

"What Lies Ahead"

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August 19, 2018

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I [Paul] have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:4b-14)

The final number in the Broadway musical "Hamilton" is a song called "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story." I expect that many of you know it. The lyrics name the fact that Alexander Hamilton, unlike the other founding fathers, does not live to old age, and that his story has not been told in the same way, or with the same energy, as other key figures in our country's early history. Hamilton has died in the previous scene, the fateful duel with Aaron Burr, so it falls to the rest of the company to bring the play to its conclusion. Appropriately, it is George Washington who sings the first line: "Let me tell you what I wish I'd known when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control... who lives...who dies...who tells your story."

Kate loves "Hamilton," so we've been listening to the music a lot lately, and this last song is the one that has been ringing in my thoughts the most. As my time as your pastor comes to a close, I have found myself thinking a lot about the story of our time together. And I have come to realize how little control I have over it. I have no control over which of the new things we've done together will live or which will die. I cannot control who tells the story or how it is told. When your work means a lot to you, when you have honestly labored to do the job that God has given you to do, that can be hard truth to bear.

And then I came across these words from Paul — another pastor, another disciple of Jesus Christ, another imperfect person called to serve — who wrote to the church in Philippi and basically surrendered all rights to his own story. So much of Paul's life had been shaped by identities like family heritage, ethnicity, tribe, and nation. These were his go-to answers to the question, "Who am I?" "Who am I? I am a Hebrew from the nation of Israel. I am from the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Pharisee who takes the law seriously and tries to live it every day."

But in this letter Paul wants the Philippians to know that his answer had changed, and he makes that point in a jarring and unforgettable way. He says that all of those old markers, all of his old measures of success, were "rubbish." It was all trash. "*Whatever gains*



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I had," he writes, "these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ... I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

We in the church have gotten pretty good at taking the sharp edges off of scripture, of finding ways to fit faith comfortably into the lives we have. But it is hard to do that with this passage, if we are willing to hear it and think about what it really means. How many of us here would be willing to say that our family name does not really matter? How many of us would be comfortable dismissing our nation, our heritage, and our religious experience in the same way that Paul is doing? In his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul discovers that the only thing that really matters for him and his identity is Christ... that all he really wants to know is Christ crucified... that everything else has to take a back seat. Paul gives up his old story for the new story of knowing and being known by Jesus Christ. *"I want to know Christ," Paul says. "That's what I want. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I want to get close to him by sharing in his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death. This is the goal, and I have not attained it yet, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."*

So Paul is not there yet, but he is on the way. Just like we are. We are not there yet, but we are on the way. Because Paul recognizes that we are all walking this way, but not there yet, he shares with the Philippians — and with us — a specific strategy and ethic. *"This is what I do," Paul says: "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*

Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead. That is the strategy, that is the lesson, and that is what I hope we will all do. When we surrender control over our story, we free ourselves from the tethers of the past... and open ourselves to a new, broader, more hopeful future.

That certainly does not mean we forget the blessings of the past. In his ministry, I expect Paul was strengthened by his deep knowledge and past experience of the law. Here in Concord, you all have memories of how this congregation has been there for you, or shaped you, or inspired you. Those are memories that you can hold onto, to remind you of your grounding in the faith.

That being said, Paul clearly wanted the Philippians to free themselves from their past, so that they can reform themselves more closely into the image of Christ. This is one of my great hopes for you. Concord is a community that loves its past. When I say the words "Old Concord," you know what I mean. People here cherish the things that have been. And there is nothing wrong with that... unless your views of what Concord has been in decades past holds you back from experiencing and embracing new things that God is doing here.

In this time of transition, God will be doing a new thing, and that new thing is more than a new name on the senior pastor's door. That new thing will involve new mission, new music, new modes of worshiping, new ways of teaching, and new expectations of how you can serve and give to the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. I pray that you will resist the temptation to do things the way you have done them in the past simply because it is the easy thing to do. I pray that you will actively seek out new people to take the lead and listen to fresh voices who have new perspectives. You don't have to reinvent the wheel, but you do have to change the tires every now and then.

In 1528, as the ideals of the Protestant Reformation began to spread across Europe, conflict immediately began to arise within the church. There was pressure to clarify what Reformed Christians believed and how those beliefs set them apart from the rest of the

world. If you were a supporter of Reformation principles, it was a dangerous time to speak your mind. Even so, a group of pastors in Switzerland and Southern Germany decided that they would be more concerned about the truth and authentic faith than about their names, or their jobs, or even their personal safety. In January of 1528 they came together in the central Swiss city of Bern. Huldrych Zwingli, a key leader of the Swiss Reformation, was there. By the end of the synod, most of the pastors in attendance had come to firm agreement on ten principles or theses of faith that would guide them in the future. They included key principles that we as Presbyterians still follow to this day, including the centrality of scripture and the unquestioned lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life.

While the theses in themselves are noteworthy, I want to focus this morning on the postscript that the pastors added at the end of their statement. They clearly felt strongly about what they had said and what they believed. They were willing to risk their lives for it. We believe these things strongly, they said. But then they added this:

"... [if, in the future,] something is brought before us by our pastors or by others, which brings us closer to Christ, and in accordance with God's word is more conducive to mutual friendship and Christian love than the interpretation now presented, we will gladly accept it and will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit, which does not go backwards towards the flesh but always forward towards the image of Jesus Christ our Lord."¹

Our stories will go on, yours and mine. We will be in different places, but we will all continue to try to be the best disciples we can be... continue to have some successes and some things we could have done better... some brave stands and some regrets. At the end of the day, none of us will have very much control over what lives, what dies, and who tells our story. My prayer today is that we would let go of our respective stories as we think we know them... that we will allow our stories to be drawn up into the much grander and more beautiful story of Christ... that we will forget what lies behind, and strain forward to what lies ahead, because the Holy Spirit never goes backwards towards the flesh, but forward, **always forward**, toward the image of Jesus Christ our Lord.

When our children were younger, we attended a worship service in the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia, with some family friends. They had a children's message, just like we do, and at the end of the message the kids would leave the sanctuary to go back to the nursery area to have children's church for the remainder of the service. Every week, in that moment when the children would turn to go, the church would make a powerful liturgical statement. The statement recognized that the two groups would be parting, for a time, but that even in their separation they would still bound together by the love and presence of God. As the children lined up to leave and go to children's church, they would all face the congregation and say together, "May God be with you here." The congregation would then respond in kind, "May God be with you there."

It seems a fitting way for me to say to you how great a privilege it has been to serve Jesus Christ in this place with you, and to thank you for the love that I have experienced here. God will continue to be with you here, doing new things, not for your harm, but to give you a future with hope. And God will continue to be with the disciples and saints down there at Mount Pleasant Presbyterian Church. So we can name and claim with confidence the tie that will continue to bind us together, even as we part, if only for a time.

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc02/htm/iv.iv.cxxxi.htm>

May God be with you here. **May God be with you there.** Amen.