CONFIDENCE IN COMPLETION

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2021 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

About two weeks before fall finals my senior year of college, a bunch of my friends decided that we were going to make Christmas gifts for our mothers. Not just any gift. We were all going to learn how to knit scarves for our moms. So instead of working on final papers, preparing for exams, or doing any sort of responsible thing, we sat in the campus coffee shop and chatted while knitting. There was just one problem for me with this. No one helped me as I was choosing my knitting needles. And while my friends quickly finished their loose-knitted scarves with those nice, large, round needles they purchased, I struggled to finish half of my tightly knitted scarf before I had to get back to being a responsible student. And though I saved the beginnings of that scarf for years, I never finished my mom's scarf. (Sorry, mom.)

It's about this time every year that I remember that scarf, not simply because it's a not-yet-completed Christmas gift almost 20 years in the making, but because Advent is a time of year where we remember that we are still awaiting a completion of sorts. Advent is that season of watching and waiting, preparing for and anticipating the second coming of Christ. As we move toward Christmas, we remember God's people waiting through the ages for their Messiah, the one who would save, rescue, and redeem them, until the coming of Jesus. And during Advent, we are reminded again that we join with the church through history looking toward and longing for the day when Christ will come again, when the future that is God's reign and rule will break in to our world of death and sin once and for all. Advent is our regular reminder that we are looking toward and watching for the completion of God's coming reign, when Christ returns, and all creation and all things reach their telos, their fulfilment, their full potential, their completion.

Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, also looks to the Day of the Lord, the day when the future that God will bring in Christ breaks in fully and finally with Jesus's return. Paul writes to the saints, the holy ones, that is all those who have joined him in following Jesus, and he anticipates this coming day of the Lord and encourages them to live in light of what is to come. As with all the epistles, or letters, in the Bible, when we read this letter to the Philippians, we're reading someone else's mail. And in order to better understand this letter, it's helpful to know a bit of the backstory.

The church in Philippi is a special church because it's the first church Paul started in Europe. (The Gospel spread a long way before it ever arrived in Europe.) Acts 16 tells the story about how Paul was with Silas in Troas when he had a vision of a man from Macedonia, a Roman territory, asking him to come and help them by spreading the good news of Jesus there. Taking this as a sign from the Spirit, Paul and Silas set out immediately across the Aegean Sea, eventually arriving in Philippi. There they shared the message of Jesus with a group of women who became the first converts and the beginning of the Philippian church. While they were there, they stirred up some holy mischief. They cast an evil spirit out of a young girl, which angered the men who owned her because they weren't going to make money off her fortune telling anymore. So they had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into jail.

Perhaps you know the story of what happened while they were in jail in Philippi. The beat-up and battered Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God when around midnight an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and broke all the prisoners' chains and opened all the doors. Instead of fleeing, Paul, Silas, and the prisoners stayed. They spared the guard's life, shared with him and his household the good news of Jesus, and that very evening they were all baptized into the faith. Ultimately, Paul and Silas ended up being released from jail to go on their way spreading the message of Jesus.

Some time has passed, Paul ended up in prison again. This time he was most likely in Rome, waiting to be tried for spreading the message of a King and Lord that is greater and more powerful than Caesar or any other king. Charges of this kind could lead to lengthy lock up, beating, or even to death, so they were serious. Hearing of Paul's imprisonment, the Philippian church sent aid to Paul and provided spiritual and material resources for him. In an abundance of gratitude, he wrote this letter of thanksgiving and encouragement to the Christians at Philippi. Paul wrote to the Philippians remembering the exciting beginnings of the church and the powerful work God had done. And the

whole letter drips with joy and gratitude from the beginning. Shockingly, the imprisoned Paul is filled with joy and gratitude while bound in chains.

Why is Paul so full of joy and gratitude? What about this situation could possibly inspire joy? Clearly God's work was unfinished. Paul was in chains facing death. He was still waiting on that coming Day when the Lord would triumph, when the Lord would turn everything right side up, when the Lord would make all things new, when love would win and justice prevail. In the midst of this incompletion and waiting, Paul wrote this joy-saturated letter calling the Philippian church to persist in being imitators of and participants in the life of Jesus. In the earliest part of his letter, he shares the secret of his joy. You see, the joy-producing good news for Paul, and the good news of Advent, isn't simply that God isn't done working yet, as glad as we may be to hear that. But the good news is the assurance, the persuasion, the confidence we can have that the God who began the good work of drawing people fully into the life of Jesus will bring that work to completion. God's faithfulness in completing what God has started is the foundation for Paul's confidence and joy.

The good news Paul proclaims and the good news that Advent persistently declares is that though God is not finished, the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. Paul has confidence in this because Paul has confidence in Christ. And we can have that confidence, too. Paul knew God was not done with the church in Philippi because Paul was persuaded and convinced that God would finish the work God started. God doesn't give up on people like I gave up on that scarf. God has no abandoned people projects. "I am confident of this," Paul writes, "that the one who began a good work among y'all (yeah Paul's from the south) will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." Paul is confident in completion.

The overflow of this confidence in completion for Paul is joy. Amid all the things that demonstrated God was not finished yet, that is in the midst of trial and hardship of all kinds, Paul experiences joy. Life lived during the not yet fully complete time, during the "we're still a work in progress" time, during the "we aren't what we used to be, but we aren't yet what we ought to be" time, during "God's still working on me to make me what I ought to be" time, during the time that is still filled with bumps and bruises, trials and hardships… life lived during this time is a life ready to overflow with joy. Paul demonstrates that in life with Jesus abundant joy flows amidst the fragments and the loose ends and the hardships and all the things that demonstrate that God must not be done with us yet. Instead of these things pressing him to despair, they move him deeper into participation in the life of Jesus and deeper into joy.

What if that's how we responded to trial and hardship? What if that's how we responded when we saw those loose ends of our lives, when we experienced those things that remind us we're not fully who God wants us to be as individuals or as a community? Instead of despairing, instead of fighting, instead of withdrawing, instead of turning in on ourselves, instead of making excuses, or whatever our typical responses might be, what if instead we moved deeper into the life and joy of Jesus? One of the things we learn from Paul is that our life situation does not have to be a deterrent to joy. Joy is not the same happiness. Joy is something given—an overflow of life in Christ, a fruit of the Spirit grown in us. Happiness is something pursued and is dependent on the happenstances of life. Joy is not attached to happenstance but rather to the work of the Lord of life. Joy isn't just about looking on the bright side of life. Rather, joy is the fruit of confidence in the One who started the work and who is working to bring it to completion. Joy is the outflow of being convinced of the faithfulness of God to so dramatically set everything right that the reverberations of that future already impact the present. Joy comes in the assurance of God completing the good work, in the persuasion that a new day is on its way, in the being convinced that in spite of what is happening around you, God is at work finishing the work God started in you.

But how do we live in this joy? I want to briefly highlight three things Paul shares early in this letter that act to fertilize the fruit of joy in Paul's life and that surely would do the same for us. First, Paul gives thanks in remembering. "I thank my God every time I remember you," Paul writes. It's one thing simply to remember. And as I'm constantly reminded by a mentor friend of mine, memory is important. But the secret to joy is remembering those things for which we give thanks. Paul could have focused on remembering the trials and the hardships. He could have remembered being falsely imprisoned and beaten when he started the church in Philippi. He could have primarily remembered those problem places in people's lives or the unfinished work that keeps the people from a truer participation in the life of Jesus. But instead, Paul remembered the way God had been at work in and through the Philippian people from the beginning.

Too often the memory tracks that get played most in our hearts and minds are the ones that highlight the brokenness around us and in us. Too often we remember, but what we remember are not the things for which we are grateful but the things for which we are despairing or ashamed or frustrated or angered by. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying Paul is telling us to look the other way when things in our personal or communal lives are broken or need to be made right. But if the tracks that play most frequently in the playlist of our hearts and minds are full of songs of gratitude, then joy will no doubt flourish in us.

Second, Paul prays. Paul is constantly praying for the people of Philippi. He makes petition for them. His prayers of supplication, his prayers of request on behalf of these people, are for their betterment and for their growth in the life that Jesus has for them. In verse 9 Paul says, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best." Paul prays that the people would grow in their love and that this love that makes them more like Jesus would give them a deeper understanding and better discernment of what really matters. Paul prays for them to live authentically, sincerely, and blamelessly in the way of Christ for the glory of God. This posture of prayer for others is no doubt a critical fertilizer in the growth of joy in Paul and in us. I wonder how much more often the church would be known for joy if the world around us witnessed us praying for each other more often than it witnessed us squabbling over our differences with each other. If we prayed for one another how Paul prays for the Philippians, perhaps the world would know we are Christians by our joy.

Finally, Paul says that he shares, he participates, he fellowships with this Philippian church. Paul has shared in the gospel and shared in God's grace with these Christians, even as God continues to work on them. The word for sharing that Paul uses is the word koinonia, and it speaks to an intimate and authentic coming together in the life and work of Jesus. In the people's coming together, in the sharing that happened through being together and offering support to one another, Paul experienced God's grace that activates joy. Paul experienced God's presence in the authentic connection he had with these faithful people. There is no doubt that this sharing in life together—a sharing that involved physical and emotional and spiritual resources—provided nourishment for the joy that abounded in Paul's life. I'm convinced that fellowship of this kind is a crucial part of cultivating joy in our lives. And while we may come up with a long list of reasons we're hesitant to participate in this kind of fellowship with those who are works in progress, missing out on this intimate connection and sharing in life together may very well mean missing out on joy.

Advent reminds us that God is not finished yet and, better still, God will complete what God started. And in this Advent season of active waiting for God to complete God's work in us and in the world, Paul's witness to us today is that the fruit of joy can be abundant, even in this time. So let me suggest these words from Charles Wesley as our prayer, this season and all our lives long:

> Finish, then, thy new creation;
> true and spotless let us be.
> Let us see thy great salvation
> perfectly restored in thee.
> Changed from glory into glory,
> till in heav'n we take our place,
> till we cast our crowns before thee,
> lost in wonder, love, (and I'll add joy) and praise.
> Amen.