

“PRESSING ON & STRAINING FORWARD”

Sermon Text – Philippians 3:12b-13
Pentecost 16, Proper 22,A
Zion Lutheran Church – Beecher, IL
Sunday & Wednesday, October 2 & 5, 2011
OT Reading – Isaiah 5:1-7
Epistle Reading – Philippians 3:4b-14
Gospel Reading – Matthew 21:33-46

In the Name of Jesus. [Amen.] Our sermon is based on today’s Epistle reading. I re-read the following: **But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** (Phil. 3:12b-13, ESV)

Dear friends in Christ,

The epistle assigned for today is specifically is written to Christians... to believers. We know that because Paul, who wrote this book, addresses his readers as “**brothers...**” that is, those who’ve been called by the Gospel to be children of God.

As God’s children, they no longer are to call earth their “home...” not at all! In reality, the opportunity to dwell with God in heaven is theirs! Out of His grace, God has handed it to them on a silver platter in their holy Baptism. In those incredibly precious waters, they’ve been called out of darkness to walk “**in the marvelous light**” (1 Pet. 2:9, ESV) of Jesus Christ... and the end of that “walk...” *will be in heaven itself!*

But, look again at his words. Even though he’s writing to Christians, there’s a definite air of concern. His concern is that his fellow Christians won’t remember who they are... nor where they’re going.

He encourages his listeners of *all* times and *all* eras to “**hold true to what we have attained...**” and to “**keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example**” they’ve been given.

Why would he say that? And, why would he say that, by the way, to *Christians*?

Just as quickly, he answers that question. “**For many... walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set in earthly things.**”

“**Many...**” Paul says. Many remain in this world who aren’t just apathetic toward Christianity; instead... they’re violently opposed to it! In their life’s journey, they remain lost, and their direction in life is set *not* toward heaven... but toward hell itself!

Is it possible for us – we, who have heaven as our eternal destination – is it possible for us to lose our bearings as we travel on our own life’s journey? Well, you tell me...

Do you *always* say “no” to the pull of the world to walk with it – even when you know that it’s a path displeasing to the Lord? Remember... I used the word “always!”

Is *every* phone conversation or email correspondence that you engage in one that you could have with any member of your household... or your church? Remember... I used the word “every!”

Is your presence with other Christians around the life-giving Word of God the very *highest* priority in your day-to-day life? And... as before... remember I used the word “highest” when I pose that question.

I pray that you’ve connected the dots.

Yeah... St. Paul is warning each of us Christians to be wary of the temptations put before us by the devil... the world... and by our own sinful flesh. For those temptations... should we give in to them... would slowly, methodically, and most definitely creep into our lives... and destroy our faith in Christ!

If you think about it for only a moment, you know that the following is true: The journey to heaven is littered with the bodies of many who fell away from the One True Faith along the way. Their belly became their god... and they sought to fill it with things that their sinful nature craved... *all to their utter ruin.*

Sadly, they believed the voice of the world... telling them to take glory in their “alternate lifestyle...” or to live as *they* would choose... dismissing the Bible’s guide for human conduct... and living their lives by their feelings and “what seems right” *to them!* They had no interest in things of God... that is... of heavenly things... because “**earthly things**” seemed more important and fulfilling.

Dear people of God... all of you whom God has called to be here at this place and time... If these words of St. Paul have hit you square between the eyes... then repent!

Repent of that walk away from the Lord that you’ve all so often *willfully* embarked upon. Repent and look with eyes of faith at Jesus... the Holy One of God, your Savior. For on this Lord’s Day it’s my privilege to proclaim to you once again the wonderful news of God’s final word on *all* your sinful actions... on *all* those things that would separate you from Him forever.

Your sins of the flesh... of all the times when you had more concern for earthly things than the kingdom of heaven... *ALL* of your sins that would damn you to hell... are covered over by the blood of Jesus Christ... the eternal Son of God who came into this world... for the specific purpose to redeem you and all of humanity from your “lost” condition.

Repent... and look at Christ. Look at Him. Fix your eyes on Him on the holy cross... offering up His perfect life... for you... and you... and you... and the whole world! Look at Him... showing His eternal love for you... suffering, dying, and rising for your sins so that *you* may have eternal life in His holy name!

And... in the aftermath of this repentance and return to your Baptismal faith, you once again are on the path to eternal life. You’re restored to be one of His own... a “holy one” of God... who rejects the way of unrighteousness and plans... with the help of the Holy Spirit... to live as God calls His people to do!

Because of this, Paul calls us to join him and “**press on...**” on our life’s journey. Just as athletes are exhorted to push themselves to their physical limits when the game goes into overtime... so does Paul exhort us, his fellow believers, to “**press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**” (Phil. 3:14, ESV)

Press on... don't let other things get between you and the greatest **"prize"** known to man – eternal peace and joy in heaven!

And, as you **"press on"** in that journey to the heavenly Jerusalem, consider who you might be able to take along for the ride. Just as you thrill to hear the timeless Word of God calling you to repentance and faith... so would *scores...* no... *hundreds...* actually... make it *thousands* of others living not all that far from this very spot!

They, too, deserve to hear our Lord's calm, comforting voice bidding them to new life in Christ's saving name. They, too, (although in their sin-caused blindness might not yet recognize it) they eagerly desire a peaceful, serene existence with the Maker of all.

How, do you think, how might this congregation rise to the opportunities that are in our own backyard? Only time will tell how God will use us to reach those who still haven't heard of Christ, the Crucified One, *for them!* May God grant us wisdom... and an eagerness... to faithfully proclaim the Gospel.

God, in His wisdom, has given each of us two eyes. I suggest that you keep one eye focused on heaven... remembering that heaven is where your real home is. And I suggest, that you keep that second eye focused on the path on which you're walking here on earth... always watching for detours that would rob you of the greatest of gifts that one can ever have – forgiveness, life, and salvation.

No doubt you've all noticed the latest fad to hit television programming. The so-called "reality TV shows" seem to become more numerous each year. Yet, how much "reality" they *truly* portray is a big question.

Think about it... how "real" is it that many... actually... *any* of us... have the opportunity (let alone the *desire!*)... to be stranded on a deserted island... and eat a jar of earthworms for \$50,000?

But I submit to you that we... the people of God here at Zion Lutheran Church... have the best handle on what's "real..." and what's not.

Here... we have life itself!

Here... we have the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here... in our church and in our school... we speak of our God who loves us... who has saved us... and has promised to share His kingdom with all who complete their lives in repentance and faith in His Son!

May you, God's beloved ones, faithfully **"press on... and strain forward"** as you journey with Christ to your heavenly home. And... as you travel... lead by the Spirit of Christ... may you also extend your hand to those around you... inviting them... and welcoming them... into the family of our Father – for time... *and eternity!*

For Jesus' sake and in His holy name! [Amen.]

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. [Amen.]