

A Love Letter...concerning a Work in Progress

Second Sunday of Advent

(Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11)

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How would you like a love letter addressed to you in Advent, in anticipation of Christmas? That is what we have in the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul's love letter to his friends in the church in Philippi. He loves them dearly and writes to tell them so. Like a good love letter, he celebrates them with their best features, dreams of their future well-being, and uses elegant phrases about the on-going process of their lives. If Paul had known about the church in Birmingham, he would no doubt have written us such a love letter. Since he did not know about us being the church here, we will read this letter as though it were for us.

I.

In his first paragraph, our reading, Paul sets out to frame the life of his beloved church in the large drama of God's purposes. He sketches out the beginning and the end of that great divine drama. His phrasing suggests a way for us to think about how our lives are situated in faith, so that there is a grid through which to perceive the everyday stuff differently.

First, the beginning of the drama: Paul writes of the God "who began a good work among you" (v. 6). Paul pushes clear back to the beginning of creation and imagines that from that first moment of creation God had a purpose and a hope for shape and well-being of our lives in faith. Presbyterians call that "providence," the slow, hidden resolve of God among us. Calvinists get tied up in knots over the claim. The point, in any case, is that there is a large purpose derived from God's hope that has been surging through our lives from the beginning. The hope of God

from the beginning is not control or coercion but positive, passionate expectation that we will get our lives fully in sync with God's intention. Try it this way: "Angels danced the day you were born." Angels danced at creation, danced in joy and doxology as they pondered the potential of lives that would cohere with God's good will.

And then Paul writes that the God of the beginning will bring our lives to completion by sway of Jesus Christ (v. 6). Paul has complete confidence that God's hope will prevail for us; it will end well because God is faithful. Paul and the early church had no doubt that the rule of Christ would be established in creation. The reason we read this text in Advent is that Christmas is not just about the birth of the baby. It is the full, visible assertion of the compassionate rule of Jesus, so that we can see and receive and celebrate God's fullness. We mark Christmas as the liturgical recognition that the fullness of our lives in God is a gift for the day.

Paul wants his friends to construe their lives as situated between the beginning *hopes of God* at creation and *the full culmination of God's gifts* (at Christmas). The stretch between beginning hope and full gift, between alpha and omega, is occupied by God's generous fidelity. Paul says to his beloved church, imagine your life caught up in the great divine drama in order that you may not imagine your life as a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing, in order that you may not imagine your life as an endless rat race that no one can win, in order that you will not imagine your life as an endless series of accidents that amount to very little. Christians are people who imagine and receive their lives differently, bracketed and ordered by God's goodness and God's resolve for us. Advent is a chance to reflect on that framing of our life according to the truth of the Gospel. Advent is a wakeup call that we take some responsibility and some joy and some new, obedient freedom in the truth of God's claim on us. Like a good love letter, Paul wants us to imagine our best life, a life in God's faithful drama.

## II.

And then Paul, in elegant phrasing, imagines the space between beginning hope and culminating gift, full of stuff to work on through the course of our life. I will lift up four of his wondrous phrases from his opening paragraph through which Paul invites his beloved to think and act again.

1. Paul urges that “your love may overflow more and more” (v. 9). The imagery is of a river of self-giving love that builds and builds, and knows no boundaries. There is no flood-control for self-giving love that is rooted in God’s love. Paul’s term is of course *agape*, love that moves beyond the self to the other. If our lives are a meaningless tale, a rat race, or a series of accidents, then self-preoccupation is appropriate, a self-preoccupation that leads to accumulation, selfishness, greed, and endless anxiety. But when our lives are grounded in God’s fidelity, we are able, in gladness, to reach beyond ourselves, to give of ourselves and all that we have, to our best friends, to our neighbor, to our community, eventually to those who threaten us because they are not like us, and to our enemies. Paul imagines a great flow of generosity that has transformative power in the neighborhood. Advent is a time for thinking again about generous, forgiving, transformative love that reaches beyond self and can make a difference.

2. Paul hopes that his beloved church will have “knowledge and insight to help you determine what is best” (v. 9). Paul’s sense of “knowledge” is tricky; you may remember in I Corinthians 13, in his great poem about love, he warns against knowledge that is self-regarding and elsewhere he calls it “puffed up,” all of which adds up to nothing. Paul here is not concerned for the accumulation of data, or scientific breakthroughs, or technical advances. The knowledge

about which he writes is defined by his next word “insight,” the capacity to look beneath, to discern the meaning of things, to honor the mystery of love, mercy, compassion, and justice that enhance the human enterprise.

Our society, like every strong society, has gone haywire in our assumption that more controlling knowledge will make us safe and happy, so we have the wild pursuits of the “intelligence community.” But what we now need is not more such learning. What we now need are mature folk who probe the mystery of God’s world and the wonder of the human process that lives by generosity and hospitality. The purpose of such “knowledge and insight,” if we have discipline and patience, is that we will learn what is best, not for ourselves, but for the world and the coming generations of the earth.

3. Paul urges that in “the day of Christ,” that is for us, on Christmas day, you may be “pure and blameless” (v. 10). Paul knows that a life in sync with God’s purposes requires the disciplines of holiness that give us power and energy and freedom. Paul is not speaking of being goody-goody or pious in showy ways. But he reaches back to the book of Leviticus where there are commands for offering animals in sacrifice to God that have no flaws. The same phrase “pure and blameless” (that is, no flaws) turns up in the story of Job, the man who is perfectly in sync with the hopes of God. When you are in the presence of such a person, you know that there is a calm not diseased by Christmas preparation, not impressed with the loud greed of the world, but quiet, grateful, alert, uncompromised in the neighborly conduct of money and sexuality and work and speech. Paul expects his beloved church to live a different life that is not defined by the pressures of his society.

4. Paul wants that on the day of culmination, for us Christmas day, that you may have produced “the harvest of righteousness” that comes through Jesus Christ (v. 11). Isn’t that a

wondrous phrase! “Righteousness” in the Bible does not mean moralistic acts. Rather it refers to acts of intervention whereby the strong with resources intervene on behalf of the weak who are without resources. The targets of such covenantal righteousness are characteristically the vulnerable and the needy, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the prisoner, all those who cannot fend for themselves. The imagery of “harvest” suggests long term work over the growth season, so that such compassionate engagement produces visible outcomes. Paul imagines a life that has been mobilized for the well-being of the community.

### III.

It occurs to me that this letter from Paul to his beloved is a marvelous guideline in Advent for Christmas preparation:

-It affirms that our lives are *bracketed by the big drama of God’s purposes* and we do well to ponder such deep beginnings and such awesome culminations. Imagine God’s large purposes hovering around your life.

-Paul becomes specific in his wondrous phrasing about the “*in between*” that is our advent work. Clearly in between we have unfinished business, we being a work in process. But this the way with love letters; we always know that the one addressed is not yet finished, but still a work in process. And we intend to provide support along the way for a wondrous conclusion to the beloved. For us it goes like this:

“Overflow in love”...boundless generosity;

“Knowledge and insight”...the pondering of how God’s governance works in our lives;

“Pure and blameless”...a life simple enough to avoid pathological anxiety by holy discipline;

“A harvest of righteousness”... a long history of interventions for the sake of the neighborhood.

-Paul finishes by affirming that *all this will converge* in “glory and praise of God” (v. 11). This advent practice, in sum, is about ceding ourselves over to God in gladness, to refer our life back to God who has given it to us.

What strikes me about this advent love letter is this. When Paul writes the church, he assumes that Christmas preparation is serious business. But it has nothing to do with how the world lives with that commercial orgy. It is rather that when our lives are set in God’s great drama, we have a quite different agenda. It is a profound agenda, because it touches the deep reality of how we are to live in God’s mercy. It will be a prayer we pray for each other that we have enough resolve not to get caught up in the orgy, but to create time and energy and space for serious advent. The urgent question always in the final days of advent is: “Are you ready yet?”

Are you ready with overflowing love?

Are you ready with knowledge and insight?

Are you ready with purity and blamelessness?

Are you ready with a harvest of righteousness?

No, not ready yet...but under way toward the great day of fullness. God will bring our life to completion. We may be glad and grateful as we wait.

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