

## Sermon Text – Sunday, March 16, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 15:1-8, 18; 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Luke 13:31-35  
Scripture for Message: Philippians 3:17-4:1 “Stand Firm”**

This section of Paul’s letter to the Philippians ends with these words, “Stand firm in the Lord in this way.” I wonder if they would fit – for our purposes in the beginning of our reading because he [Paul] begins by encouraging those he intimately refers to as siblings to join in imitating him and observing those who live according to the example he provides. They thus stand firm in the Lord. Although to us this might sound arrogant of Paul, as if he is encouraging them to be like him rather than like Christ. It was not unusual during that age for those who follow preachers and teachers to imitate them as they learned to follow Christ – there was no New Testament for them to turn to as a guide.

Paul’s intent is to encourage the people to stand firm by continuing to become co-imitators with him of Christ [words he uses in 1 Corinthians 11:1]. That is how, according to Paul, you can stand firm in the Lord. I wonder if learning why Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi can help us understand the message for us today. So, let us explore the context. Paul writes this letter from prison, maybe in a Roman prison but that is not known. He writes this letter for several reasons. First because there is someone available to deliver it for him, but also because of a concern he has over the effect of his absence, he wants to encourage them to stand fast in their faith. He expresses his sorrow for not being with them, he expresses joy in knowing them and a deep concern and love for them.

The concern he seems to have could be that “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” This is a concern that brings him to tears. There are many schools of thought as to the identity of these “enemies.” Could they be the same groups he warns against at the beginning of his letter? But he writes that whether the proclamation of Christ comes from false motives or true what does it matter – the fact that they proclaim Christ at all is cause for his joy (Philippians 1:18). Maybe then that is not the group to which Paul refers.

Could these enemies be those who he refers to in the opening of chapter three as dogs and evil workers (3:2)? Maybe, but why would their destruction bring him to tears? I wonder then if we can look at those who “live as” enemies of the cross as the ones who might be actual faithful followers of Christ. The ones who become distracted from the call to focus on God and salvation through Christ, distracted by the things of this world. They are not true enemies of the cross but live their lives in opposition to what the cross offers. I wonder if Paul also has in mind those who insist that the faith of the Philippians must be rooted

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in obedience to the law and thereby denies the grace of the cross of Christ. I wonder if they could be us!

Maybe that is why Paul is moved to tears. Paul is so passionate that the church in Philippi follow his example in following Christ that it brings him to tears to think of those who might be distracted. He cares so much and does not want the enemies of the cross to destroy the church. That causes me to wonder how living as an enemy of the cross is bringing destruction to the church. Could that have anything to do with his reminding the Philippians that their citizenship is in heaven, and from heaven will come their savior, the Lord Jesus Christ?

The region of Philippi was part of the Roman Empire, and the people of Philippi were Roman Citizens by birth. Paul was teaching these people another way to live and was teaching them about the one true God. However, Rome worshiped the emperor as their God, their Lord, their Savior – the followers of Jesus stood in direct opposition to that position. I wonder if Paul is reminding the followers of Jesus that even though they are under the “humiliation” of Roman Imperial rule, their “citizenship” is to a heavenly realm. This is not merely a reference to some future event but refers to the present time. He is not encouraging the people to drop out of being in the world but to live as if they were already living in the Kingdom. I wonder if his concern was that those enemies of the cross were putting too many rules in place to follow Jesus and making it too much of a challenge.

This directs my thinking that Paul did not mean to imply that the “enemies of the cross” were the same people he refers to as “dogs,” “evildoers,” and “mutilators of the flesh.” The enemies of the cross in my mind were not only the ones among them who insisted in obedience to the law but also those who felt that as followers of Christ they were now free to indulge the “desires of the body.” Fred Craddock, a Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University and an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) from rural Tennessee, give us his thoughts regarding the “enemies of the cross.” His thinking is that the “enemies” were those who felt free to indulge the body and he writes, “Since the body is the center of this lifestyle, the end of the body is their destruction.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s message is to stand firm and rely on the Lord – but to do that they must also face the cross and all that the cross means. For Paul, the cross is a very real and powerful message that conveys God’s power to save and transform. The cross is a very real message that Jesus is the expected Messiah. The enemies of

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Philippians*. WJK. 1985. Print. 65

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the cross would choose other gods such as circumcision, food restrictions, or wealth and prestige. They would choose self over others.

But what is the message for us today? I think the heart of the message from all our readings today is to rely on God without fear. What we have read from Luke's Gospel indicates that Jesus did not fear Herod even though the Pharisees warned him to leave Jerusalem. Jesus' reply indicated he would stand firm until he finished the work – on the third day, more than just a comment it was rich with meaning that would not be evident to his followers until later. He expressed his sorrow and deep regret that the city that was his spiritual home would be lost and would fall away.

In addition, what we have read from the book of Genesis reminds us of God's covenant with Abram and Sarai. This helps us address the question of knowing that God will keep God's promises, and that God is our "shield and fortress" a protector from the harm that living in the world will bring. The Lord comes to Abram in a vision with these assuring words, "Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abram, however, had doubts and who could blame him, the Lord took a long time to fulfill his promise, and both Abram and Sarai were getting old. Abram was afraid that the inheritance that God promised to his offspring would go to the offspring of one who had no blood ties.

The Lord assured Abram that by standing firm in his faith his reward would be great. Make no mistake my friends, God rewarded Abram and God considered him righteous for faith alone not for any virtuous deeds or good behavior on his part. If we were to take a deeper look at the story of Abram, we would realize that Abram exhibited weakness of character by putting himself and his personal safety first on more than one occasion. Abram used his wife as a shield against harm, yet God continued to bless him and kept his promise to both he and his family.

In addition, as we read our call to worship from the Psalms, we find the psalmist praising God for light and salvation for shelter and steadfastness. The psalmist expresses the knowledge that these things do come from God that even when enemies seek destruction "the Lord will take me up." This is a message that when we cry out to the Lord, the Lord is gracious and will answer.

We live in a world that filled with chaos and strife – there is war and genocide. Maybe we are not touched personally by violence but its effect on our lives happens in subtle ways. There are changes happening all around us and those changes are frightening to some, maybe some of us right here or someone you know is negatively affected by the chaos and change in our society. Recently 'mother nature' has not been kind bringing us storms, floods, and fires. Where do we turn during these troubling times?

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Turning to scripture helps to answer these questions. The lessons learned as we read from scriptures and follow the examples of Jesus and the Apostles, even Paul can help us know where our help comes from. It is unfortunate when followers of Christ turn to the things of this world for comfort. We know that governments and human-caused institutions will fail – maybe that is why Paul reminds the people of Philippi that their citizenship is in heaven. Our citizenship as well is in heaven, and that is where our ultimate loyalty lies.

When we read the history of God’s people, we can see compelling evidence that each time the people turned toward earthly power for shelter they were led down paths of destruction and sorrow. If we face reality, we know that we cannot place all our hope in what our current political leaders will do for us – humans very often put their own needs ahead of others and those we assign power to are no different. But where does that leave us as followers of Jesus, people of God?

The strong message of our scriptures today tells us, “Do not be afraid” stand firm in the Lord. By God’s power we can shed the humiliation of an earth-bound body and be transformed / conformed to the body of Christ’s glory. We know, however, that this path will not be an easy path to travel. Jesus reminds us that just as he suffered, we too shall suffer. The message of the cross is one of humiliation, shame, and suffering and yet we must look to the cross for our salvation and strength. The cross reminds us that the journey of discipleship to Christ will take us through humiliation and shame and we must embrace that to be transformed.

During Lent, we continue our journey to the cross – therefore, we must remember all that this journey meant for Jesus, for Jesus’ disciples, and what it means for us. There is sacrifice, there is persecution, there is sorrow but do not be afraid because we are not alone on our journey – God is here. Remember that Jesus is the Messiah we wait for and our reward for faithfulness will be great.