

“Press On”

Sermon – April 6, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

“Partly sunny, winds up to 23 MPH, high of 77 degrees, relative humidity 17%.” That was the weather we had on Wednesday afternoon, March 19, 2025. Raise your hand if enjoy that kind of weather. <pause>

OK. That’s seem pretty unanimous. How about this:

“A chance of snow showers, mainly after 2am. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 33. West wind around 5 mph becoming calm in the evening. Chance of precipitation is 30%. New snow accumulation of less than a half inch possible.”

That is tonight’s weather forecast. Raise your hand if you are looking forward to this weather. <pause> No one? Really? <mockingly> I’m shocked.

My stepson Jesse and I were riding in the car together on Friday and he said, “I didn’t mind the long winter, but after getting a taste of summer weather a couple of weeks ago, it kind of crushes your spirit to go back to wintry weather.”

Raise your hand if you agree with Jesse. <pause> Yeah, pretty unanimous. You feel trapped. Things out of your control. Just when you thought things were getting better, your hopes get dashed to the ground.

Such a feeling might remind you of a quote from the 1994 movie “The Shawshank Redemption” when the character Red, played by Morgan Freeman says, “Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.”

These days trying *not* to read even the headlines can be depressing. For 238 years, our country has to tried “to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

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What we thought we were working towards as a society seems to be being dismantled in just a couple of months. Native Americans, African-Americans, and others, though, would, at best, wryly note that lofty vision has from the beginning been applied, uh, “selectively”, so recent events and acceptance are perhaps more revealing than retrogressive.

For those, though, whose values as followers of Christ have, at least ostensibly, aligned with their values as citizens, these radical changes in our secular government have caused a crisis of faith.

The Apostle Paul and the early church also had challenges of their faith.

Today’s lesson from chapter 3 of Paul’s letter to the Philippians reflects some of those challenges.

Philippi was a wealthy Roman colony that was inhabited primarily by retired military and political figures that were given land by the Roman government. It was a mid-sized city in Macedonia that was a stop on one of the main roads between East and West in the Roman Empire.

The Christian community in Philippi was the first church established by Paul on European soil. From its beginning, though, there had been active opposition, even the threat of death.

Rome tolerated some ancient religions, like Judaism, but otherwise expected people to pay at least nominal public homage to Rome and its gods. You could view it as a loyalty oath to Rome. Christianity was viewed as an upstart cult where its followers proclaimed this Jesus guy as Lord and not the emperor—and that was not acceptable.

Thus, Paul writes his letter, and the Philippian disciples receive the letter, as islands of devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of a vast ocean of religious, political, and economic devotion to the Empire of Rome.

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Unlike the Corinthians, the church at Philippi was doing well in their life in Christ. But they were discouraged and disheartened. They were getting more and more persecuted because of their faith. And Paul, their founder and spiritual leader, was imprisoned, possibly in Rome.

Today’s passage starts with Paul seemingly bragging. He is a Jew by birth with deep ancestral roots. Furthermore, he was a Pharisee and zealous follower of the law and persecutor of the church to defend the faith. And though not stated here, in the book of Acts, Paul claims his status also as a Roman citizen, which gave him certain rights.

But all of this is not bragging. Paul is simply saying that if anyone has a right to boast about religious credentials, it is he. He had been highly regarded in his religious life and privileged in his secular life. And, yet, none of that mattered. He had given it all up for life in Christ.

As he says in verse 9, “I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

For Paul faith does not mean adherence to some cognitive or behavioral formula that specifies what we are to think or do, even when it contradicts our best sense of what is true and just. Rather, “faith” has to do with fidelity or loyalty to the way of life God’s promises open up for us—a way of life characterized by holding fast to God’s promise of unconditional goodness and mercy, precisely when we are in the midst of what appears to be a precarious future or an irreversible past.

And “righteousness” has to do with living in such a way that we embody God’s mercy and justice,

Paul is affirming a new reality where followers of the Lord Jesus Christ accept a new and radical value system where background and heritage,

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education and training, religious and political convictions and activism, and lifestyle matter not one jot compared the value of knowing Christ as Lord.

Paul has come to understand that salvation ultimately lies in the act of resurrection. As he says in verse 10, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”

Without hope and knowledge of what God can and will do, the banality of human existence can overwhelm us as we take stock of all that is happening in our world. God triumphs over all that causes fear and chaos in our lives, and over all that threatens our existence, be it water, war, or wilderness.

Paul’s words remind us of who God is—our Savior; and of who we are to God—precious and loved. Our present realities might feel like mighty waters or the wilderness, but we can wait in confidence and expectation that God’s salvation is at hand.

Like the weather, there are good days and bad days; times when things are sunny and bright and other times when they are cold and wet. But regardless, we press on knowing God is with us and sustains us.

So as you go forth today, be heartened and encouraged by Paul’s closing words in today’s passage, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.