

Sermon Text for March 21, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 40:28-31, Philippians 3:12-21

“Pressing on toward the goal”

I’ve gotten back into running a little bit again. I used to run a lot, I’ve done marathons and half marathons, I’m not fast, just persistent, and even then, I’m not always persistent. Two weeks ago on Monday I went out for a run and in the middle of the run my brother called and we talked for about a half hour as I paced back and forth in the middle of my course. We finished our conversation and I started right back up where I left off, but because I was cold as soon as I started again I felt something pull in my calf and a shooting pain went through my leg. I stopped and hobbled back home angry at myself for stopping in the middle of my run to talk to my brother. I should have kept going and called him later. He was thrilled, of course, that he had done something that had caused me to hurt my leg.

With our bodies and in our daily routines and life as we press on toward a goal if we stop in the middle of it, then we will inevitably not achieve the result that we want and we will probably find ourselves limping along and having to wait for quite a bit longer before we get back to where we were and try it again. In both of our Scriptures today we see that both Paul and his community needed encouragement to press on toward the goal and not to stop and try to catch their breath, or be distracted by something along their journey, but to keep pressing on even in the midst of all that was happening around them in their lives: prison for Paul, persecution for the Philippians, and the pandemic for us.

During this time period pressing on toward our goal is probably an incredibly appropriate encouragement to us as well. The closer we get to a goal of being finished with this pandemic, we see the light at the end of the tunnel now, the harder it is to keep pushing, to keep doing what we are doing to stay safe. We want to take that break and get back to doing things in a normal way, but we have to press on and persevere. But ultimately, as a church, what is our goal? Where do we place our emphasis? For Paul the goal was to receive the prize of the resurrection. It was easy for Paul and the church to lose sight of that goal as they struggled for daily existence.

Today we are called together to press on toward the goal, and that goal is a heavenly goal. Let’s read.

READ

The first Scripture that we read should sound familiar. I read them almost at every funeral that I do. They are incredibly consoling and they give hope for those who wait upon the

Lord that they will be strengthened for the journey ahead, even as now they feel beat down and in a place that is difficult to see the future as being to their advantage at all. Isaiah encourages the reader to press on after the prize even in the midst of the tragedy in which the people of Israel find themselves. So the Israelites are slaves in a foreign land and Isaiah says you will mount up with wings like eagles. Not withstanding your current situation, you will overcome all of the odds, if, if you wait upon the Lord. It isn't going to happen because you decided to do something and because of the actions or the non actions that you took, but it is going to happen because the Lord will be by your side.

When Isaiah makes that clarifying statement in vs.31 that those who wait upon the Lord will receive the power and the strength to carry on, it can seem contradictory to a command to press on after the goal, after the prize that is ahead of us. But instead, what we find is that this is a prerequisite before we press on toward the prize. If you wait upon the Lord, those who wait upon the Lord, those who take the time to ask for the Holy Spirit to discern what their decisions and what their actions ought to be especially in times of anxiety and consequence, then, and only then mind you, will the Lord provide you with power and strength. If you do not seek out the presence of the Lord then you will get tired, you will fall and be weary and wonder if it is all worth it and come up with the realization that no, it isn't worth it by myself. Because by ourselves it is never worth it.

You see, the reason why I read this Scripture at a funeral, arguably the most difficult time in the life of the one who lost a spouse, or who lost a parent, or a close friend, is that they are asking those questions at that time. Why did this happen and if this can happen at any time, is this race, is this life, is what we do together worth it? And the answer we get in Isaiah is that pressing on after the goal when you wait on the Lord and with the Lord by your side is always, always worth it. When you press after the goal with the Lord you will never get tired, if you love what you do and you are doing it with God and with people who love the Lord, you will never get weary. As we walk alongside the Lord and with each other, if we love Him and each other, then we will constantly get renewed.

Along that path things will come up that remind us why we are doing it and it will give us strength and power to do what we do together. I said in my enews that last year the first Sunday in March we had 321 people in worship. That was a time that we experienced the close, close presence of God in our midst. That seems like a lifetime ago, doesn't it?

Let's look at Philippians and we find someone who was writing to a community and doing a bit of reminiscing as well as do you remember when I was with you and things were

going along so well and so smoothly? Yeah, that was pretty neat. Paul in prison writing to the Philippians and encouraging them to be see the glimpses of Joy and to be surprised by Joy as it appears even in the midst of a seemingly joyless reality in which they found themselves, persecuted and even hunted by the Roman authorities.

We read a lot of verse today, more than we normally do as we make our way through Philippians, but there was this one that should sound incredibly familiar and one after which we titled our sermon. Look at vs.14 where Paul states that he “presses on toward the goal.” We’re going to make our way through this Scripture in a fairly sequential order. Look at vs.12 and Paul gives us the reason why he is encouraged to press on toward this heavenly goal that Jesus has laid before him. He says that he presses on toward the goal not because it is his to achieve and to own, but rather because Jesus had initially reached out and owned him. One of our most important Scriptures as Protestants in order to combat any kind of works or faith righteousness is that we lift up I John 4:19 where John tells us that we love God because he first loved us.

This strips away any attempt that we may make to ensure that things are up to us. Paul pursues after the goal, presses after the goal not because the goal is his to achieve, but rather because God has already achieved it for him and now it is up to him to pursue the path that has already been laid out for him. What a very different way to look at things. We move forward not by our own might, our own decisions, our own stubbornness, we move forward by the calling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We move forward based upon what Jesus has already laid out for us.

Ever session meeting I share with them the Scripture that I am going to be preaching on the upcoming Sunday and when I got to vs.13 I took issue a bit with Paul because I encouraged session to not forget what has happened during this time of the pandemic, but we took a good bit of time talking about what we have and currently are experiencing together. We lifted up some things that were very positive that we were able to accomplish together during this time, but we also lifted up very clear failures with communication and appearances of some decisions that seemed contradictory and conflicted with previous protocols and decisions.

We did look back, but after that meeting as one elder put it in an email to me: “I don’t see Paul making the suggestion that we shouldn’t deal with things of the past. What I see Paul saying is that from an emotional, and more importantly spiritual sense, we need to forget about the sin that has already happened. Instead, our emotions and spirit should be focused on what’s coming. After all, we may be sinners, but we are being made holy and let’s focus on accomplishing that.” You see why I love this session. Thoughtful, they actually think and pray

about the Scripture that we look at together. They may not read all of my enews from beginning to end, but your leaders are invested in making sure that this is a place that pursues the kingdom of God together.

Paul as he encourages the church to press on toward the goal also gives them a reason for why they should press on with all the strength that they have. Look at vs.20 where we are reminded that our citizenship is not here on this earth, but in heaven. This may not seem like a very patriotic thing to say, but it is the truth and I believe we may have forgotten this truth in the political climate in which we find ourselves. What happens here on this earth is important. But it does not dictate how God is going to interact with us. I have my ear on the ground and my finger on the pulse and there are some Christians who are convinced that the way God is going to act in heaven and on earth is completely tied up with what happens in our country. God has not chosen us in a type of Christian nationalism to determine the spiritual and physical future of this planet. How dare we think that.

Our commonwealth, Paul states, our citizenship is in heaven. What happens here on this earth is important, but it does not dictate how God will bring about His kingdom. Paul's goal while he writes in prison is not to overthrow the government, but rather to bring the church of Philippi to a focus on the resurrection. Every week after I study and write all my notes in my yellow note pad I ask the question, so what? How does this relate to us as a church? Paul does say in vs.17 that we ought to be an example so that those who are on this earth will see us and want to be a part of this body that we call the bride, the church.

We are normally uncomfortable telling others to follow our example because it can very easily smack of pride as if someone is saying look at me, aren't I good. But we do need to ask the questions of what kind of example are we setting? When I meet with couples for premarital counseling inevitably there will be a reflection at one point where one or the other will say: I want to be sure that I don't raise my kids how I was raised, or I learned from the mistakes that I saw in my family. We want people who interact with First Presbyterian to say that we want to be a part of a body like that one, who with warts and all, still love each other, still press on toward the same common goal.

But a warning, it is hard work. Paul uses the most demanding posture that he can think of to describe what it is like to be a believer in Jesus Christ, that of a runner. As we run this race we will find that our lungs are burning, our temples are pounding, our muscles ache, the heart is pumping harder than you want, the sweat is rolling down your face. But you press on because we press on together. Amen.