

The Green Hill Presbyterian Church
10:30 AM Worship – Sunday, April 6, 2025

SILENT PREPARATION

Nobody warns , “So many shopping days until Easter!”
No costly gifts, no monetary loss.
Easter seems too easy.
It is – if you forget the cross.

— Joseph T. Nolan

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Worship Assistant

Gracious God, whose mercy and pardon
are for all those who put their trust in you:

Speak to us through your Word this day
that we might be faithful to all that we have learned from Jesus Christ.

Strengthen us to achieve the goals you set before us,
that we may answer your call and bear fruit for your realm,
attracting others to your loving embrace. Amen.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING

Worship Assistant

Isaiah 43:16-21

*This morning’s reading from Isaiah falls in the midst of a larger section –
concerning the promised redemption and restoration of Israel.*

*In the verses immediately preceding, God is referred to as **Redeemer** and **Holy One** – Isaiah refers to God as **Redeemer** more often
than do other Old Testament writers.*

*Notably, God redeems Israel not because of its merit,
but because of the covenant relationship that has been established.....*

Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth;
do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself –
so that they might declare my praise.

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Pastor

Philippians 3:4b-14

*Our reading – from Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi –
begins in the midst of Paul’s warning,
against those who still insist that circumcision
is a requirement for faith in Christ.*

*Having begun in this way, Paul then goes on to state his case –
arguing against any confidence in the flesh,
or in having done the “works of the law.”*

*In the middle of the reading, Paul’s statement –
describing his own self-emptying –
brings to mind the example of Christ,
to which Paul has previously referred, and lifted up for emulation*

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:
circumcised 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;
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss – because of Christ.
More 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 – and 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.

I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection,
and the sharing of his sufferings – by becoming like him in his death,
if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not 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.

Beloved, 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,
I press on toward the goal – for the prize of the heavenly call of God –
in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

“Limping to the Finish Line”

Pastor

Back in **February 2008**,
Major Phil Packer was *struck by a rocket blast* –
he was seg with the **British Armed Forces**,
in **Basra, Iraq**.

The major – then – suffered major *heart, and spinal, injuries* –
enough that *medics* told the now-paraplegic soldier
that he *would never* walk again.

But they were *wrong* –
wrong by a *whopping 26.2 miles*.

Thirteen months later, **Major Packer** completed the **Flora London Marathon** –
on *crutches* –
only *one month after* a year’s rehab had allowed him
to finally *take his first step* with them.

Starting the marathon with the main race group,
he finished it **13 days later.**

He covered roughly **two miles a day,**
and the *whole journey* took him **52,400 steps.**

But – when you’re told you’ll never walk again –
every step is worth counting.

And – when *each race day* consists of **4,000 painful steps** –
you probably *count each limp*
and *remember every one* of them.

For **Major Packer** – then – *limping in* was actually *all in.*

But, the major’s herculean efforts
were more than just an amazing story of *human will*
and *overcoming the odds.*

His marathon was also a fund-raising movement.

It resulted in a *donation* of more than **£1million** –
then, about **1.5 million US dollars** –
to **Help for Heroes,**
a charity that helps rebuild the torn-up lives
of people injured in military service.

And – as **Packer** *slowly but surely limped* toward his *funding-raising goal* –
he was *joined each day* along the road
by scores of tear-drenched supporters.

Families of lost soldiers.

Entire schools of inspired children.

Cops.

Firefighters.

Politicians.

And onlookers,

caught up in the seemingly-transcendent journey.

But, **Packer's marathon** was *neither his first – nor his last –*
fund-raising challenge.

Even *before* his wheelchair-bound legs would work,
he observed the *one-year anniversary* of his war injury
by *rowing across* the **English Channel**.

Then – after the marathon –
Packer took on **Yosemite's infamous El Capitan**,
one of **America's hardest mountains** to scale.

He accomplished a **four-day summit**,
almost entirely by the *upper-body strength*
developed through his *training regimen* of **4,000 pull-ups**.

Maimed by a *rocket blast*.

A year later – *rowing* the **Channel**.

Two months later – taking his *first step*.

One month later – limping a *marathon*.

One month later – scaling **El Capitan**.

We *could* call that **17-month run** *inhuman*.

But – actually – it's *superhuman*.

The fact is that few people can identify with the **Apostle Paul**
the way **Major Phil Packer** can.

“*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh,*”
Paul says, “*I have more.*”

(v. 4)

“*[F]orgetting what lies behind
and straining forward to what lies ahead,*
I press on toward the goal....”

(vv. 13-14a)

Phil Packer's journey – from past to future – was a physical endeavor.

The **Apostle Paul's** was *spiritual*,
and he *offers us* a challenge:

That is, *are we "all in" with God,*
or, are we content to "limp in"?

If we choose to go "all in,"
our first step is letting go of the past.

An old **Peanuts cartoon**
has **Lucy** – on **Charlie Brown's** *baseball team* –
standing in the outfield.

Then – as a *fly ball* sails toward her –
she *remembers all the other times* she's dropped the ball.

We can guess what happens next: She *drops this one*, too.

Then **Lucy** calls out to **Charlie Brown** –
who's *standing there* on the *pitcher's mound* –
"I almost had it,
but then my past got in my eyes!"

The dominant metaphor in Paul's text is the marathon –
or what some have called the Christian race.

And **Paul** wants – *above all else* –
to *run efficiently*,
to *press on* toward – and reach – the goal,
to *win* the prize.

But – first – it is necessary to shed the useless stuff
so our running steps can be *light*
and *without unnecessary impediments.*

That's why **Paul** argues that we *need to forget* the *past*.

In his **letter to the Philippians** – *just before* our passage begins –
Paul is fending off *false theologians*
who are “cutting up” his *message*
of *salvation without the need*
for *law-bound works*. (vv. 2-3)

So – to *refute this claim* –
Paul spells out his *unparalleled spiritual curriculum vitae* (vv. 5-6)
and then proceeds to call it “*rubbish*” – (v. 8)
a rather gentle **English** rendering –
of the **Greek** *skubala*.

In essence, **Paul** was looking
for an *attention-grabbing* – and fairly *crass* –
way of *making a point*.

That is, *anything that we try to bring* to the table –
to somehow merit **God’s free gift of salvation** –
is a *big, fat pile of.....theological rubbish*.

In other words, **Paul’s past** –
with both its *impressive religious résumé*,
and its *equally impressive failures* –
was, well, *past*.

It was – *now* – only *useless information*.

It was – *now* – of *absolutely no use* to him,
as he endeavored to *know Christ fully*.

And – the fact is – that everyone of us has a past.

For some people,
the passage of years has engendered a sense of spiritual merit:

Long-term church attendance.

Learning self-control and discipline.

Growth in theological knowledge.

Giving faithfully.

Perhaps even service as an elder.

**But – for others – the past
is what makes them feel unworthy of Christ:**

The failed relationship.

The debt.

The secret habits.

An abortion.

They feel unlovely and unlovable.

**But – Paul's point is – the checkered past and the sterling past
have the same thing in common –
they're both skubala.**

The **eternal scandal of grace** is that *we are merit-less* –
we can't offer anything good enough
to get **God** to love us.

Nor – *thankfully* – can we *do anything vile enough*
to prevent **God's love**.

**But – because most human relationships
operate in the opposite manner –**
it is *extremely hard* for most of us
to *believe* – and *truly feel* – this.

We can *certainly talk* about *unconditional love*,
but *rarely* – on a *purely human level* – is it true.

**So it is that employers offer performance bonuses –
not unconditional bonuses.**

So it is that we are *closer to certain family members* than others –
for reasons we *can't necessarily articulate*.

And, so it is that *our friends*
are usually people who *share affinities with us* –
humor,
intelligence,
hobbies,

income,
education,
kids, *whatever*.

In other words,

few – if any – human relationships

teach us what *our relationship with God*
is supposed to *look like*:

loved *because of God*, *not* because of us.

Richard Rohr – who writes a lot about *spiritual formation* – says:

“God does not love us because we are good.

God loves us because God is good.

Why can't we surrender to that?

Because it – initially – feels like a loss of power and importance!”

**So – whether we're pretty good or not good enough –
we have to let go of the sense of self-importance.**

Who we've *been* – or *not been* – *simply does not* influence **God**.

As a practical exercise,

let's imagine and compare two people in a church.

Let's say one is a *single mother* who never learns
while stringing together *train-wreck relationships* –
two kids by two different fathers.

The other is the *successful and generous businessman*
who *serves passionately* as a deacon –
a model of discipleship in the church.

Who does God love more?

Who is more worthy of God's forgiveness?

The point is that God simply has no favorites.

[Remember the “divine dichotomy” we talked about recently.....]

God just *does not* see people as *we tend* to see them.

That fact should never – however –
undermine – or detract from – the pursuit of holiness.

Followers of Christ do live *lives of goodness and obedience* –
but as a *result of gratitude* – for what God in Christ has done for them.

So Paul – then – is clear: We have no merit before God.

And so – like Paul –
we *must let go* of the idea
that our *good – or bad* – past *performances*
in any way *pre-condition* God
to *love us more or less*.

The second essential step is living into the future.

Having *shed unnecessary baggage*,
Paul – running for Christ – now says
that we *press on* and *strain forward*,
with *our eyes on the prize*.

Paul's hope – for Philippi and for us –
is that we strain forward to what lies ahead (v. 13)
and that we press on toward the goal. (v. 14)

And if we can follow his example –
regardless of who we've been –
we are *completely set free*
to live into God's future for us.

In *this regard*, Paul's motivation is clear –
one day sharing in the *glory of Christ's resurrection*.

But – in the *meantime* – there's a *kingdom* to help expand.

Like Paul –
as *people* who have been made Christ's own –
we *each have been given* a life to live.

And *when* – as with **Paul** – **Christ** is *everything to us*,
the *future is big*.

So what lies ahead for us?

What *goals* are we *supposed* to press on *toward*?

Businesses create *marketplace goals*.

Our schools set *classroom-performance standards*.

Even some **church leaders** are gifted
at discerning, interpreting, and implementing
an *organizational vision*.

But do we – as individuals – have goals
as we look to our own future with God?

Do we appropriately goal-set *our individual roles* in the kingdom?

Paul's doxology at the end of **Ephesians Chapter 3**
reminds us of what **God** can do:

*“Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly
far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, for ever and ever.”*

So – as Christ-followers – we need to develop a little holy imagination:

Let's *pursue hope* at all costs.

Let's *ask God* what the future could look like,
and then *ditch the fears* that hold us back from it.

In The Right Stuff,

author **Tom Wolfe** tells the story of the *jet pilots*
who tested the *early supersonic aircraft*.

Theirs was a life of *heart-stopping risk* – but also *great excitement*.

The **credo** they *lived by* was “**to push the outside of the envelope**” –
to *fly higher and higher* into the *cold void* between earth and space,
pressing their planes ever faster.

They risked *mental fatigue*
and *flirted with unconsciousness* from oxygen deprivation,
until they *crossed the threshold* of the speed of sound.

Friends, that’s what Christianity ought to be like:

ever *learning*,
ever *growing*,
not afraid to *ask the tough questions* –
the questions that *challenge faith*.

Major Packer had two ways he could have approached life.

The first was to collect a *disability check* –
and a *whole lot of sympathy* because of *his past*.

It’s a *fair approach* – that *any of us* might have taken in *his situation*.

But *that was limping in*.

The other was to call the past irrelevant with regard to the future.

To *risk failing* on big *fund-raising goals*.

To endure *insufferable pain*,
so that he could *change the experience of others* in similar situations.

That is all in.

The Apostle Paul had a similar choice,
and *we* have the *same choice* today.

Limp in, or all in?

The **Good News** is that **God** *actually allows* the *limp in*.

Plenty of people *filling churches today*
can check off the "***I'm saved***" box.

And they – like **Paul** –
will share in the **resurrection of Christ** when they die.

God's unconditional love covers even **Sunday Christians**.

But are such people really living – before they're dying?

Are they content to *remain confined* to their *past* – both successes and failures?

Or, are they dreaming with God –
about what *next week*, or *next month*, could look like –
and *doing something about it* today?

But – even if we're only able to limp today – we should keep limping.

If we do, we'll *find that* – soon – we're *all in*.

And *that* is precisely what **God** asks of us!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit:

Amen.

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (Unison)**

Pastor

Adapted from the Second Helvetic Confession (1561)

The heavenly Father even sent his only-begotten Son, the most perfect teacher of the world. In him is hidden the wisdom of God, which has come to us through the most holy, simple, and most perfect doctrine of all. And he chose disciples for himself, whom he made apostles. These went out into the whole world, and everywhere gathered together churches by the preaching of the Gospel. Then, throughout all the churches in the world, they appointed pastors or teachers according to Christ's command; through their successors, he has taught and governed the church unto this day. Christ's apostles call all who believe in Christ "priests;" not on account of an office, but because all the faithful have been made kings and priests, able to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ. Amen.

***CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

Pastor

Now, may the One – who by the power at work in us –
is able to accomplish – abundantly –
far more than we can ask, or think –
make us complete in every good work
as we each approach the finish line.

For, great is God's faithfulness!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the fellowship and power of the Holy Spirit –
be with us this day, and even forevermore. Amen.