

"Pressing On"

October 15, 2023

Babcock Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Epistle: Philippians 3:4b-15

The Sermon:

As I approach today's sermon there are three things I want to say:

1. This is Not last Sunday's sermon as I promised, just too much has happened in this past week to justify a re-run.
2. I find that I am left wondering what to say.
3. I know I needed worship this morning. In the midst of turmoil, I know I need to remind myself of the everlasting God, and the truths of our faith. And I need to do it with you, in your presence.

II.

I vividly remember 9/11. I was the Executive of the Presbytery of the Cascades - essentially it is the state of Oregon. Churches had times of prayer, the services were crowded, everyone knew this was a seminal time.

I made it my mission to be at every service I could attend because I knew we all had to remind ourselves of the truths of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So what happens to us? Well, the human thing is to let OUR thing become THE thing, to forget who we are and whose we are. In the Old Testament there is the phrase about God's people that they were "Taking their ease in Zion."

So, I know I need to be in Church with you, to sing the hymns, to pray the prayers, to hear God's Good Word in scripture ... together, together.

III.

Yesterday in the Opinion section of the New York times there was an article by Dahlia Scheindlin: "The Pathways to Peace Are Getting Darker." I read it and re-read it, and read it again.

“Like many Israelis right now, I'm inconsolable. I've watched for days as the pain over lost lives and hostages accumulates. This is hell, and the days ahead will be worse.

“But this moment is excruciating for me for another reason. In those frantic first hours on Saturday as the events unfolded, I feared they could spell the final failure of what I view as my life's work — a commitment to peace, justice, equality and a reduction of political violence.

“Much of my career has been spent working on grueling political campaigns for parties I believed were committed to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and making peace. I advise numerous human rights and peace organizations, working with people I love and respect (far more than politicians). I have plumbed the depths of conflict and democracy in my academic work. I write about and promote these causes, and I spend my volunteer time pushing yet another peace plan that sometimes seems doomed before birth.

“This isn't virtue signaling. If anything, my activities reflect despair at the failure of each previous effort to reach the aim of an agreed political resolution to the conflict.

“Yet at each juncture, I felt an inexplicable need to keep trying, to keep changing paths.”

IV.

But it is not just the current conflict that today commands the papers and the news. As David Brooks said on the same page, “We are surrounded by war. Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Sudan, Israel: These aren't just names, these are people's lives.”

Diane is Armenian, her brother lives part-time there and works as hard as he can for peace. I served on a Foundation established in 1966, with the Presbyterian Church by Vartan Jinishian. In my foundation work, I have been to Armenia four times and called on Armenians throughout Southern California to encourage support.

Nagorno-Karabakh, in the far corners of the South Caucasus, is tragically easy for the world to forget. In the nine-month blockade on Nagorno-Karabakh since December, 120,000 people — mostly civilians — are lacking enough food, medicine or fuel. And they are being driven out by a violent Azerbaijan. The Russians had kept a lid Azerbaijan until they had other fish to fry in Ukraine and left Azerbaijan along to do their dirt.

I know these folks, I have stood in their fields, heard their dreams, discussed and planned for the Jinishian Foundation's work.

V.

Today's scripture is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. He loved that church and wrote some of his most personal thoughts to them. Let's tune into what he says:
Philippians 3:4b-15

Pressing on. How does one keep Pressing On in a world that perpetually throws up road blocks and speed bumps? You know when you hit one how you fly off the seat.

Self-help books that sell now like pancakes, tell you that you're brilliant, awesome, powerful. Do these affirmations feel accurate? Instead of blasting through projects and conquering the world, most of us – at best – feel like we're crawling uphill.

Last Friday, in the New York Times, Peter Baker laid out a list of our country's speed bumps. When I finished, I sat there stunned.

"The American public has been sour on the country for a remarkably long stretch. The last time a majority of Americans reported in a Gallup survey, being satisfied 'with the way things are going in the United States' was January 2004, nearly two decades ago.

"This has taken a toll on American institutions. Fewer than half of Americans express confidence in the police, the medical system, organized religion, the Supreme Court, banks, public schools, the presidency, large technology companies, organized labor, the media, the criminal justice system, big business or Congress. Last year, Gallup recorded significant declines in 11 of the 16 institutions it tracks. Only small business and the military drew more than 50 percent support."

"In June, a separate survey by the Associated Press found that 49 percent of Americans believe democracy is not working well in the United States, 40 percent who say it is working only somewhat well and just 10 percent who believe it is working very well.

NY Times – 10/06/2023

How to keep our balance in such a world? Given the legislative branch of our government you have to ask, How's it working now?

Paul says he began this race when he was grasped by Jesus Christ. The Greek verb which Paul uses is *katalambano* which has the particular meaning of being seized or caught, almost by surprise; pulled back from the cliff, yanked from danger.

I remember an elementary school crossing guard who saved five children at a school crosswalk by snatching them from an on-coming car, pulling them to herself, taking on the impact of the car.

Literally, those children were seized and saved. Had the McMinnville, Oregon, News Register been published in New Testament Greek, *katalambano* would have been used.

In just this way Paul says he was grasped by Christ - seized and saved. Because of this he is now running great race of faith.

Paul admits the race is hard.

And it *is* a hard race, this journey we call the Christian pilgrimage; it's not an easy gait down a smooth path, a light jog around the track. He confesses how he must personally keep striving and pressing on, always working up a sweat.

VI.

Precisely that is what brings us to today.

It is, of course, all well and good to talk about the race, but what we are able to do depends a great deal on the preparation we make, the training we do.

It is clearly God's intention that all people who dwell on this earth sit together at this table and find nourishment for the race that is set before us.

If that is true, then in the economy of God's great goodness:

- the hungry are going to be fed and the weary will be given strength,
- the poor and the exploited are going to receive justice,
- human life will take precedence over money, power, and the national hubris we are experiencing;
- Races will be together in fulfilling the dream of brotherhood and sisterhood.
- and peace will become the natural order of things, Ukraine, Armenia, Iran and Iraq, Africa, and of course, the near East.

Here is the vision: what if we became:

- as good at making peace as we are at fomenting war?
- As good at communicating with each other as we are at arguing?
- As adept as being in community as we are at building road blocks and walls?

VII.

Probably one of the most dynamic renderings Eugene Peterson's The Message. This is what he does with today's passage (and this is how I want to end). The passage makes clear the eternal truths that must guide us in life:

⁷"The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing in the trash - along with everything else I used to take credit for.

⁸And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important to me are gone from my life.

¹⁰I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself.

¹³I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have made it. But I am on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me.

Friends, don't get me wrong: by no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back."

Each Sunday, we gather to affirm this is the power that will infuse our lives with grace and meaning.

Philippians 3: 4b-16 Contemporary English Version

^{4b} Others may brag about themselves, but I have more reason to brag than anyone else. ⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old, and I am from the nation of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a true Hebrew. As a Pharisee, I strictly obeyed the Law of Moses. ⁶ And I was so eager that I even made trouble for the church. I did everything the Law demands in order to please God.

⁷ But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. ⁸ Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have given up everything else and count it all as garbage. All I want is Christ ⁹ and to know that I belong to him. I could not make myself acceptable to God by obeying the Law of Moses. God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ. ¹⁰ All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life. I want to suffer and die as he did, ¹¹ so that somehow I also may be raised to life.

¹² I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize.

¹³ My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead. ¹⁴ I run toward the goal, so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.

¹⁵ All of us who are mature should think in this same way. And if any of you think differently, God will make it clear to you. ¹⁶ But we must keep going in the direction that we are now headed.