

Second Sunday of Advent

Philippians 1:3–11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart,[a] for all of you share in God's grace[b] with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Perhaps one of the reasons that some Christians do not talk much about the coming “day of the Lord” (or the Second Coming of Christ) is that we have fallen into the trap of thinking that it is all about doom and gloom. Because we reject the notion that faith in Christ is an “insurance policy” against eternal damnation, and do not believe that fear is an appropriate motivator for faithful living, then we may avoid texts that seem to lift up the gloomy or fear-filled “day of the Lord.” When we do that, however, we may miss the joy that stands at the heart of Paul’s proclamation of that day. For Paul, the second coming of Christ is a day in which all of God’s promises will be fulfilled, God’s people will be redeemed, and resurrection life will reconcile all to one another and to God (see Rom. 8:18–25). It is precisely the anticipation of that “day” that fuels the joy that pours out of his letter to the Philippians.

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent are full of anticipation. Malachi asks, “Who can endure the day of [God’s] coming?” But he also says that God is the one whom the people *seek* and in whom they *delight*. The purpose of the “refiner’s fire” is renewed and restored worship, surely a joyful thing. The Song of Zechariah celebrates the fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham. Israel will be able to worship God without fear, and the Dayspring will guide the people into the ways

of peace. In the gospel reading, the ministry of John the Baptist is introduced with the words of Isaiah, which celebrates the promise that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” In all of these readings, the day of the Lord is anticipated with joy and longing.

The reading from Philippians follows immediately on the salutation and announces the themes that shape this letter: thanksgiving, joy, deep affection, partnership, and readiness for the “day” of Jesus Christ. Paul is in prison as he writes, but this in no way diminishes his sense of connection to the people of Philippi. The purpose of the letter is to reassure the Philippian community of his well-being, to thank them for their generosity, to encourage them in their faith and life together, and to warn them against false teaching. Paul is sending the letter with Epaphroditus and hopes to send Timothy later on. This letter is not abstract theology. Its purpose is not primarily instructive. This is a letter that shows what Christian friendship looks like and how deeply joyful it is.

Fred Craddock suggests that Phil. 1:3–11 can be divided into three sections reflecting Paul’s relationship to the Philippian congregation over time.¹ In verses 3–6, Paul looks back

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 15.

in gratitude to God as he remembers this community, and his prayer is full of joy. In particular, Paul gives thanks for their “sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” which he (and his co-workers) have experienced with the Philippian community. “*Koinonia*” can also be translated as “participation in” or “partnership” or “fellowship.” This is a rich and important term for Paul that is far beyond what we think of as “fellowship activities” or even small-group ministries in the modern church.

Fundamentally, it means a shared relationship in Christ. Those who are baptized into Christ become a new community where boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender and economic status are overcome (see Gal. 3:28). In Christ, those separated by the world’s categories become sisters and brothers, a new family in God. Baptism is the entry into this new relationship, and it is sustained by the *koinonia* (or “sharing”) in the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper (see 1 Cor. 10:16). Paul goes on to describe what the new community looks like as he exhorts them to “have the same mind” with one another as they have in Christ. The partnership Paul celebrates is relationship grounded in and shaped by the person of Jesus Christ.

This partnership in the gospel is deeply theological, but also immediately practical. The Philippian community has not only shared spiritual fellowship and active ministry by building up their community. They have also been deeply generous to Paul and his colleagues by supporting their ministry in other cities. At the end of the letter, Paul expresses his deep gratitude for their financial support while he was starting the community in Thessalonica: “no church *shared* with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone” (4:16). Spiritual transformation is evidenced by generosity. Paul concludes his remembrance of what God has begun among the Philippians by affirming that God will “bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (v. 6).

Paul then turns to the present time in verses 7–8. The theme here is the affection Paul has for these friends in Christ. The Philippians are not only partners with him in God’s grace. They are also in solidarity with him during his imprisonment. “I keep (or hold) you in my heart,” Paul says. The Greek can be read either this way (as

in the RSV) or as in the NRSV (“you [Philippians] hold me in your heart”). In context, the RSV seems to make more sense, because Paul is speaking of his affection. The other reading would imply that this affection is conditional on the affection or support of the Philippians for him. But clearly, Paul’s care for those with whom he has shared Christian community is based on God’s work among them. Indeed, he says that he longs for his friends with the “compassion” of Christ. The root of this word is the gut-wrenching feeling of “suffering with” that God in Christ has for humankind. Paul can hold the Philippians in his heart because he participates in the suffering of Christ as he longs to share in Christ’s resurrected life (see 3:7–11).

Finally, Paul looks to the future in verses 9–11. Paul has told the Philippians that he remembers them in his prayers. Now he prays for them and for their future. What he wants for them is an intensification and deepening of mutual love, out of which, Paul says will come wisdom which will enable them to know how to live with one another and in the world. As God enables them to live ever more deeply into the “mind of Christ” and his self-emptying love, they will become the community that God intends. And this is what will prepare them for “the day of Christ.”

Paul is confident of this outcome not because of the efforts that the Philippians have shown in the past or will continue to put forth in the future. Their readiness of “the day” does not hang in the balance, dependent on the amount of their faith. Paul’s hope is grounded in what God has been doing with and among his friends. “For Paul, God is the power of good beginnings and good endings in all things, not the least in our relationships with one another,” writes Dan Migliore. “The work that God has begun in us will be completed by God. It is the faithfulness of God, not our own or our friend’s faithfulness, that is the source of the unwavering confidence that the goal of our life and that of our friends in Christ will be reached.”²

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2. Daniel L. Migliore, *Philippians and Philemon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 32.