

Sermon Text for January 17, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 34:7-12, Philippians 1:3-11

“God will complete the work”

It is hard to believe that we find ourselves in the middle of January as together we have faced this pandemic and we have together looked for ways to stay unified and continue to be the body of Christ even as we have been separated for nearly a year now. Hard to believe. We find ourselves these past few weeks with cases of the virus increasing within families within our own church as we ask for God’s healing and continued protection upon us as we look to navigate these very strange and unprecedented times. We need your prayers for those families within the church who are dealing with covid. We need your prayers as we look toward a not so distant future where we know that we will be back together again. Don’t lose hope in these waning days of the virus, even as the virus seems to be clamping down even harder. Presbytery recommended not being in person until around Ash Wednesday, and that could be a target date, but we haven’t made any decisions yet.

It is a trying time for all of us and we thank you that you have not abandoned us even as you are tired of not coming to church, of not doing that which you have been raised to do your entire life, which is to come to church and give honor and praise and glory to God. We hope we have provided you a platform to be able to do that even though we know what you are doing now is not the same. It isn’t the same for any of us, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Stay on the journey with us as we continue to move forward.

While it is a trying time for our church it is in a parallel fashion a trying time for our nation and I know for some of you there is an overlap of one and the other. We see a bit of a light at the end of the tunnel as we find ourselves on the edge of turning the page and beginning a new chapter in our nation’s history. A new president will be inaugurated which regardless of our political positions we will find ourselves in a new beginning. As Christians we are always called to be optimistic and believe that God is at work in every new beginning, giving the benefit of the doubt until we see otherwise. That should be part of our nature. You see if we believe that God is at work in this nation, we can say that even though some have abandoned God as we saw clearly in the storming of the capital, God would never abandon us. So there has to be hope for the future.

Today in our sermon series, surprised by joy, we find a promise from God that He will bring to completion that which God has started. But as we find ourselves in all of those realities that we have just listed earlier, realities that are not considered positive and challenging at best, that while we find ourselves under that stress and anxiety, and even fear and anger that we have been harnessing either against leaders within our country or even leaders within our church, what we find today is God's promise that He isn't done with us yet. That God will bring to completion that which God started. Let's read..

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I've enjoyed watching the NFL over these past few weekends. Just as a matter of information we still had our fantasy football league here in the church. Jackson Allison, by far the youngest participant, won the regular season, but we all know that the regular season doesn't mean anything, it is the playoffs that count. Well, Terry Sweigart won this year's Fantasy Football league and will be presented with his green jacket sometime when we are back in session. But what we found this weekend is that nearly half of the quarterbacks playing in the playoffs were over 35 years old with two of them over 40 years old. That is unheard of, and yet exciting as well.

In our first Scripture we find the Goat of nation building, the one to whom all people looked up to as a person who had such a unique relationship with God that he was to be emulated in all that he did, Moses was the man for so long. We pick up the Scripture this morning and hear that he was old, but he could still see well, he was still energetic and active, he could still throw the ball 50 yards down the field, but he died and a transition needed to take place.

This type of transition seemed like an impossible one. The nation of Israel was still wandering in the wilderness. They had not taken the promised land as they were supposed to and things were simply going from bad to worse. Who in the world in a time such as this, could take over from Moses and lead the people? Whoever it was surely they were set up for failure. But look at Deuteronomy 18:18 where we read God promising Moses and the entire nation of Israel "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command."

God promises Moses and so the entire nation of Israel that God will take the initiative and ensure that he will bring to completion the good work that he started and not leave the nation of Israel without someone who could complete the work. That's a promise from God! What we find in this promise, and then again with the mention of Joshua in our Scripture, is that God is invested in this transition far more than we are. God wants this to work, this transition from

Moses to Joshua because there is still more that God wants to do through us. Israel will survive and thrive and God will take the lead to make sure that it will happen.

This was Paul's approach to the church in Philippi as well. We find ourselves in Paul's letter to the Philippians, the residents of Philippi, and while last week we gave a brief recap on the city and the letter, it would serve us well to do it again this week. If you look at vs.5 we read Paul tell the Philippians that he is praying for them because they shared in his preaching the Gospel from the first day to the last. The first day would have been Lydia and the jailer and then all the other days in between which marked a lasting relationship between Paul, the founder of this church, and the people of the church.

Paul loved the church in Philippi. He uses the term *koinonia* in vs.5 which means fellowship and is used to describe what we are missing now more than anything which is time together. He tells them in vs.7 that he holds them in his heart and the Greek is such that it can also mean as you hold me in your heart. This is a relationship between pastor and church which is built upon years of sharing joys and sorrows, that even though they were separated from each other then, he in prison and they under terrible hardships in Philippi, still he is able to express how much he loves them and he knows how much they love him.

Last week we looked at the grace that he wishes upon them and we said that before we get to the joy that Paul's describes in the midst of what many would call a joyless reality, we have to pass through grace. We passed through that grace last week, and now this week we are introduced in vs.4 to joy. Paul says that every time he thinks of this church he has joy in his heart. No matter what is going on, pandemic, political unrest, disappointment in leadership, whatever it may be I think of you with joy.

What kind of joy is this? It is the type of joy that is unearthed even in the midst of suffering and pain and persecution and hardship which both Paul and the members of the church were experiencing. This term joy, *chara*, us used a few times in Scripture. Another time that it is used is in Matthew 28:8, look at that, it is a Scripture that describes the women at the tomb who are given the good news of Jesus' resurrection and as a result they leave the tomb with great fear, and joy. This mixture of fear and joy, hardship and joy, pandemic and joy, upheaval and joy, mistrust and joy, seems counterintuitive. How can you have one with the other. What we read in this Scripture is that this is what the Christian life is all about. Our joy is not predicated upon our surroundings. We can find ourselves in all of these anxious and dangerous situations, but the joy that we have in Christ should not abate or be affected. It is a joy seen in the midst of suffering and even fear.

Our key verse today we find in vs.6, where we read Paul say to his beloved in Philippi, part of the joy we are able to experience together, even in the mess in which we find ourselves, is due to the fact that I am confident, there is no doubt in my mind, that God will bring to completion that which he has started in you. But how can he say this? Things don't look great. He is in prison and probably will never be able to see them again. There needs to be a plan of succession, but Paul doesn't focus on him and his role and how he was the Goat of church planting as Moses was the Goat of nation building, he says God is going to bring to completion that which God has started.

Paul can be confident because he knew the church and he knew that he was replaceable, he knew that everyone is replaceable, even the Goat. He was confident not only because he knew the church, but especially because he knew God. The promise that God will complete the task that is before us is often superseded in our minds by the hardships that we face which we allow to cover up the joy that we have in Christ and the confidence that God is able to use us to accomplish his purposes.

Let me ask you a question, are you more focused on what you can't do because of this pandemic, or are you more focused on finding ways in which to pursue God's promises of completion through you and this church even in the midst of the pandemic and all of its ensuing difficulties? Are you focused on what can't be done as opposed to what can we accomplish together, or looking forward to what comes next, or does the present so weigh you down that you just want to turn the page whether it is time to do it or not? Paul tells the Philippians not to allow the joy of Christ to be dampened by the present situation in which you find yourself. Like the women move forward with anticipation, and yes maybe even some fear, but with a joy that only comes from a realization that God is bringing to completion the work that he has started.

So what is the work that God has started among us? Being a believer in Jesus is in some ways an act of memory. We remember that God has worked in our lives in the past and it gives us hope that God will continue the work in the future. What is some of the work that we have done together? Remember the children's programs that were bursting at the seams? That work will continue. Remember the young adult gatherings and momentum that we had built? That work will be brought to completion. Remember the older adult ministries that we were beginning? God will bring that to completion and get it off the ground. Remember the community meals that were right around the corner? God is going to make that happen.

You need to ask and wonder, is God still at work here among us? I believe that God is, and I know that God is going to bring to completion that which he started. Amen.