***Joy to the Whirled***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 8, 2024*

*based on Malachi 3:1-4 and Phil. 1:3-11*

When I was in 9th grade I remember my English teacher assigning us a report of some length on a novel of our choosing. I chose Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*. I remember how disappointed she was at my choice. But I found the book interesting because it was a story told through a series of letters. Here is a bit of it in the voice of the protagonist, Jonathan Harker…

*I heard a heavy step approaching behind the great door, and saw through the chinks the gleam of a coming light. Then there was the sound of rattling chains and the clanking of massive bolts drawn back. A key was turned with the loud grating noise of long disuse, and the great door swung back.*

*Within, stood a tall old man, clean shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. He held in his hand an antique silver lamp, in which the flame burned without a chimney or globe of any kind, throwing long quivering shadows as it flickered in the draught of the open door. The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture, saying in excellent English, but with a strange intonation.*

*"Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own free will!" He made no motion of stepping to meet me, but stood like a statue, as though his gesture of welcome had fixed him into stone.*

*The instant, however, that I had stepped over the threshold, he moved impulsively forward, and holding out his hand grasped mine with a strength which made me wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed cold as ice, more like the hand of a dead than a living man. Again he said.*

*"Welcome to my house! Enter freely. Go safely, and leave something of the happiness you bring!"*

See, Dracula’s not such a bad guy.

The letters of the apostle Paul are fascinating and, as in Bram Stoker's novel, the letters tell a story, too.

In all of his letters you can see the mind of a great thinker at work at a moment in time. In Paul’s letters you can see him doing his best to work out a given problem with a community.

You see what he’s thinking, how he is trying to make a point with all the emotional and rational weight a person who can communicate with his authority can bring to bear on it.

Reading between the lines you can also get a picture of the worries, biases and concerns of those he is writing to – at least, as Paul himself understands them.

In his letter to the church community in Philippi you can see that Paul is writing from prison somewhere. Reading between the lines you see that the Christians at Philippi have been worried sick about him. It’s clear that they have been making inquiries all over the northern Mediterranean world about him. Finally they locate him. With that, their worst fear has been realized. He is their founder and they see him as their sustainer as well.

Knowing that people in Roman custody depend upon others for their survival in prison the Philippian church sends one of their own, a young man named Epaphroditus with gifts; money, food, maybe, and a letter. We learn from Paul’s response that on the way Epaphroditus has gotten sick. In fact, he has nearly died. Paul is touched deeply by the gesture, by the young man’s sacrifice, and also by the love of these people to go to all this trouble over him.

We learn from Paul that the letter they have sent is a letter of concern, but the concern they show is as much concern for themselves as it is for Paul.

If Paul is in prison under sentence of death, as they fear, what of the Christian enterprise? Is it going under? No one else in the faith has Paul’s stature. Jesus is gone. Now it looks like Paul is on his way out too. What hope is there? Has their faith been in vain?

The Philippians are tempted to believe that the success of this off-shoot form of Judaism depends entirely upon Paul. When he is dead will it just fall apart?

No, says the apostle. Though writing from prison he appears not only hopeful, but amazingly serene, even confident.

He says*, I thank my God in all my remembrance of you . . . thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I 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.*

Whatever that means. It sounds intentionally vague.

In any case, Paul says to them that they are living between two days. They are living between “the first day” -- the day they found real hope in this world, and what he calls, “the day of Jesus Christ” a day which is not an Armageddon, or an end time, but may instead be a time of another new beginning.

The *now* they live is a middle time, an in-between time. But then, 99% of everybody’s time is spent in the in-between times of life.

I mean, we ALL live in this in-between time – expectant but unfulfilled. That is the state of our lives whether we have accomplished much or nothing. Even if you are Shohei Ohtani or Taylor Swift and you're at the top of your game.

Paul sees himself as in-the-thick of his career but still not having arrived at his promise. Thinking that way is a good thing, says Paul.

Paul wants to allay the fears of the Philippians that things are falling apart. They live in difficult times. But no, he says, things are on-track, because the enterprise of Christ is not in his hands (Paul’s hands) where they are tempted to think it is, but in God’s.

Paul lets the Philippians know that one of the promises of being alive is not that life will be easy. It is likely, in fact, to be hard. It may look like everything will soon be coming off the rails. What is true, however, is that from the first day to the last, God will always be faithful.

And central to that faithfulness will be God’s faithfulness in sticking to the task of making us what God intends us to be.

In this morning’s Hebrew Testament text, the prophet, *Malachi,*  speaks directly to people who have come to see God as a god of wrath and hell-fire.

Looking at the world as it is, well, that is all they can come up with. Malachi says, “Yes , God is a God who comes bringing fire, but the fire God brings is not a terrifying all-consuming holocaust type of fire. No, it’s a refiner’s fire.’”

Malachi says that the image of God they need to have is one of God as "a refiner and purifier of silver;” someone committed to burning the dross out of God’s own.

In the text from Philippians Paul is confident that God will bring to completion the work that God has begun in them, and that process, he intimates, takes time. Maybe lots of it.

I mentioned once before that I contracted Lyme disease in the summer of 2000. In September of that year I came up here to Portland from Ashland to see a contagious disease specialist. You know what he said? He said, “I am sure you’ll be well by Christmas.” I was overjoyed to hear that. I didn’t realize then that it was empty talk, like solders in World War One or the American Civil War who expected to be home for the holidays.

In March and April of 2020, President Trump told us repeatedly that Covid would disappear by Easter. Remember?

The church I was serving when I had Lyme disease had the tradition I brought here of giving out epiphany stars at the beginning of the new year. For those who are new here, these are paper stars that have one word printed on them to use as a kind of guide for the year.

That January the word I drew randomly from the basket said, “Patience.” Twelve months later, feeling as bad or worse, I drew another star: “Patience,” again. Now, there were 50 possible different words in those baskets. What are the chances I’d draw that specific word twice?

Well, I’ll tell you. It was 1 in 2500. Patience.” OMG. It took seven years of trial and error with dozens of diverse treatments to finally put it away for good.

Paul says that God will complete whatever God has in mind to complete, and it will all be done in God’s time.

Sometime that completion takes … decades, even generations to work out. Damn.

It takes a certain amount of courage, this refining.

This holy season of Advent we are now in is a time of waiting and refining. We live, as Paul noted, between two seasons always. Between our youthful hopes and a future full of mystery and strange turnings, between our expectations and small “r” reality, between our parents ideas of our lives -- how those ideas have shaped us, and God’s idea of our reality. Here is a poem that sheds what I think is holy light on this by a poet I’ve had the luck to work with on a couple of occasions.

*“The Hammock” by Li-Young Lee*

*When I lay my head in my mother's lap*

*I think how day hides the stars,*

*the way I lay hidden once, waiting*

*inside my mother's singing to herself. And I remember*

*how she carried me on her back*

*between home and the kindergarten,*

*once each morning and once each afternoon.*

*I don't know what my mother's thinking.*

*When my son lays his head in my lap, I wonder:*

*Do his father's kisses keep his father's worries*

*from becoming his? I think, Dear God, and remember*

*there are stars we haven't heard from yet:*

*They have so far to arrive. Amen,*

*I think, and I feel almost comforted.*

*I've no idea what my child is thinking.*

*Between two unknowns, I live my life.*

*Between my mother's hopes, older than I am*

*by coming before me, and my child's wishes, older than I am*

*by outliving me. And what's it like?*

*Is it a door, and good-bye on either side?*

*A window, and eternity on either side?*

*Yes, and a little singing between two great rests.*

“A little singing between two great rests.” If you are alive, let life find you singing sometimes. As I said last week, let it find you choosing joy.

So, what do we do while God takes a hellish amount of time making us into what God wants us to be, shaping our lives into the one’s God wants for us?

Paul has a word to say about that. He says, “It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment. So that you may be able to determine what is the best.”

For many people, job # 1 is merely determining right from wrong. Well, “right from wrong” is entry level religion. You want to find the manual on that? Look at the Ten Commandments. Those commandments, remember, condemn lying and also theft. Millions of Americans seem to think those two things are now just fine, right? And most of them seem to think of themselves as Christians.

Paul here is talking about choices for folks who have gotten at least that much straight. They take those commandments seriously, as a given for living a decent life. The manual for those Paul is addressing is the 8 Beatitudes of Jesus.

Paul says this all has to do with determining what is best, compared with what is merely good. It’s about distinguishing ultimate matters from penultimate matters. It’s about finding what is critically important from what, in the vast scheme of things, is actually trivial.

The example Paul will speak of later in the letter to the Philippians is money. The Philippian Christians take matters about money very seriously. Well, Paul says that is a good thing but it is not the best thing. The best things, says Paul, are always about love.

There’s the good and then there is the best.

In Luke chapter 9 Jesus says, “Follow me.” But a certain man demurred saying. “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

And Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the reign of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Choosing the best can be radical; it takes courage; it takes vision and imagination. It requires, well, the best in us.

What Paul wants people to have is something we might call common courage. Because that is what it takes to live effectively in this world. Not the courage of a medal of honor winner. Not the courage of, say, a John McCain. No, just the everyday courage of people who put one foot in front of the other, facing what there is for that day and leaving the rest to the one who will complete it all according to a heavenly timetable.

I want to close with a poem of Anne Sexton’s about that kind of courage. Our own Nancy Miller asked me to read it at her husband, Rev. Ross Miller’s memorial service earlier this year. It fit Ross to a “T.”

Courage

It is in the small things we see it.

The child’s first step,

as awesome as an earthquake.

The first time you rode a bike,

wallowing up the sidewalk.

The first spanking when your heart

went on a journey all alone.

When they called you crybaby

or poor or fatty or crazy

and made you into an alien,

you drank their acid

and concealed it.

Later,

if you faced the death of bombs and bullets

you did not do it with a banner,

you did it with only a hat to

cover your heart.

You did not fondle the weakness inside you

though it was there.

Your courage was a small coal

that you kept swallowing.

If your buddy saved you

and died himself in so doing,

then his courage was not courage,

it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,

if you have endured a great despair,

then you did it alone,

getting a transfusion from the fire,

picking the scabs off your heart,

then wringing it out like a sock.

Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,

you gave it a back rub

and then you covered it with a blanket

and after it had slept a while

it woke to the wings of the roses

and was transformed.

Later,

when you face old age and its natural conclusion

your courage will still be shown in the little ways,

each spring will be a sword you’ll sharpen,

those you love will live in a fever of love,

and you’ll bargain with the calendar

and at the last moment

when death opens the back door

you’ll put on your carpet slippers

and stride out. Amen.