

God's Work in Progress

Philippians 1:1-11 & 2:12-13

Isaiah 43:16-21

For the month of May (5 Sundays) I'm returning to a little book of the Bible that is one of my favorites: Philippians. I love this short letter of the apostle Paul, and to me it contains essential and relevant material for living the way of faith, hope, and love—and joy!—in a world that is in turmoil. And, it's a great little book for keeping our hearts and minds grounded and steady and encouraged, as we follow the Way of Jesus.

We won't look at every passage from this little epistle, but the main parts and themes. It's short, but packed with brilliant and beloved teaching, and solid encouragement for us in our journey of faith.

Brief background, before we dive in: the city of Philippi was established as a Roman military colony; it is described in Acts 16:11 as a "leading city in the district of Macedonia" and it was in a strategic location along a Macedonian highway that connected Rome with Asia Minor and other eastern locations. So, it was part of strategic trade route as well as being a strategic military outpost.

The Philippian church was founded by the Apostle Paul on one of his missionary journeys, which you can read about also in Acts 16:11-40. And as we can tell from the tone of the letter, right from the start, the apostle had great affection for these people, and they for him. There is a warm tone.

This letter to the Philippians is also one of the apostle Paul's last letters, if not his last, which he wrote from prison. So there is, to my observation, a maturity and a wisdom here that comes from having stayed close to Christ through the joys *and* the struggles of life, and of following the Way of Christ over many years. What's remarkable to me is that there is no quiet resignation in this letter, or loud protestation, now that Paul is at the end of his life. He rather exhibits a joy and an energy to live for Christ as long as he remains alive. "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain" he will say toward the beginning of the letter. Either way, God be praised. I can't lose. My life has purpose as long as I'm alive. And if I die, well, I get to be with Jesus in glory.

Eugene Peterson calls this letter Paul's happiest letter, and it has been called Paul's epistle of joy because he speaks of joy and rejoicing more often in this little letter than he does in all his other letters. The fact that it's called Paul's epistle of joy is remarkable, given all that he has been through during his life, and

is experiencing toward the end of his life when he writes this: namely, that he's in prison, he is materially poor, and he is in poor health as we learn from his other prison letters. What's remarkable is that there is no complaining from Paul about how awful things are—for him personally, or about what's going on in the world. And there was plenty to complain about on both fronts!

There is also no sense of quiet desperation or resignation on his part—a kind of phoning it in (“Oh well, what can we do?”). Here, in one of Paul's last letters, he is just as caring, just as positive and joyful, just as engaged in the work of God as he was when he was called to be an apostle years earlier.

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 (here is a clue that the early church has begun to organize and form leadership a structure): 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!**

What a rich and beautiful opening to this letter, with expressions of affection and partnership, joy and confidence. It sets such a great tone for the rest of the letter and I'll be coming back to this from time to time in this series because this joyfulness and confidence really is the golden thread that runs through this letter.

Even more than just confidence, we might say he is expressing his *conviction*, a heartfelt *conviction* that God is up to good. You know how we talk about someone being "up to *no good*"? This is the opposite: God is *up to good*.

He begins with this amazing affirmation: "I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion." Paul doesn't hedge here. He doesn't say, "Gee it would be great if God would bless you and work his purposes out through you..." He doesn't say, "I wonder if God will do something good; let's pray about it." He says, "I am **confident**..." that the One who began a good work will continue that good work until it's complete.

Now, an important footnote here: This passage is often used as an individual encouragement. The One who began a good work "in you" (in your life) will continue that work and bring it to completion. That's good, and appropriate. However, the "you" here in Greek is plural. You all. Our chair Bible,

the NRSV gets it right: “The one who began a good work *among* you...” in your community of faith, will continue that work.

This raises the question: What is that good work that God began, that Paul is talking about? He doesn’t say what it is, specifically, so it’s likely that Paul is simply making a general statement about God being at work in their service and mission to the community around them. 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 will continue to be at work, into the future.

Now, this letter to the Philippians *is* full of encouragement from beginning to end, 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 or anxiety (we get strong hints of that especially in chapter 4 when he says “be anxious for nothing...”).

I’m sure that Paul’s awareness of their anxiety or fear is why he begins the letter this way—because he wants to set an encouraging tone.

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. Or perhaps it was economic recession.

Philippi was located on a trade route, so perhaps 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. Maybe the population of Philippi was changing—it certainly would have been changing socio-economically, but perhaps it was also changing in other ways, again, because of their location.

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, 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! (Jesus didn't really say it like that, but that's what sometimes happens! Jesus actually said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be in their midst. I like that better!")

Anyway, there was probably some internal conflict going on. It could've been a squabble over mission priorities or money. Perhaps they were arguing about the color of the carpet they were going to put into the Philippian church social hall. We get clues in the letter that there was disagreement over *something*.

So there are possible *external* circumstances, or *internal*, or probably **both**, that created a need for Paul to bring encouragement to this church that was

facing challenge and change, which resulted in them feeling anxious or concerned.

And this is true today, not just in churches, but in all institutions. Transition is happening in education, in our health care system, and we see this 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. A tidal wave of change.

And a comforting bit of good news is, as we read and study the Bible and learn about the historical contexts, is that the world was in the midst of culture shift in the first century as well, when the New Testament was being written.

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 we live in a changed and changing world, God is still at work, God is always good, and faithful, 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”).... ***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 are doing a good work—now work harder to complete it."

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 in chapter 2:13: "*Work out the gift of salvation... 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 the work of ongoing ministry is God's work, not ours.

This reminds me of a passage in Mark's gospel—4:26-28 (I thought of this because we're planting seeds at our house right now):

²⁶ Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain.'

Jesus is teaching here 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. We do the simple work of sowing seeds, doing good and 'tending the garden' so to speak, and then trust the Spirit of God to make it fruitful.

This is a relief, in a way, because it means that our work, if you will, is simply to abide in Christ, follow his Way, worship, pray, and listen—*and do that together* (that's part of Paul's encouragement in chapter 2, which we'll talk about

next week; we're in this together), and then affirm the good work that God is doing. We let God's Spirit make it all fruitful. We release outcomes.

Obviously, this requires wisdom and discernment, and patience. *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. That's what anxiety will do to us: cause us to run ahead of God and try to "fix" things. The problem with that is, sometimes "fixing" things makes them worse, or complexifies things unnecessarily, or slows things down.

The first pastor I worked with right out of seminary said to me once, "Don't slow things down by hurrying up." I needed to hear that as an eager and somewhat anxious young pastor. I still need to hear it! We'll talk about that when we get to chapter 4, when Paul says "be anxious for nothing..." It's an invitation to slow ourselves down *internally*, and trust God; to do the counterintuitive thing and rest in God, converse, and seek wisdom for what to do, and when. Which leads to the next part of Paul's encouragement from the opening of the letter, in his prayer for them.

Following the confident assertion that God is at work, and will continue that work, Paul prays that their love would overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight. In other words, with wisdom.

With the assurance that God is at work, even if we aren't always 100% clear what that work is at the moment, there is something *we can* do: we can love intelligently and wisely, and in a way that blesses others, with small but substantial acts of love.

Every time *Jesus* talks about the good work that we are invited to do, he always uses examples of small things: a mustard seed, a grain of wheat, a little bit of salt, a small amount of yeast mixed in with dough. These are all small, but substantial, because God causes them to grow and multiply, and, because they are done in love. Mother Teresa: "We can't all do great things, but we *can* do small things with great love."

So, please don't talk yourself out of being able to make a difference because you feel like you can't do something bigger. Every act of love counts. Every good work counts. Because God is at work through you, and all of us.

As in other places where we are told to love, Paul is describing love here, not just as affection, but as behavior. Not primarily as feeling, but as wisdom. As a decision and action that will produce a good result for the benefit of others, and for the glory and praise of God.

We are a world in transition—and have been for decades; it's just accelerated now. We can't deny or ignore it. And in the midst of this transition,

people are anxious and afraid, hurting and in need of hope. And joy! One of the gifts God's people can give the world, in addition to our loving service, is our joy, and our peace—as much as we are able to access joy and peace for ourselves. Joy opens the door to peace, and to the Spirit's gifts and work.

These are challenging times in which we live. It's not easy! But possibility and potential are before us. Because... God is at work! Even if it's underground, or on the margins for a time—hidden from our sight, like seeds waiting to germinate, or roots spreading. Like yeast in dough. We are asked to trust, and have faith, and act on the conviction that God hasn't given up on the world. Or on any person.

And, it's always good to remember that there isn't anything God hasn't seen before, there is nothing God hasn't handled before. God is the God of history. Nothing surprises God or freaks God out. God has seen some pretty messed up stuff over the centuries! So we can rest confidently in the fact that God is at work, even if, perhaps, in a new way for a new day—as he said through Isaiah: “Former things have passed; new things I declare to you! I will make a way in the desert, and springs in the wilderness.” God will make a way through the dry and dusty wilderness times, and bring refreshment.

I Come with Joy