

# “God Is at Work”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 8, 2023*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 25:1-10

Philippians 2:1-13

## *Introduction*

Last Sunday, we were introduced to Paul’s letter to the Philippians – to a congregation he founded and longed to visit again. But Paul wrote this letter from prison, not knowing whether he would again enjoy the freedom necessary to ever be with them again. Instead of being bitter or despondent, Paul encourages the Philippians, saying, “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the sake of the gospel.” (1:27)

Paul is calling the congregation to unity: not to hold the same thoughts or opinions, but to be unified in their actions: to work side by side, to hold fast in the same spirit, to have – as we will hear in today’s reading – the same mind that was in Christ. Let’s listen to Paul’s words to these Christians in Philippi, to the people he loved and longed to see again...

## *Read Philippians 2:1-13*

Some day – long after I have departed from this place; when someone who is not yet a part of this congregation walks down the hallway, seeing my photo hanging on the wall in the line of Valley’s pastors, asks one of you, *who was that guy?* – I imagine you saying, *Oh, Pastor John, he was the one who always reminded us that when the Bible says “you,” it doesn’t mean the one person, but the whole community; he would tell us all the time that “you” in scripture is not an individual but (and he’d say this with the remnant of his southern accent) “all y’all.”*

Well, today, that’s exactly what I’m going to do. When Paul says, here, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (v. 4), and “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12), and “It is God at work

in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v. 13), he is addressing “all y’all.”

In writing to this early congregation, Paul says some beautiful things about Christ and the Christian life: love and compassion, sympathy and joy. Then, Paul finally gets to what is bugging him: disunity. *Please*, he seems to be asking, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” (v. 3) Love as one; be in agreement. Instead of looking out for number one, watch out for the good of others.

In Paul’s mind, humility is a necessary ingredient for community unity. True humility is not measured by low self-evaluation, but by demonstrable concern for others. These Philippian Christians – like each and all of us – are to discern together a path of faithfulness in the context of the difficult decisions they need to make.<sup>1</sup>

The lyrical passage of verse five through eleven – commonly known as the Christ Hymn – has two parts: 1) Christ’s decision to descend from his position of power “in the form of God,” taking on the “form of a slave,” completely obedient to God’s mission; and 2) his exultation by God to the highest place and to the “name that is above every name.” The first half depends upon Christ’s choice; the second half is purely the power of God at work. This distinction between what we can control and what is the work of God is mirrored in the final two verses: “work out your salvation” – decide what you will do – and “it is God who is at work among you” – look for and receive God’s power and presence.

This language about “work(ing) out your own salvation” (v. 12) can be troublesome for many Protestants, who fear that it implies a form a *works righteousness*. But Paul’s focus here in this passage really has nothing to do with how one is saved. Instead, Paul is concerned with how “saved” people, believers, live out their salvation here and now in the world. These are matters of unity, obedience, humility and public witness – how God is “enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” (v. 13)

Thus, we find – in this Christ Hymn and in the verses surrounding it – Paul describing the great paradox of our faith; that Christ came down to be raised up and that we are also raised with Christ in order to lift up others alongside us. If we want to be like Christ, we must remember how Christ became like us, to see us eye to eye, to be on a level plane with you and with me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Troy Troftgruben from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The phrase, *level with me* can mean a couple different things. It can mean, *tell me the truth*. We use it in mundane situations. *Level with me, does this robe make me look fat?* We also use it in some more serious situations. *Level with me. Are you drinking again? Level with me, am I going to get laid off this time around? Level with me, do you still love me?* We say this phrase when we want to know the truth but we're afraid of the answer.

*Level with me* can mean, *Be honest with me*. It also means, literally, *level with me, on the same plane*. One person is not higher than another. I am level with you; you are level with me. Apparently, that was a problem in Philippi; some people feeling they were better than others. Some people, today, think they are better than others, for all kinds of reasons: they are good looking, they have money, possessions, educational credentials, or power to influence others. Those things aren't necessarily bad, but they don't make anyone better than anyone else in the eyes of God, in the mind of Christ. They are level with you; they are level with me.

Now, some people also think they are not as good as others, for all kinds of reasons. They're not good looking. They don't have money, possessions, educational credentials, or power to influence others. Not having those things don't make them lower than anyone else. Not in the eyes of God, not in mind of Christ.

Jesus came to earth to be level with you and level with me. God in the flesh walks with us in the day and stand with us in the night when our feet are tired and sometimes our spirit are, too. God comforts us and lifts us up when we feel down and when we fall down. Thus, God inspires us to lift others up when they feel down, when they fall down as well.<sup>2</sup>

Notice how, in this passage, Paul ministers to the problem of divisions in the church. He does not name or tackle the disagreements directly. He doesn't position himself on one side or the other, citing arguments for or against. Paul doesn't attempt to find some elusive middle ground or moderating position. Paul understands that Christian unity is achieved not by like-mindedness or similar political opinions but, rather, because we are joined together in the one mind of Christ.

Paul is bold to tell his beloved but divided congregation to adopt the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Paul reminds them that sometimes it is necessary to lower yourself in order to see others eye to eye, to get on the same level. Paul

---

<sup>2</sup> Alyce McKenzie, "Level With Me" from *Patheos.com*

tells them that that he wants them to think like Christ thinks in order to do what Christ did and still does.

Christ calls us not only to believe in him but to follow him and to emulate him; to engage in the same manner of life that characterized his. Our faith demands not only that we strive to live together and minister together as one, but also to do what Christ commands. And, in doing so – by *work(ing) out our salvation with fear and trembling* – God heals our wounds, bridges our divisions, and closes our gaps. In this way, the church is called to be a showcase to the world for all that God can do.<sup>3</sup>

For, as Paul concludes, *It is God at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work...* The Greek word translated “work” is the source of our word, “energy” or “energize.” God gives us the desire and the energy to enact Christ’s compassion in the world. I’ll say it again, the “you” here is plural, showing that God is among us, having come to be on our level. This divine companionship thus is not only an example for us in how we live and work together, but the motivating power operating in and through those relationships.<sup>4</sup>

And so, the “salvation” we are to work out is not our private, individual destinies but, rather, the quality of our life together in the mind of Christ. Paul began these verses describing this quality of life in terms of mutual love and affection: sharing in the same Spirit, in humility, putting others first. Here is the real quality of life: a public life, a politic for living.

Christ is, as Paul says, the true form of God. When we look to Jesus we see God’s true nature – bringing people together in his name. In this, we see our assignment – to bring people together: people divided by so many different social and political and theological points of view to do something different, to congregate according to something more significant than our level of sameness. As the church, we come from many differing places but seek to walk in the same direction – toward the one Savior who has come to be level with us.

Paul encourages the church to focus on our originating cause, our great mission – to allow Jesus to gather us, to be at work among us, to overcome our divisions, and to be one in Christ Jesus. In other words, to show the world what Jesus has done and can do. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Will Willimon, “One in Christ” from *Day1.org*

<sup>4</sup> Susan Eastman from *WorkingPreacher.org*