At a recent Clergy Day, two days after the violent shooting in Las Vegas, Bishop Hollingsworth welcomed us to Morning Prayer by saying, “We are all living with traumatic stress, not post-traumatic stress, but daily trauma.” The litany is long—hurricanes in rapid succession, earthquakes, mass shootings, wildfires—not to mention saber-rattling where we would long for measured diplomacy and renewed efforts to threaten the availability of health care to those least able to pay for it. If you are like me, you may feel like that sea turtle—disoriented, maybe even turned upside down, and worried about whether there is a way out of our weariness, exhaustion, and fear.

And so, like me, you have come to church, hungry for a word of hope; hope that in the midst of unrelenting trauma that has claimed innocent lives and turned the lives of survivors, including us, upside down, that we are held in loving, trustworthy hands that will set us right-side up and companion us on the path of salvation. To us, St. Paul speaks these words:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

On the surface, the words sound like “churchspeak”, and maybe that’s why our pews are not filled to overflowing in times like these. The perception of many is that all we Christians have to offer is a Pollyanna-ish cheerfulness that refuses to look at the darkness of our times. If the best the Apostle Paul can tell us is to psyche ourselves up to “stop worrying” and rejoice instead, that isn’t very satisfying. I know myself too well to accept such sloganeering. I come here because I can’t stop worrying; can’t “mind over matter” the stress and trauma of life. I come here looking for God to shower me with grace and peace that equips me to feel and grieve for victims of tragedy and sustains me to work to heal and help the world.

But let’s go deeper because I think Paul really does have a word of hope for us. Debie Thomas, writing in The Christian Century, helps us understand that Paul’s words are not just a shallow
exhortation to “look on the bright side”. They might better be described as a personal testimony to God’s faithfulness in the midst of turmoil. Thomas writes,

“What’s helping me as I contemplate Paul’s advice is to remember that he wrote this letter from prison—while awaiting trial and anticipating a likely outcome of death. It also helps to remember that he was a man who was threatened, rejected, beaten, and shipwrecked. A man with a ‘thorn in the flesh’ that God apparently did not heal. A man whose haunted past included contempt, rage, and even violence. A man who knew firsthand the irony of a Pax Romana that left most people cringing under state-sponsored oppression. Paul was no Pollyanna; he was a tried and tested realist.”

Far from a “Don’t worry; be happy” message that is found wanting, Paul’s journey of faith taught him that wherever he found himself, on good or bad days, God was near. Paul’s life experience taught him that God was near, sustaining him through the worst the world could dish out, even imprisonment and torture.

We can rejoice in the Lord because God is always near. Last week in his sermon on prayer, Dale noted that bringing our needs and fears and hopes and questions to God is the means to ground ourselves in hope and love. As we name our concerns and fears in prayer, our inability to turn ourselves right side up, we will not be abandoned. It is not a promise that we won’t face the worst things the world might do anymore than Jesus himself was delivered from them. It is not a promise that if we only trust in God enough life will be happy. But it is a cause for rejoicing because Christ, who has descended to the depths of human despair and rose victorious over death, meets us precisely at the place where we are most anxious and fearful. This experience of God with us, coming in the midst of trauma and fear, gives us peace the world cannot give and equips us to use our experience of God’s peace to be a healing presence to others.

Perhaps we do well to think of Paul’s words as a call to cultivate the inner life of the soul. This requires us to see both the reality of the world’s brokenness and the reality of God’s love. In Paul’s experience, peace and joy are not emotions we can conjure up within ourselves. Joy happens when we surrender ourselves to the reality that God, in Jesus Christ, has bridged the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes. Living in relationship with God renews and sustains us to be gentle trustworthy witnesses to love’s power to overcome evil, to be God’s partners in helping turn the world right side up.

And we do not make this journey alone. Gathered by Christ’s Spirit into community, we come together every week in this parish to remember and claim Christ’s victory over evil and death. We come here to practice being Christ to one another and for the sake of the world. Called by God’s Spirit to be his body in the world, we are empowered by the love we have received to become first responders, a sign of God’s generous, forgiving, healing presence in this world for which Christ died. This is reason to rejoice; the Lord is near! Let us follow him into the world in his spirit of gentleness and peace.