

Over the next half dozen Sundays, our lectionary provides us with readings from the book of Philippians as our epistle, so I've decided that we'll stay with that track. And our sermons over these next six weeks will be following our readings from the book of Philippians. They'll also be the subject of the 9:00 education hour, the Bible studies that started this morning. We'll be picking up those readings, so there's the chance to reflect together on the readings and tell me if there's anything you disagree with in the sermon. That is your moment now, 9:00 every Sunday.

So today we'll start at the beginning of the book, which always seems to me to be a good principle in life, to begin at the beginning. And I like to talk about beginnings. In fact, I like to talk about beginnings, middles, and ends, because I think that they're important in life. That's how we make sense of things. We're conditioned to understand things, to understand our life in a narrative framework. That's how we make sense of things, by putting them somewhere between a beginning, a middle, and an end. We see that in the Bible. The Bible has that structure of a beginning, a middle, and an end. And we all tell a life story that has that narrative feel to it. So beginnings, middles, and ends are important, and that's what I'll be talking about this morning.

Beginnings. Paul writes, "I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion." Paul was there when the church was founded in Philippi. He was a key player in making that come to be. And we read the story of how the church was established in the city of Philippi in the 16th chapter of the Book of Acts. And what we see in that book is that Philippi is a region of Macedonia in northern Greece. And Paul had a vision. And in this vision, a dream, a man comes to him from the region of Macedonia and says, "Come and preach to us." And so he did. And it was the first time that St. Paul ever preached in Europe was when he went to the people of Philippi and preached to them and started a church. It was always an important place for him.

And lots of dramatic things happened in Philippi, but it all began with Paul sitting down with a group of women. And that group became the core of the church. In fact, we know that the church used to meet in the house of a woman called Lydia, who we are told was a seller of purple. I was telling this story once to a women's fellowship group in a previous church, and it was a group of more mature ladies. And as I was telling the story, I noticed that there was a woman at the back dressed completely in purple. So I said, "Oh, and we have a Lydia with us today." And she went white. And I thought, "Oh dear, what have I said?" And I soon realized what had

happened, when I heard the woman say to her, "He said Lydia, not idiot."

We don't know how long Paul stayed in Philippi after the church was founded, but it must've been a reasonably long time, because we can see that he developed deep bonds of affection with this church. He knows them well. If you're familiar with some of the other letters of St. Paul, you'll know that sometimes they can be a bit frosty, because either he wants to sort something out in a church, or they've written him an angry letter. But this one is a much gentler tone and it's a warm and affectionate letter. Paul's not writing to chastise them or correct them. It's actually a thank-you letter. As we go on, we'll see that he's thanking them for a gift they've given to him whilst he's been in prison.

And I want to jump from talking about beginnings to ends. Paul always writes with a strong sense of an end. And that's true here in this passage. Let me finish the verse which I read earlier. "I am confident," Paul says, "that the one who began a good work amongst you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

He talks again towards the end of our passage about the coming day of Christ. And in chapter 3, he says this, "But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ." And that's a strong element, that sense of an end, in all of Paul's writings. Maybe he was slightly worried here that the church in Philippi was losing sight of that for which the prize, which was laid out for them, as they got distracted by the persecution, which was inevitably coming their way. They were taking their eyes off the prize; they were losing that sense of striving for a glorious goal and day. And later in chapter 3, he reminds them our citizenship is in heaven. Paul didn't want his readers ever to forget where they were headed.

We should remember that. We often talk about our lives as a journey. We're on a spiritual journey, we say. Well, if there's no destination, we're not really on a journey, we're just ambling in the woods. Imagine if we set off on a journey really without a sense of destination. If we went on vacation and we just packed up the car, drove up the 5, and when the whining in the back started just turn off and say, "Oh, we'll have a holiday here, then." I mean, it doesn't work like that. You don't go through all the efforts of packing the car, strapping the kids in, planning all the logistics. You have to have a sense that where you are going is better than where you've come from, or that you'll have a good time where you are going. That's what makes it worthwhile.

Paul was gripped of a sense of where he was heading, of where he was going. He's pressing on. He says he takes "hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of me." He's straining towards that which is ahead. And when he talks about straining in those terms, you can imagine the veins in his neck bulging. He's determined to follow through and get to his destination.

What do we strain for? What goals are we pressing for? Do we have a sense of that day when God will restore all things, that glorious day on which His kingdom will be established? What's at the end of our spiritual search? Is it inner peace, a state of nirvana, a sense that one day I'll find my true self?

That's not what Paul's talking about. He's gripped by the vision of the day of Christ, when the world will be renewed, and the kingdom of God will be finally and fully established. It's a day portrayed in the book of Revelation, a day when God will wipe away all tears and death will be no more. That's what gets Paul excited. Inner peace, self-realization, they come as a byproduct. That's not where he's aiming. That's not his goal.

Which leads me to say some words about middles. What we're aiming for affects how we understand the now, the present moment, the middle. If our eyes are lifted and focused on that which is to come, we'll understand our now differently.

Going back to chapter 3, Paul draws a contrast between those whose mind is on earthly things and those whose citizenship is in heaven. Paul encourages his readers to lift their mind to heavenly, spiritual things. And as they live their life in the light of that hope, then earthly things will look different. The simple truth is that earthly, material things simply don't satisfy the deep longings of our soul. C.S. Lewis put it like this: "God finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We're half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because they can't imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased," he concludes.

Paul had found in Jesus Christ a life which completely satisfied, and his letters are full of encouragement to walk the way of Christ that he has found. He lived his life in the light of an end, and it transformed his experience of the now.

And I want to draw out, as I close, one distinctive characteristic of Paul's now, of his experience. And it comes in the passage that we just read. "I'm constantly praying with joy," he writes. Paul knew the infinite joy that

C.S. Lewis described in that passage I just read out. And Philippians is known as a book of joy. That word joy comes 16 times in the short letter of Philippians, and this is the first. Towards the end he blurts out, "Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I say rejoice." And yet Paul writes his letter from prison. He's chained to a Roman guard. He's not in a happy situation. But Paul learned that Christian joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances. Joy is deep in our hearts, and it's not dependent on our circumstances. Our circumstances don't determine our joy.

There's a Chinese proverb, "If you want to be happy for an hour, get drunk. If you want to be happy for three days, get married. If you want to be happy for eight days, kill a pig and eat it. If you want to be happy forever, then learn to fish." I would add, "If you want to know joy, get to know Jesus Christ and receive the gift of His Holy Spirit."

How many of us know that deep joy that Paul felt in his prison cell? There was a conference once, it's a famous Christian experiment this. It was at a Presbyterian church in Omaha. I think the fact they're Presbyterians has nothing to do with it. But anyway, all this congregation, as they came into church, they were given a helium balloon, and they were told to hold onto their balloon until a moment in the service when they felt joy. And when they felt that moment of joy, they were to release their balloon. So as the service went on, some balloons went up. But at the end of the service, a third of the people were still holding onto their balloon. There's a slight sadness to that, that there wasn't amongst that congregation a feeling of joy.

When would we have let our balloon go if we were in that congregation? We can ask ourselves, "What brings me joy?" Not, "What makes me happy," but "What brings me joy? What satisfies the deep longing of my soul?" We all spend too much time thinking, "If only. If only this had happened, if only that had happened, then I'll be happy," when there's a deeper question gnawing inside each one of us, in the deep places of our heart, "Where is the joy?" Paul could answer that question. He was sick. He was in prison. He would not appear to be in a happy place, yet his heart was full of joy. May we know that joy in our lives. Let's pray that in the midst of lives now, we'll know God's joy as we press on to the prize that lies before us.

Amen.