Thanksgiving, 2015

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

To my sisters and brothers in Christ, in the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina,

Greetings to you, as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week! This year, Sandy and I are happy to be hosting both of our children, their spouses, and our son’s mother-in-law for Thanksgiving. We’ll enjoy a full house, rare time together as family, some football, and likely more food than we really need. In other words, our Thanksgiving will be much like that of many others across this country. As much as I’m looking forward to this celebration, it also strikes me that I’m also looking forward to a break from the regular news cycle and all of the images of horror, hate and fear that have been dominating our world. For a few days, at least, I’ll withdraw to be with my family ...or at least try to do so.

This year, as it does in many years, our celebration of Thanksgiving falls between the last Sunday of the old Christian year, when we celebrate “The Reign of Christ” and the First Sunday of Advent and the beginning of the new Christian year. More than in any previous year, I find myself giving thanks for the messages of these two Sundays. Let me tell you why.

As I prepared to preach at St Peter’s by the Sea in Swansboro, this past Sunday, I could not escape the rhetoric from politicians, religious leaders and others about the plight of Syrian refugees and our responsibilities as Americans. Some voices called for a halt to the settlement of Syrian refugees in this country. Others made a clear case for the rigorous screening that already precedes the entry of any refugees into this country. Some voices reminded us of the biblical call to welcome the stranger. Others reminded us how frequently the New Testament includes Jesus’ message, “Be not afraid.” Still other voices seemed to be filled with hate or bent on inciting fear. There have been so many voices, and so many messages. In the midst of these voices, came two others. On Sunday, we heard the account from John’s gospel of a conversation between Jesus and Pilate, just hours before Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate, the regional representative of the Roman empire is faced with accusations about Jesus that have been brought by the religious leaders of Jesus’ own people. Pilate tries to get Jesus to acknowledge that he is a king, and therefore a threat to the empire. Jesus claims that he came into the world to testify to the truth. As the conversation ends, Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” I’m left with the sense that Pilate wants to throw up his hands in confusion and frustration.
Next Sunday, although I will not preach, I’ve looked ahead at the readings for the First Sunday of Advent. From Luke’s gospel, we will hear Jesus warning his followers that, in their lifetime, there will be signs that the ‘Son of Man’ is coming and that the kingdom of God is near. He calls them to be alert. Some who read these scriptures seek to find clues in the contemporary world that will indicate when this time will come, as a precise moment, in order that they can properly prepare. Others read these scriptures and understand that they ought always to live as disciples of Jesus and to be ready, believing that the kingdom of God comes in every generation.

So here’s the reason that I appreciate what the gospel messages of these two Sundays brings to the celebration of Thanksgiving which comes between them. While we might prefer otherwise, we live every day with signs of the “end times” all around us. There are times when we are more or less overwhelmed by these signs, but they’re always there. As followers of Jesus, however, we are called to seek truth in the example of his loving and sacrificial life and not in the countless other voices that cry out for our attention, and especially not in those voices that call us to hate others or to become fearfully obsessed with our own self-interest. The kingdom of God came near in the life of Jesus, and we who follow him must recognize that God’s kingdom is still near. The new peace or “shalom” of God is present on every side and it dwells in us and in our communities of faith. So what must we do in difficult times such as these? How about these words offered in the Letter to the Hebrews, and proclaimed two Sundays ago in our churches, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:23-25, NRSV)

There are most certainly a variety of ways of engaging in “love and good deeds.” Those who wish to write to Governor McCrory to express their positions ought to do so, but all of us ought to pray for him and for those elected to leadership in this country. Those who want to become more actively involved in the work of resettling refugees, or at least advocate on behalf of this work, can visit our diocese’s Interfaith Refugee Ministry, with offices in New Bern and Wilmington and found online at http://helpingrefugees.org. Those who would prefer to feed the hungry in their own community, or to care for the veterans in our midst who are struggling with visible and invisible injuries should do so. The needs of the world are great, and there is more than enough work for all of us.

I thank my God every time I remember you, and this Thanksgiving my prayer will include a renewed commitment to serving as your bishop and to leading our diocese in support of the many ways that you are engaged in caring for those in the midst of whom you live, and proclaiming with our Lord Jesus that the kingdom of God is near. In whatever way you celebrate, I pray that this Thanksgiving be a time of blessing and renewal for you and for those whom you love.

Yours in Christ,

Robert A. Steiving