

## God at Work

**Mark 4:26-32**

**Philippians 1:1-11**

This morning, I'd like to bring us a word of encouragement from Philippians 1, which will be a reminder of sorts since I've preached through this letter before. Philippians is one of the apostle Paul's last letters, and it reflects the wisdom of someone who has been through a lot in his life, including imprisonment. That is where Paul is writing from, and where he will end his life.

So it's remarkable that Philippians has been called Paul's epistle of joy. He mentions joy more in Philippians than in any of his other letters. It's a joyful reminder of the blessings of being close to Christ, and of following the unchanging Christ in a changing world. We will hear that joy this morning.

### **Philippians 1:1-11**

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.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

As Heidi and I go for walks in our neighborhood in Shoreline, we witness, almost on a daily basis, the rapid development of our area, as the tracks for light link rail and a new station are being built (pictures). I realize this is happening all over Seattle, but this is our neighborhood, where we live and move and have our being, and it represents significant change for us.

In the bigger cultural and even global picture we see change happening, practically on a daily basis. Got me thinking about the 1964 Bob Dylan song, “The times they are a-changin’.” He and other artists had some almost prophetic insight into the coming changes. And times, well, they are a changin’, aren’t they? Climate-wise, socially, politically, demographically, institutionally. And pandemically...

Times were a-changin’ in the 1st century too. So there is much to learn from the Scriptures and the early church about following Jesus in a time of change and societal upheaval. And learning how to have joy and peace and contentment in our journey, amidst the change. And, to maintain *our sense of calling* in the

midst of it all. We need to remember who we are, and whose we are, and what we are called to, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is a rich and beautiful opening to the letter to the Philippians, worthy of mining all of the treasures it contains. For our purposes this morning, though, I'd like to look specifically at the apostle Paul's encouragement to the church in verse 6. It actually launches the letter and sets the tone for everything that comes after.

Here is the Lord's encouragement for us, today and going forward:

**God, who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion.**

This passage is often used as an *individual* encouragement. The One who began a good work "in you" (in your life, and your life, and your life) will continue that work and bring it to completion. That is true, and it's a good word for each of us. God *is* at work in each of our individual lives in specific ways, and God will continue to work in our lives as we desire it. But the "you" here in Greek is plural. You all. Y'all.

The NRSV translation gets it right: "The one who began a good work *among you...*"—that is, in your *community of faith*, in all y'all—will bring it to completion.

What is that good work that God began, that Paul is talking about, you might ask? We're not sure, exactly. It's quite likely that Paul is simply making a

general statement about God at work, spiritually, in the lives and the community of this little church. I think that becomes clear as the letter goes on.

So, the encouragement right from the start is the confident reminder that God is at work, and continues to be at work, and will be working into the future, until God decides the work is done.

Now, this letter to the Philippians *is* full of encouragement and joy from beginning to end (and I'd invite you to read the rest of this short letter, Paul's epistle of joy), yet when we read carefully between the lines one can detect that something was going on in the Philippian church that was creating a sense of *discouragement*—or fear, and anxiety. We get strong hints of that especially in chapter 4. I'm sure that's why Paul begins the letter this way.

We don't know specifically what was going on. But likely there was something **external** to them: perhaps opposition they may have been facing, or even the beginnings of persecution at the hands of the Romans. Or perhaps it was economic recession. Philippi was located on a trade route, so it's possible that commerce had changed in some way. It could be that this little congregation was hit hard economically; there is a hint of that at the end of the letter as Paul mentions their poverty, and as he thanks them for a financial gift they gave him, even though they are poor. The population of Philippi was also changing—it

certainly would have been changing socio-economically, and ethnically as the region became more and more diverse. Roman roads were part of the new “technology” in that day, which allowed easy access to and from all kinds of new places, which would’ve created diversity in the region.

So it could’ve been something *external* that was going on.

There was also likely something **internal** going on in the church. Like a personality conflict. Or two. Or three. You know, as Jesus said, wherever two or three are gathered in his name... a disagreement is likely to arise over what we’re supposed to do in Jesus’ name! In their case it could’ve been a squabble over leadership, or priorities, or money, or something happened between a few people that escalated and got blown out of proportion. We get clues in the letter that there was disagreement over *something*, as Paul urges them to try to resolve their challenges with each other.

So there are possible *external* circumstances, or *internal*, or probably **both**, that created a need for Paul to bring both encouragement *and* challenge to this church. Again, the times, they were a-changin’ back then, as they are now.

As I often say, all churches in America today can relate to this—external challenges, and internal challenges. This was true *before* covid hit, and now covid has complicated things even further. But it has been true for years, that *there is*

*no such thing as a church that is not in transition right now.* Whether the pastor has been there for many years, or whether they're in between pastors. Whether the church is a relatively new church plant, or it has been in existence for long time. Whether the church is small, medium, or large. Whether the church is Presbyterian or Methodist or Catholic or non-denominational. Transition and challenge are the name of the game today. It's the new normal because of the massive culture shift we have been, and are living through, right where we are in our neighborhoods, in our country, and around the world.

And btw this is true of all of our institutions and not just the church. I think of my dad's career in banking: he started out at National Bank of Commerce; then it became Rainier Bank; then Seafirst Bank; then Bank of America gobbled them up. He started out as a "personal banker" as they were called back in the day; and by the time he reached the latter part of his career things were rapidly becoming automated. So, financial institutions have been and continue to be in transition. Education is in transition, hospitals and the health care system is in transition, and, we see transition being played out on a daily basis in politics, and some of our other long-standing institutions (such as fraternal organizations and the like). Someone has called this a cultural tsunami.

So, this isn't just the church's challenge. It's everywhere. And across all kinds of institutions. So, we're in this together. Therefore, in my opinion, we need to work together!

And with challenge comes opportunity. And we, with the eyes of faith hope and love are invited to see how God is at work at this time. Because God *is* at work, bringing hope and renewal and redemption. Even amidst a pandemic, and economic challenges, and racial equality efforts. God is still at work.

Which is why I love this letter to the Philippians. Because Paul wanted to encourage them with this letter, and through them encourage us—and make it abundantly clear that although transition is the new normal (we live in a changed and changing world), God is still at work, God is always good and trustworthy, and we need more than ever to abide in Jesus Christ, and remember who we are, and whose we are, and who is really at work among us. Because...

The key word in verse 6 is "**God**" (literally, "the one")—it's emphasized in the grammar of the sentence. **The One (God)**, who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion. He doesn't say, "*I*, the apostle Paul, who began a good work among you will continue it" (even though he founded the church); he doesn't say "**you** who began a good work—now work harder to complete it...," or "your staff who performed a good work..."

The reminder here is that it's **God**, who began a good work, who will continue it and ultimately fulfill it. And he reiterates this a few verses later in Philippians, in chapter 2:13: "...for it is **God** who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure."

We're reminded once again that the work of renewal in the church and ongoing ministry is *God's* work. God does the leading, the growing, the working, the completing. As we heard from Mark's gospel (4:26-28), this is how the Kingdom of God works and grows:

26 Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself...

Jesus is teaching us that the word of God and the Spirit of God have their own powerful effect, and the Kingdom of God grows of its own accord. "The Spirit blows where it wills," as Jesus said, bringing life, healing, growth, redemption, blessing.

This is good news because it means that our work, if you will, is to simply abide in Christ, follow him, pray, and listen—and *do that together!*; that's part of Paul's admonition in all his letters: People! You're on the same team! Work together! And affirm and **join** in the good work that God is already doing.

This is why I believe that *strategic prayer and strategic listening* are just as important as strategic planning these days. We need *strategic discipleship* as much as strategic planning. Especially during this covid time. We just can't do the same kind of planning that we used to do. But we *can* pray and listen, and *that* is the opportunity before us. To be in a place of openness before God, a place of curiosity, and attentiveness.

We of course struggle during this time because we want to see each other and enjoy community together in person. We need that, and we will get there eventually! We will! But for now we can reframe our experience, perhaps, this way: God has opened up an opportunity for his Church to be in prayer, so we can listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church. And talk to each other about it and compare notes.

Obviously this requires wisdom and spiritual discernment, and patience. Because *God is never in a hurry*. The only real mistake we can make is to run ahead of God and try to do things on our own steam, or force things to happen that *we* want. That's what anxiety will do to us: cause us to run ahead of God and try to "fix" things quickly. God invites us, rather, to be still; to pray and discern, and gain the eyes of faith to trust that God *is* at work. Perhaps we are right where we're supposed to be at this time and there is nothing to "fix."

God is not taking a break from things right now until all the churches come back together. God is not waiting for a more effective vaccine rollout. God is not socially distancing from us. In fact, God may be working now in unexpected and even unseen ways as much as ever. Like that seed in the ground that Jesus talked about. There is a lot that happens quietly underground before the above-ground party gets started. Spring is coming and seeds will sprout! So, keep watch!

This is our encouragement: God is at work, and will continue that work. God doesn't leave any of his projects unfinished!

I'd like to close with a brief reminder about our calling as God's people, as stated in Paul's prayer for the church at the end of this passage. He prays that their love would overflow more and more. That their—that our—love would overflow more and more. This is another sermon altogether, but I want to just plant this thought with you:

Although much is changing, and will continue to change, around us and around the world, there are some things that never change: the gospel, obviously, never changes. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. God the Father's love is sure and certain. Great is God's faithfulness!

The other unchanging thing is that people need love. People are hurting and in need. Many want and need a sense of purpose for their life. They need

healing and grace. They need hope! Again, even if we don't know specifically what to do, strategically, in response to all the changes—covid or no covid—we can continue to do what we do best as God's people: love others, bless others, pray for others, trusting that God *is* at work.

May our love overflow more and more, as we trust the God who is at work among us.

Now unto God who is able to do exceedingly abundantly, beyond all that we can ask or imagine, *according to the power which is at work among us*: to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore! And all of God's children said...