

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Friendship and Courage
Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6
December 5, 2021

Scripture readings in Advent don't mess around. Today, they go to prison and out into the wilderness: a place of suffocating limit and a place of disorienting directionless-ness. And they take us there with them. Then again, some of us would say we are already there—in a place in life of impossible darkness or in a place in life of vast uncertainty. So, we can also say if scripture readings in Advent take us to the places of great human need, they also take us to the places of great spiritual hope. Today they give us in those two places and all the spaces between them two of the most important things we need to carry on: friendship and courage.

For Paul in prison, it was friendship. The Philippian Christians had one of those special relationships with the Apostle Paul. They were loyal; they were his friends; they were with him. We all need friends like that. That's how the Philippians were with apostle Paul. They'd seen him through it all, even when he stirred up controversy by preaching that Jesus is Lord and the Son of God, and Caesar is not Lord and definitely not the Son of God. And now they seem him through to the end, loyal, faithful, with him even as he is in prison awaiting trial and possibly death.

If you're Paul, what do you say in response to that?

In Paul's letter to them from prison, he is writing parting words to the community he planted, loved, and nurtured in Philippi. How do you possibly find the appropriate final words to thank the folks who have risked their own welfare just to be associated with you, who have supported you and stood by you—even though they could have been harmed by the scandalous, treasonous claims that you made about Jesus, and whom you know may face some hardships in the near future?

He writes, I'm so thankful for you, for your partnership in the gospel. I'm so proud of you. And I know that the good work God began in you God will bring to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul and the Philippians had a special, mutual relationship of friendship and shared devotion to Christ. Those are to be treasured. They don't come around all the time. Church can be like that, but it's not always like that for everyone of course. Lots of people have stories of their pain from church. I think it's a different kind of pain than other soured relationships because with church, like with marriage, you have a sacred sense of what it could be, what it's supposed to be. Like with marriage, you believe you deep in your bones this, and in your soul, you need it to be. Sometimes it's not. But when it's good, it's so good. Like Paul and the Philippians, and like a lot of other times and places.

I was talking with a pastor friend recently who was still marveling about the love his congregation had shown for him. We were reminiscing about the old days . . . before Covid. He said I don't know how we did what we did on Sundays. I would preach the morning service, which ended close to 1 pm. Then we'd rush somewhere to have a meal for lunch. Then at 3, I would preach for the afternoon service.

I interrupted, "you have a second Sunday service at 3? In the afternoon? Another one?"

He said yep. And because preachers often preach in one another's pulpit for that service I'd be going across town to another church. And here's the thing: I'd get up to preach that afternoon service and there they'd all be out there looking back at me.

"Who?" I said.

My congregation, they'd go with me wherever I was going for the afternoon service.

I said, wow, "you had a *second* service at 3? Another one? In the middle of the afternoon?"

He was looking at me like, are you a dummy, yes, that's what I just told you. Keep up.

He said, can you believe we did all of this? I was exhausted by Sunday night. So wrung out from the day. We all were. It's amazing we did all that before Covid. They don't do it anymore, for now at least. He said, just the other day I asked some of my people, why did you go with me for those Sunday afternoon services? Why would you do that?

They looked at me and said, "Preacher, you were going, and we didn't want you to go alone."

Now, you see, that's amazing. That is some kind of love: *I know you were going, and I didn't want you to go alone*. That's the kind of relationship Paul had with his Philippian friends, too. They said: we'll go as far with you as we can. And they did. Now that he's in prison and facing death, they can't be with him, but in spirit, they're right there with him. And he feels it. And he has the same love for them.

It's a bond that exceeds human friendship, it's a mutual devotion to Christ that binds people together in love and ministry. Paul's letter is saying the same thing to them: I'll go as far with you as I'm able, and then I'll trust you to God's care. I am thankful for you, I'm so proud of you. God's going to finish what God began in you whether I'm here to see it through with you or not.

What does it mean to read this passage in the growing darkness of Advent? Maybe, encouragement. Or to read it in the loneliness of life when you feel like you might be all alone in the world. Maybe, Solidarity: you aren't alone. Or to read it in the face of all that goes wrong in the world. How about, Hope?

The words of the Apostle beckon Christians in every generation to continue their partnership in this great faith as they await the Coming One. We will need each other on this journey, because

the days ahead are unknown and the powers and principalities of this world are strong. And we as individuals may have feet of clay, but together, we are stronger. Even in darkness, there is joy—not always in our circumstances but in the God who has brought us together and in God’s Son who willingly took on flesh to join us in this incarnate life. The light shines even in the darkness.

And so, we do not lose hope. Friendships help with that, but it’s going to take courage, too. Almost anything worth doing, almost any day worth living, or any relationship worth salvaging takes courage.

John the Baptist, in a very different kind of situation, had this hopeful courage, the same fire burning in him that Paul later would, even though John looked a lot different and sounded a lot different. There he is in the wilderness, preaching to anyone who will listen about the coming kingdom and the coming king. That’s courageous work, but he was doing it. Still doing it, no matter how impossible the odds.

The Gospel makes it clear how dangerous this is by listing all those names in the first part of our reading this morning. The other day I was asked a really good question, “Why all those names? Why is half of our reading a list of these rulers Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, etc.” Well, I said, for one reason Luke wants us to know when this all happened, so it’s helpful information. For a second reason, the Gospel and Christian life was and always is a question of where hope lies, where power ultimately lies? The question posed to every person is: who do you trust, and what do you believe? Those names represent the world’s ways, the people at the top of the heap—in that case the Roman empire’s claim to power and ultimate meaning. Now, do you believe that claim? John didn’t. Paul didn’t. Jesus didn’t. Do you? Do you believe that about Rome or about any empire in the world? And finally, I think, those names are right there in the story because they are rising stars in the empire’s constellation of power and intimidation. And those stars will fall. Or maybe they’re not stars in the sky, but think of them as the geography of the earth. In those terms Tiberius is the valley that will be filled; Pilate and Herod the mountains and hills that will be brought low; Phillip and Lysanius are the rough places made smooth and crooked places made straight.

Luke cleverly is presenting and committing high treason. The Gospel almost always is. It’s always treasonous against the rule of this world. It’s always the light held against the darkness. Annas and Caiaphas, high priests of Israel represent all flesh who will see the salvation of God.

Luke wanted everyone who reads his Gospel story of Jesus to see the Gospel for what it is: a voice crying in the wilderness. The Gospel comes to the world from the outside place that doesn’t quite fit in anywhere, a place between places, the place of uncertainty, the wild place. Wilderness was the place between places, a place no one wanted to be for long, a literal no-man’s land. There’s a man of God now in no-man’s land this day, crying out from the wilderness of human experience which may be the only kind of place besides prison from which we can see the truth of the world.

John and Paul, it seems couldn't be farther apart in their experiences. John's outside breathing fresh air, his eyes and spiritual vision full of valleys and hills. Paul's in prison, in the dark, the sky only seen through a small hole in the wall. John's a solitary figure, alone in the world except for those who come curious or called to hear what he has to say. Paul has a long relationship as part of a community with whom he feels tender care. John is anything but tender. You hear that in his sharp-edged preaching. John is preaching in advance of the coming of Christ. Paul is looking toward the second coming of Christ. Take them together, and I think you have a picture of the bookends of life experiences.

And yet . . .for all their different places in life, they share in common a penetrating vision of God's Advent. Even in our captivity, in Christ, we are free. Even in our loneliness, in Christ, we are not alone. Even in the face of impossible odds, God will make a way. Every valley will be filled in, and every mountain and hill will be made low. With Christ, with one another, and with courage, God's people can find their way through today to tomorrow and the tomorrows to come. No empire on earth no gates of hell and nothing we've done to diminish this hope can stop this grace of God. God's Advent has begun. And will not stop until the good work begun in you has become complete.

And God will bring to completion what God has begun.
Thanks be to God.

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