

Find the Good

Psalm 37:1-8 Philippians 1:3-11 and 4:8

I'm reading the bookends of Paul's letter to the Philippians...

Philippians 1:3-11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I 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. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your 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. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

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

I take joy in the humorous things from church bulletin bloopers and on church reader boards. An all-time favorite from a readerboard: “Don’t let worry kill you; let the church help.” I’m hoping today helps—in the right kind of way! There is a lot going on in the world, isn’t there? And by “the world,” I mean our country too. And our region. It has a lot of people feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and, well, worried about the future.

This morning I want to highlight something from Scripture, that tells us that in the midst of *everything* going on in the world, it is our call as God’s people to find the good. To look for the good, and affirm it. Yes, we need to be aware and understanding and act on things like gun violence, mental health, racial justice (it is Juneteenth!), to name a few. And, there is still a war in Ukraine and ongoing war and famine in places like Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Yemen. We need to be aware of those issues and places and people, and as we are able, be helpful in responding and making our world and our society a better place.

And at the same time, we need to spend as much if not more time becoming aware & affirming that there is still so much good around us, and in the world. God calls us to that awareness and affirmation. *But we need to **find** the good. We need to look for it. And affirm it.* For our sakes, and the sake of those

around us. Find the good, affirm it, and share it/showcase it, for the sake of creating environments and contexts of encouragement and well-being.

Let me be quick to say, this doesn't mean we put our heads in the sand, never look at the news, or deny what's going on in the world or try to escape from it. We *do* need a break from it from time to time, but this doesn't mean we go whistling through the graveyard and pretend everything is fine. Even if we wanted to do all of that, we can't these days because unless you live off the grid in a vast wilderness somewhere, apart from everyone, people around you and related to you *are* watching the news, *are* on social media, and *are* feeling the impact of things like covid and the economy and so forth. And they're telling us about it.

Not to mention, the Biblical writers are always honest about what's going on around them; they're realistic. And yet, while seeing clearly the situation at hand, as part of their hope in God, they seek the good. Partly for their own encouragement, partly as a way to see where God is at work, and partly to motivate themselves to do good. Because once we see the good, affirm it, showcase it, we'll start to believe it, and then want to act on it.

So, my encouragement to us this morning is to be a treasure hunter. Find the treasures of good in the midst of your daily and weekly activities. This is what

the apostle Paul did. As he dictates this letter to the Philippians—which is agreed by scholars is his last letter—he’s in prison, he is poor, he’s in poor health, nearly blind (which is why he is dictating it to a scribe), the church is being persecuted (and so is he), the Romans are sensing that their empire is beginning to collapse so they are brutally doubling down on asserting their power and authority—especially against minority groups and non-citizens. Paul has been betrayed and abandoned by many friends.

This is the apostle Paul’s situation. And when thrown in prison, he didn’t say “Where’s my lawyer?!?” He said, “Anyone have pen and paper? I want to write another letter of encouragement to the church.”

And in the midst of painful personal circumstances and a brutal society, he writes what commentators have called his happiest letter. His letter that contains the word ‘joy’ and ‘rejoice’ more often than his other letters.

Paul found the good, and affirmed it. It begins in the first sentences of his letter as he expresses his fondness for the people he worked alongside in forming the church, and as he affirms the good work that God is doing among them and through them. 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 at that time. Even though there was plenty to complain about!

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

And it begins with this amazing affirmation: *I am confident* that the One who began a good work will bring it to completion. Paul doesn’t hedge here. He doesn’t say, “Gee it would be great if God would work his purposes out...” 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.

And at the end of the letter he gives a strong encouragement to God’s people to find the good, dwell on the good, literally “meditate” on it, and affirm it.

I know all of this is easier said than done, which is why we need to go treasure hunting, and *be persistent* in it. Look for good news stories; ask people for good news stories... *create our own* good news stories!

Heidi found this lovely piece (from 2020). A younger woman speaking with an older man she just met:

“Sometimes I just want it to stop. Talk of COVID, protests, looting, brutality. I lose my way. I become convinced that this “new normal” is real life. Then I meet an 87-year-old who talks of living through polio, diphtheria, Vietnam protests and yet is still enchanted with life.

He seemed surprised when I said that 2020 must be especially challenging for him. “No,” he said slowly, looking me straight in the eyes. “I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the printed headlines; I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that we love big. Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines. **“Husband loves wife today.” “Family drops everything to come to Grandma’s bedside.” “Old man makes new friend.”**

His words collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit. My headline now reads **“Woman overwhelmed by the spirit of kindness and the reminder that our capacity to love is never-ending.”**

Isn’t that beautiful? So, here is something you can do this week, or at the end of each day: write your own headlines.

Find the good. Sometimes apart from the bad, and, sometimes in the middle of it. Paul found the good *while* he was in prison, not apart from it, without being in denial about his circumstances. He didn’t say “I’ll look for the good after I get out of prison.”

Reminds me of a story—there are a few versions of it, but it goes something like this: a little boy wakes up on Christmas morning to find a big pile of horse manure under the Christmas tree. His response: “There must be a pony in here somewhere.” We can find the good amidst the _____.

We're hearing stories of Ukrainians finding the good and doing good. I heard a story about an artist (painter), who is calling for other artists to do their arts—music, dance, painting. Because one of Putin's so-called justifications for the war is: Ukraine doesn't have its own culture. This artist is saying, "Yes we do! So we need to continue to express ourselves as Ukrainians, focus on beauty in the midst of ugliness, and tell our stories through art." It's almost a form of protest. Art as protest. And affirmation.

Find the good, affirm it, and highlight & showcase it. Art read the opening verses of Psalm 37, and while that Psalm isn't a prayer, per se, it is a piece of wisdom, a reflection on the goodness of God, and the justice of God. It's one of my favorites.

One of the things I like to do sometimes when reading Scripture is to just read the verbs. The action words. They often describe who God is and what God does. Read the verbs in the Psalms and what they say is things like: God heals, God forgives, God vindicates, God lifts up the downtrodden (and so on), as we heard in our prayers earlier in the service. What does all of that tell you about who God is, and what God does?

In addition to revealing who God is and what God does, looking at the verbs also shows us what finding the good and exercising faith and hope looks like.

Back to Psalm 37; what are the verbs?: *Trust, do good, take delight in, commit* (your way to the Lord), *trust* (again), *be still, wait patiently*. In between are some affirmations of what God does: “Do this, and this is what God will do” (along that line it’s worth looking at the promises too—they invite us to have a larger, eternal perspective: God’s got a handle on this! is what it’s saying. In spite of evidence to the contrary)

Now I can’t tell you *how* you’re supposed to do all of those things; how to trust, wait patiently, be still, and what those look like for you. But they, with the Philippians verbs about God at work, and many others like that in the Bible, all indicate decisions that we can make to see the good, to see God as good, and put ourselves in a place of living in and into that goodness.

To me, the centerpiece of Psalm 37 is the line: *delight yourself in the Lord*. *Delight yourself in the Lord*. Paul says the same thing toward the end of Philippians: *rejoice in the Lord, always*. This isn’t denial, or superficial cheery optimism, whistling through the graveyard. What the Biblical writers are saying is: You don’t have to focus on the badness of the bad (and bad people), or the badness of your circumstances (or how bad you *think* they are if you are awfulizing, or catastrophizing them). In the psalm David says: *refrain from anger, forsake wrath*. They don’t help anyone, especially you and me. *Delight yourself*

in the Lord, and your true desires will be fulfilled. This is wisdom. And oh, do we need wisdom these days!

Delight yourself in the Lord, which means we can delight in what the Lord has placed before our eyes and ears and senses in our everyday comings and goings.

We can follow Paul's admonition from Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, meditate on these things." Find and approve of what is excellent. Say yes to it. And be in scavenger hunt mode for those things: I see someone doing justice... yes! I see a child at play, completely unpretentious... awesome! I see a Japanese maple, artfully pruned... beautiful! At church I heard about the great work that Clothes for Kids is doing. Hallelujah!

Over the past months, the concluding lines of Psalm 27 keep coming to mind, for both Heidi and me: *"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"*