

Praying Goodbye Philippians 1:3-11

A new seminary graduate was beginning his new ministry in a small, small-town church. It seems that the previous pastor was this big paragon of virtue. He lived up to all the people's expectations and was willing to live on a very low salary, to boot. He loved to work around the church and parsonage and keep everything in repair.

But the new pastor wasn't that type. He hired someone to do a lot of these chores, including mowing the lawns around the church and house. Naturally, this cost more money.

This change of pattern was of "concern" to some of the elders of the church. One day one of them approached the new pastor and tried to bring up the matter tactfully. He said to the new pastor, "You know, our previous pastor mowed the lawn himself. Have you considered this approach?"

The new pastor said, "Yes, I am aware of this. And I have asked him, but he doesn't want to do it anymore."

Ah, transitions in ministry. It almost seems like yesterday that I came to Bethlehem Church. I was just out of seminary, still had tags on me and had that fresh new minister smell. I spent my first week helping Pastor Carly with VBS. During that week I told Carly that the search committee told me something about Bethlehem that I had never heard spoken about another church; a kind of thing that never even came up in seminary. It was Burgoo.

Soon after VBS week I was off on a mission to New Orleans. Stephanie and our girls quickly took off on a mission to Chicago. Eric Stroshine and I made a few trips to Louisville to do some team building work with the help of some folks who specialize in that kind of work, and that was most helpful. Plus, the road trips with Eric were always fun. All of this was taking shape almost immediately following my arrival.

Just as quickly, I had the privilege of learning some of the stories of Bethlehem Church and the stories of some of your families. I heard stories about Bethlehem's founding families, Hooker School, previous pastors. Some of those pastors were occasions for difficulty. One previous pastor seems to be remembered most fondly by long-time members.

The first time I met Cal Mutti was in 2006 when he came and preached at Bethlehem's 100th Anniversary Celebration. He spoke to Eric and me about his time at Bethlehem and asked how things were going for us. Remember that Eric and I had already heard what a great pastor he was, and all of this kind of shaped my experience of Cal. He seemed to speak with divine wisdom and gentle authority.

On the day he preached, he stood here and said that Eric and Rocky are a great team for Bethlehem, and I felt like jumping up and giving him a great big hug! The theme of his sermon that day was a quote that he heard, one that I have shared with every confirmation class since, and one that he spoke again when he was here last month. He said, "The future is bright as the promises of God." Bethlehem's 100th anniversary and the new building dedication were occasions to pause and wonder about the future, as was Cal's departure.

One thing that always makes me smile is to watch what happens at the mere mention of Cal's name. Some seem to melt as if suddenly overcome by warm fuzzy memories. Others wilt as if thinking, "Oh, here we go again with Bethlehem's standard of comparison." Some among us don't know what the fuss is about, just that there is a big fuss.

Well, Bethlehem Church, this is all part of your story. Pastors don't come back and their stories don't go away. In the Old Testament there are stories about the kings of Israel. I don't mean to suggest that pastors are like kings, but that stories are told about leaders long after they're gone.

I can imagine a handful of Israelites gathered during the reign of King Asa, and a couple of them just happen to mention how good things were in the days of David and Solomon. Some others roll their eyeballs and complain about how it's always David this and Solomon that. Asa's a pretty good king. It's not like we're dealing with the likes of Rehoboam. Now that guy was bad news. We just need to move on.

Move on, yes. Let your stories fade away? No. There was a time when David was good was a good fit for Israel. There was a time when Cal Mutti was great for Bethlehem. There was a time when Eric and I were Bethlehem's dream team. While those days are gone, I suspect that many sacred stories will last.

A few weeks ago I was at St. John UCC in St. Charles, preaching a sermon that I think lays the groundwork for my ministry and my understanding of God. I talked about the exodus tradition, how God's people shared their stories of God over and over, not because they were

ping away for the good old days, but because they anticipated that this is how God acts again and again.

Now I find myself back at Bethlehem UCC, delivering a last message. You are God's people, and you have stories to share. There are countless stories about how you have experienced God in the past, and I encourage you to share those stories. Author, Diana Butler Bass says, "We become ourselves as we tell our stories." You will continue to become whatever God is calling you to be as you put words to how you experience God in your life. You don't have to tell it eloquently or dramatically. Just tell your story.

There will be people coming into this place who do not know your story, including Rev. Mark Sirnic. And they need to hear it. Not only is it your story, not only is it the church's story, it's God's story. It's part of the story of the gospel, and I have been honored to be part of it these last five years. And when I tell my story, you will always have a special place in it.

In today's scripture, I like Paul's words to the Philippian church. **"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident...that the one who began a good work (or a good story) among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ...And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless..."**

My prayer for Bethlehem Church is that you will continue to build upon what we have built together in the last few years. When it comes to children and youth ministries, you're about to discover what sustainability is all about. A turnover in staff no longer means that programs begin to come apart. The plan is in place. It's just a matter of jumping in there and working the plan. You won't have to say to the next children's ministry coordinator and the next youth ministry coordinator, "We hope you can grow our programs." You're in a position to say, "Our programs are growing. Try to keep up."

I also pray that Rev. Mark Sirnic is able to help you grow in new ways. When he gets here and gets settled, a lot of busy work will be out of the way. All of that building and renovating and congregational conversing in the interim will be finished, and there will be a new opportunity to grow with more and more knowledge and insight and gain momentum as you move into the future. I pray that all of that happens.

Brothers and sisters, as this chapter comes to a close, many have begun to say goodbye, and others are saying they don't like to say goodbye because it sounds so final. Well, yes, it does and yes, it is. But consider this: the word goodbye is thought to be, at least in part, a Middle English contraction for "God be with ye." To say goodbye is to entrust someone to God's care once they are no longer in your presence.

Other languages seem to do similar things. The Spanish word for God is "Dios." The common Spanish farewell, adios, means "to God." And the French, "adieu," commends the care of the departing to God.

In the Christian language, we like to wrap things up by saying "amen," which means something like, "So be it" or "It is true." At the end of prayers, at the end of sermons, even at the end of a ministry, we might give an "amen." I don't suppose that means there were no mistakes and that everything that was said is absolutely true but that, on this occasion, a prayer, a sermon, a ministry, we have spoken the truth as best as we know how. I feel like we have done that.

Now there is much work for you to carry on. As you pledge yourselves and your resources to Bethlehem Church, pledge to be good stewards of your sacred stories. I can't wait to hear what stories are written in your future. And until that happens, I am able to say with confidence, trust, faith and so much love, goodbye and amen.