

Philippians 1:3-11 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2 Advent 12.02.21

People often speak of elephants in rooms. They are large realities that everyone notices, but no one wants to talk about. Several years back when we as a congregation in our church picnic were utilizing a southern or country music theme, I wore this: my Brooks and Dunn shirt. It's well known in the country world but wasn't received fondly by one of our members. She came up to me after a class I taught and said, "There was an elephant in this room, and it was that ugly shirt you are wearing. I think maybe people weren't listening to you because that ugly shirt got all their attention. They won't say anything, but I will."

Now, I happen to disagree with her evaluation of this shirt, but I don't disagree that there are lots of elephants in lots of rooms. For me, in Advent, John the Baptist is one of those elephants. Now frankly, we may talk about him, but we would rather not. As we are watching our Hallmark Christmas shows, addressing our Hallmark Christmas cards, singing, "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas," who really wants to deal with this odd duck, scruffy, repentance-preaching prophet in the wilderness. Not many of us. He's really an intrusion into what could really be a nice, sweet holiday.

Now admittedly, Luke's version of John today is not as stark as Mark's in which we are told that John was clothed in camel's hair and ate honey and bugs for lunch. But next week we will hear more from Luke's John when he will call some of us a "brood of vipers," who are simply trying to flee from the wrath to come. Who during this "the most wonderful time of the year" wants to hear a call to repentance, a call to change our minds and move in a new direction? The last thing on my mind as I am busy writing Christmas letters, thinking about presents, decorating the house, is personal and communal change. So, I am not going to talk about the elephant in the room. John is too much of a downer.

I think I will talk today about something more upbeat. And Paul, who isn't always upbeat, is really upbeat today. Writing the Philippians, probably while he is in prison, what we would call house arrest, Paul starts his communication with a typical Thanksgiving, but one that is effusive with warmth and intimacy. Ahh, I am liking this better.

"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." Now, I realize that some folks in ancient days wrote introductions with glaring praise for the recipients in order to draw them in. Frankly, this kind of style works in communication. You start out by saying how much you appreciate someone and then he or she is better prepared to receive your critique or other form of encouragement. Paul may be using that style in today's second reading, but I am convinced that he truly is fond of the Philippians. They have been at with him from the very beginning. He truly seems to treasure them.

And I can say that the same is true from me about you. I have been at it here for 25 years, and I can say, "I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." Oh yes, there have been challenges, people who didn't like me, who thought I was too this or too that. There have been some hard-headed people, folks who weren't very open to change or to my take on the Christian gospel, but truly, this has been a labor of love. You are an incredible community.

"I am right to say think this way about you," as Paul says, "because [as I hold you in my heart] you hold me in your heart." I've experienced our mutuality of affection, as we have cried many tears together, said goodbye to a whole lot of people, too many people, as we've laughed together, lots of times, because most of you understand that holy hilarity is part and parcel of what it means to be a healthy

community. We not only have cried and laughed, we also have studied together, many, many hours. We've made music together. We have performed plays together. We've mapped out whole new ways of being church, and most of you have cheered us on.

"All of you have shared in God's grace with me, both in [the hard times, Paul says, his imprisonment] and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel," in taking quite seriously the radical gospel of Jesus that makes it quite clear that all are welcome, sinners are forgiven, and the forgotten are remembered. I am right to be very fond of you. You are great people. We are in koinonia, fellowship together. The intimacy we so often feel at Christmas is what I experience all the time.

And so, I am, as Paul says, "confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." It ain't over. There's more to come. Covid is threatening this expectation. Covid makes it hard to anticipate the future. I know it does for me.

In my life, sometimes I rest on the excitement that is yet to come. Now I understand the limitations of this approach to living. As we look forward, we often don't pay attention to this very moment, always living for the future. But there is something quite healthy about expectation, about the excitement of kids on the days before Christmas. Covid threatens our expectations for the future. It can cause us to think that the future will be no future at all.

Now, I don't want to respond to that reality with starry-eyedness, rose-colored glasses. Covid is threatening what our sense of what the future will be. But I am confident, as Paul is, that there is more to come. The one who began the good stuff among us has a lot of more good work to do. And I am experiencing that here all the time. We have all kinds of new folks, new vibrant people who are eager to be a part of

the fellowship, the intimacy we share. Our online presence has taken us to places we would have never expected. We're trying new things, doing new things, even planning new things. Oh yes, we're missing some folks. And that is the hardest thing for me. It makes my heart sink. Covid has taken its toll on some people and their connection to the community. I mourn that. But God is not finished with us yet, and if Advent hope is any indication, God is not yet finished with this old world.

And this, therefore, is my prayer, as Paul says, "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you [us] determine what is best." Truthfully, I think this is a little bit of a loaded statement from Paul. I suspect that with these words Paul is starting to bring in the challenge that he has for the Philippian community. And you will understand the challenge as you read the rest of the book. This community is dealing with some fractured-ness, with some people who aren't getting along with one another, some leaders who are bringing in some of what Paul considers unhealthy teachings. He wants the love this community knows to overflow more and more so that it will live in unity. And the unity he is talking about is not some kind of fluffy, why-can't-we-all-just-get-along affection. He wants the love to be shaped by good thinking, faithful discernment, "knowledge, and full insight."

Good theology matters. Helpful and healthy views of the church matter. The church in some places today is filled with some really bad thinking, bad thinking that has divided people and even has threatened their physical health. Not all kinds of thinking is okay. Bad thinking that leads to bad behavior and bad consequences for the community and for communities is not okay. So, before we get lost in the sweet intimacy that we share, an intimacy that is indeed sweeter than sweet, we want to make sure that what we are about together, make sure that

our minds and hearts reflect the one who began the good work among us.

And this truth makes me want to talk about the elephant in the room: John the Baptist. He may seem like a Christmas spoiler, a kill joy. But you know what? He's not really. He wants us to make sure that what we are about reflects the one who is on his way. He wants to make sure that we are well prepared for love. The salvation of our God is coming to all flesh. Love is on its way. That love will be born in, of all things, a manger. That love will forgive sinners, welcome outcasts, preach good news to the poor, turn the world upside down. That love will die on a cross and yet will be raised again to reign forever.

Therefore, it is time to submit to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The love that is on its way is after us so that we might love. It's time to change our minds, time to change our hearts, time to change our behavior, so that we produce, as Paul says, a harvest of righteousness, lives that are not just about us and what we want and what our rights are, but are about love for our neighbors, our community, whom we treasure so much.