

We Press On Towards the Goal

Philippians 3:12-21

Saint Mark PC

Consternation swept through the greatest army in the world. You see they were worried. The Greek Army under Alexander the Great had swept across Asia Minor and they had conquered all the foes they had faced. There was no other army who could put up a challenge to the Greek army at that time, the most powerful in the world.

But suddenly the Greek army came out of a forest. They looked ahead and they saw a mountain range. Scurrying back to their crude maps they wondered "what was the name of that mountain range?" and they looked at their maps and realized that they had marched right off of their map.

It was just darkness, the unknown. What was actually ahead of them were the Himalayas, but they did not know that. It was just an unknown where they had marched off of their map.

This story comes from Harold Lamb's book *The Life of Alexander the Great*.

When Alexander the sensed this fear of the unknown, he gathered his troops around, according to Harold Lamb. He said to them,

"Most armies will stay within the confines of the known. Most armies will stay within the boundaries with which they are familiar. Most armies will stay within the bounds of what is on their maps.

"But a great army. A Great army will always march off the map.

Every one of us has been marching off the map for the past year or so. Or maybe you are about to do so as you re-enter a more in-person existence. Many people I have talked with think about how we are not just reverting to 2019, but we are going into a new world, where things won't just be the same, but altered in many ways, many of them good ways.

How will our work lives, our church life, our community life be the same and how will it be forever changed?

Our Director of the DMin program at PTS in our quarterly newsletter, just wrote this about her students in the program in the year 2020:

"Pastors were scrambling to respond and seeking a faithful path as the world turned. Suddenly pastors were video technicians; they were arbiters of public health discussions in churches struggling over whether to meet in-person; they became voices for justice and comforters of the lonely. All this while finding their way through their own personal vertigo."

Some version of that is what just about everyone experienced last year. And I am not saying pastors had it worse, or even bad at all compared to what many of you have been through.

Maybe you are like me and find that the way we are marching off the map here in 2021 is in dealing with the new normal in our national life, the chaos and the controversy that seem to be daily confronting us with jarring situations like the insurrection at the

Capitol, or a rash of voter suppression laws, or many other social justice issues..

People I have talked to have said they are in uncharted territory, to use the map image again, and feel a sense of disorientation. What will the future hold for things that we value? For compassion, for those fruits of the spirit like love, peace, and kindness? We are in a time of upheaval, and even chaos for those who are trying to maintain the values of our culture, to be sure.

So, I think of those early Christians in Philippi, whom Paul was writing to address. They really did not know what it was to be a follower of Jesus in the first century - there was no map for that. Paul tries to carefully lead them, even on small details, on what faith called them to be and to do He called them to go forward into an unknown life, but a new life in Christ.

SO today, I would look at Paul's advice, and wherever you are in your walk with God, consider again how God through Jesus Christ would have us march off our maps into an unknown future - because that is what a great army does after all-

Three simple ways. But the way is not simple:

First, in our connection to Jesus Christ, we press on towards the goal. No matter how young or old you are when you continue in your knowledge and love of God, through worship or meditation, or study, it is as if Jesus Christ has a kind of partnership with you, being alongside of you in life as we step into these unknowns, as we march right off of our maps.

I always loved the story of a basketball player named Stacey King. He says the greatest night of his NBA career was when he and Michael Jordan combined for 70 points in one game.

Then he mentions that of course Michael Jordan scored 69 points and Stacey had one foul shot for one point.

This is the spiritual life with Jesus Christ. He has already done most of the heavy lifting, but when you grow along side of him, that power of heaven and earth is available to us.

Paul wisely tells us to continue to grow and be inspired in our connection to Jesus Christ. Keep being active in worship, and keep growing in your walk with God by studying, reading devotionally and be renewed by grace.

That will mean that we have the strength to speak out about values or morality issues, or justice. It will mean we go into an unknown without fear or anxiety.

2- In our connection with a world in need. In our new normal, it is wise to once again ask ourselves, To whom can we be a neighbor?

A couple of years ago after college, our daughter Anna took a long backpacking trip through southeast Asia, and one of her stops was to stay for a week at a school in Java chee-an-jur in Indonesia. She had arranged and agreed to teach an English class for a week, and stay with one of the families there. She came assuming there would be a lesson plan or curriculum of some kind, but the teacher simply introduced her and then walked out the door.

So what she did was just talk to the kids and ask what questions they would like to ask her.

They wanted to know all about America of course. Our values. Why we did certain things. They wanted to know if she was friends with then president Obama. The girls wanted to know if she knew Angelina Jolie?

But she came a way with the feeling of that question to which Jesus once responded - "who is my neighbor?"

For Anna it could be students on the other side of the world of a different faith, different culture, different understanding.

It is my hope that as each of us begins to emerge from whatever isolation we have been in - and it's different for each of us, we find a way to be involved in our congregation, or our community, because, there are so many opportunities, whether it is a mission project, or so many others.

We really are just learning how this past year is going to impact our communities and churches.

3- and that leads to the third simple way - In our relationships with each other.

I remind us that we are in a church process of transition, ironically within a time of transition. The rest of 2021, I believe, will be an important time, and an exciting rest of the year for us, and whether it is in our Session or in our ministry teams or everyone really, we want to be working as a team, together towards the goal, as Paul says.

In Philippians chapter 3, he says let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind. Hold fast to what we have attained. He doesn't mean that we have to agree with everything, but be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, when we are making decisions about our church in

the transition time to come. He says I press on to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me his own.

Paul says forgetting what lies behind, I press on toward the goal of the calling of Jesus Christ. It might be a risky step of faith, but we go forward because of Jesus.

There was a person from another country visiting Washington DC for the first time. He wanted to see the National Archives building where all those great documents are kept.

And when he walked around the Northeast corner, outside the building he saw on the cornerstone a saying, maybe some of you know what it is.

It read: WHAT IS PAST IS PROLOGUE.

And he thought, past is prologue, what does that mean? The prologue is usually the part at the beginning of the story. So he thought about that for a while, and when he caught his taxi back to the hotel, he just asked the driver what that meant?

Taxi drivers can have a gift of explaining local sites, and this driver says:

I'll tell you what it means - it means "you ain't seen nothing yet"

Imagine that: whatever we have done up to this point, whether as a church, or just as people of faith is just a prologue to the new story to come. A staggering thought.

Paul wrote this: Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward.

The past is prologue

We're marching off the map

We press on towards the goal