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The National Presbyterian Church

An Event That Changes Everything

Philippians 2:12-18

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This is the fourth in a series of sermons that were preaching now on Paul's letter to the Philippians. This is Paul's final letter to a church. He writes it from his imprisonment in Rome. Two weeks ago, we listened to St. Paul as he broke into a song. We even call that passage in the Philippians 2 as the "Philippian hymn." Paul is urging the Philippians to care about one another, to put each other in front of one another in line. He stops and thinks to himself, "I need an illustration of this," and he said, "Think about Jesus Christ." And then he breaks into a song. He says, "Jesus Christ who was in the form of God, the very essence of God, he thought it not necessary to hold on to that equality and he emptied himself, and took upon himself the form, the essence of a servant, and became obedient even unto death, the death on the cross." In the poem, it's a kind of descent as you move down toward the terror of the cross. In Jesus Christ, God himself, the Son, took upon himself servanthood, and emptied himself and came to the cross. And therefore, God the Father has highly exalted Jesus. Jesus is the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God, the Father.

This hymn tells of the love of God seen as an event that happens. In the New Testament, love is not an idea, love is not a theory, love is supremely an

event. It's what happened at the cross. It's when Jesus identified with us and disarmed the power of our sins, disarmed the power of death itself by taking it and disarmed the power of the devil. And that's an event that happened at the cross, and that's what Paul affirms to us in that great hymn.

What's next? What follows that? These are the words that follow. He says, "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me not only in my presence but also in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure." That's the sentence that follows.

Let me alert you to a few words that are in that sentence that are quite interesting. The first is the word, "As you have always obeyed me in my presence, now obey me in my absence," because he's absent from them, now he's in a Roman prison yet he's writing to them in Philippi. Let me tell you about the word "obey." The word "obey" in a sense sounds rote and slavish when we hear the English word "obey." The word that's actually used here that the RSV has translated "obey" is literally in Greek the word "listen." Listen. And I like that better because it preserves your freedom. And it says, "As you've always listened to me when I was with you, even when I'm absent, you listen to me."

It's interesting that the word translated "obey" in Hebrew is identical, it's also the word for "listen." It's the great Hebrew word *shema*. And in Deuteronomy 5, we have a sentence that begins the sacred service in the synagogue. "Hear, O Israel, there is one God you shall worship, one God and no other gods before you." The opening of the Ten Commandments, with *shema*. The word *shema* in Hebrew means "hear" or "listen," and that is the word for "obey." Listen. In fact, parents, when Paul tells our sons and daughters, "Children, obey your parents," actually he used the same word. "Children, listen to your parents." I like that better. It implies there's a possibility of negotiation, too. "Listen to your parents, hear them." And, parents, it's the better word to say. Don't say, "Obey me." Say, "Listen to me." You know? That's better, because it implies the freedom of the person who hears you. It implies their own integrity. It also implies that there's a dialogue going on, there's a relationship going on. And that's the word Paul uses here. He says, "You've listened to me in the past. Listen to me now. I have something to share with you." And then comes this very famous sentence, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to do his good decision."

I have one more thing to observe with you and that is language order. You know languages are different, all the languages in the world. The differences

have a big effect on the way you understand the sentence. Let me give you an example. In German, for instance, the verb in a German sentence is at the end of the sentence instead of the beginning of the sentence. That has a profound effect on the German language. It makes the German language a very precise language. No wonder it's the language of scientists, because it's precise because of that one linguistic curiosity that the verb is at the end of the sentence. I'll give you an example.

Supposing you were sending your son or daughter, or your mother, or your husband, or wife, to the store to get something; a German sentence would go like this, "To the store, bread, milk, no impulse items, rice, go!" Now, the verb is at the end. And so you're collecting all the nouns. You're collecting all of the objects and prepositions and everything, and you're getting a list as a good German wife or husband. You're writing it all down carefully, especially the "no impulse items" part. You're writing it all down. And then finally you hear the key verb, "go." See, that's the way science thinks, You first collect all the data. And then finally the verb. "Go!"

Now, English is different. English is a different language system. The verbs in English, by and large, come first. And there are advantages to that. It makes our language a high-action language. There are disadvantages though. For example, you say, "Honey, go to the store, would you?" And then I'm already out the door. See? Because I've already heard the action verb. "Go to the store." And then while you're going to the car, she's hollering out the door, "Potatoes, bread, milk, no impulse items." But by then you see you haven't taken good notes, you forgot the "no impulse items," and then finally you're at the store having forgotten usually what you really were supposed to go and get. That would never happen in a German family because that would all be precisely worked out ahead of time. The nouns all at first and then finally the verb. So when the verb comes early, it has a big effect on the way you understand the sentence.

Greek is like German, not like English. In the Greek language, the verbs are at the end. That's why Greek is the language of science, too, because it's very precise. With the verb coming at the end, it makes a whole difference in the way you understand a sentence. I'll show you in this sentence.

I just read it to you from the RSV in English. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Notice, the verb is in the beginning but that's not the word order in the Greek sentence. Let me give you literally the Greek sentence. "With fear and trembling." That's very German, isn't it? That's very Greek. "With fear and trembling." The common word for fear, *phobia*, is used and the interesting word *trauma* is used, which is the word for

“tremble.” And by the way, in modern medicine, that’s why a trauma room in a hospital is a room where the patient is still trembling. Isn’t that interesting? That’s trauma. You’re still trembling, it’s a fear word. So with fear and trembling, the salvation--notice, that comes first-- the salvation which Paul has just sung about in the song when Christ died in our behalf. That’s why we’re encouraged, because he died in our behalf and won the victory over sin, death, and the power of evil, and that’s why we praise him. That’s our salvation. Notice, with fear--that makes you fearful. That makes you say, “Oh,” with, “Oh, this is an awesome moment.” With fear and trembling, the salvation, yours. *Katergo* -- work it out. The word *erg* in Greek means unit of energy, and it’s used in the modern physics. It means make an event of your salvation. It is not saying that you work out your salvation.

You see, the English verb coming first confuses some readers of the sentence. “What is Paul saying now? Is he teaching works-righteousness now?” “Yes, work your salvation now.” No. He’s saying your salvation which is God’s gift to you; you get to work out. You now are to make an event of it yourself. When Christ loved you it was an event, now you make an event of that salvation. Work it out. Make it practical. Do something with what God has given you. And Paul’s not finished, “For God is at work--” and he uses the word *erg* again--“God is at work in you.” Remember, that’s the way the book started. He said the one who began the good work in you will continue it. Now Paul repeats that. “For God is working in you to complete his good decision.” That is a pure Gospel sentence! It’s not a works-righteousness sentence at all. It’s pure Gospel. It’s pure grace. But it does put something on your shoulders. He says, ‘Listen to me. You’ve always listened to me. Listen to me now. The salvation that God gave you, with fear and trembling, I mean, it’s a very awesome thing. Work it out. Make an event of that salvation, don’t just think about it.’

A lot of times if we just think about things, and then finally we decide to do something about them. I know when Shirley and I made the decision to tithe, we made that decision early in our marriage. We always figured that 10% of everything we had already belonged to God and then we had the chance to spend it to his glory. And it was funny, especially in December when we’re below our tithe we’d say to each other, “Shirley, you can spend anything you want now on our charitable options because we still want to make that tithe.” But we wanted to do it not out of works-righteousness, not in order to earn our salvation. It’s because of our salvation. It’s because of God’s grace. It’s because of his love that we want to give, and then we want to do it, make an event of the salvation that we’ve received -- to do something concrete with the love that God’s granted to us. And that’s the whole motivation in the Christian faith for doing mission, or sharing your faith, or sharing your money, or whatever you do.

C. S. Lewis saw this clearly. Remember the *Screwtape Letters*?¹ That's that remarkable set of letters where Lewis states everything in reverse. He has a senior devil writing to a junior devil to try to tempt a young man who's become a Christian; he's called the Patient. Screwtape is the senior devil and Wormwood is the junior devil, and he's giving him advice on how to tempt the patient. And at one point in the letter the young believer had a renewal experience of his faith; in a sense, he's come back to Christ. He had drifted away and now he's come back, and Screwtape is quite upset about it that he came back to his faith. And so he says to Wormwood—at the end of chapter 13 of *Screwtape Letters*--he says to Wormwood: "It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster." See, from the devil's point of view, it's a disaster that this young man has returned to his faith. "The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance." And here's a little joke from Lewis, "Let the little brute wallow in it." Some people just love to think about how they were redeemed and that's wonderful. "Let him wallow in it. Let him, if he has a bent that way write a book about it." And that's an inside joke because Lewis did that himself. Screwtape then goes on to say, "Let him write a book about it. That is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the enemy" [that would be God] "plants in any human soul. Let him do anything but act on it." Isn't that interesting? "No amount of piety in the imagination and affections will harm us" [that's the devil] "if we can keep it out of his will. As one of the humans had said, active habits are strengthened by repetition and passive ones are weakened. The more he feels without acting, the less he'll ever be able to act, and in the long run, the less he'll be able to feel."

That's what Paul was saying. That's why he says: Listen to me, folks. Don't just sing this song, this wonderful song about God's grace. I want you to act on it. I want you to do something about it. Make an event of the grace you experienced." But he's not finished. He goes on and says (this is interesting) -- he then talks about where they have to make this difference. He says to them, "Do all things without murmuring and without arguing so that you may be blameless and innocent," and then he says something curious here: "Children, that you may be like children of God in the midst of a bent and perverse generation." Nero is the emperor when Paul writes this. After the fire of Rome in 64 A.D. there was a great persecution that happened -- irrational persecution -- because Nero had to blame somebody for the fire and he blamed the Christians. We know this from Tacitus. And so it's a crooked and perverse time. And he says, "You're like children in this bent and perverse time, in which you shine like lights," he uses the word lights here, "in the world and you holdfast to the word of life." I've been thinking about that.

He calls these Christians "children." That doesn't seem fair, does it? How are

they going to be any match with Nero and Roman garrisons, the Roman Praetorian Guards and all the Roman power in the Roman Empire? Jerusalem couldn't stand up to them at the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.; it was totally destroyed. How is anybody able to stand up to Roman power? And yet he says, "You stand like children." It doesn't seem fair, except for two things going for you. One is light: you have truth. Truth doesn't have the first advantage against scams, like a Ponzi scheme, but it has the later advantage in that it lasts longer and has a better shelf life than Ponzi schemes. Truth outlasts falsehood. That's its advantage. In a scientific experiment, the truth wins out in the end because a falsehood leads down a false alley. Truth is slower, but it lasts longer. So he says, "You have light." Light is better than darkness. And secondly, you have life.

Last Wednesday night I gave a talk on Martin Luther King Jr. It was just a marvelous experience. It was part of our "Friends of the Family" series on Christians who have marked our lives for good. We looked at Martin Luther King Jr.'s life -- looking at his autobiography mainly, and also the biography by his wife. It was interesting, at one point in his autobiography, he tells about how he had to make a decision about what philosophy of life was to be, for him, the most durable? He read, of course, what philosophers like Nietzsche and Karl Marx said, and what others said, and he had come into a conclusion as to what would be the most durable thing. What was, what he called, the 'hinge' upon which history would swing?² And he decided it was the truth of God. The fact that, at the center of everything, was a moral universe; there was a moral truth that was stronger than falsehood and all these other things that are tempting it. He, especially in this case, was talking about Marxism with its moral relativism. He said, "I could never buy into it because I believe the hinge of history was the moral truth that I discovered as a Christian -- that God is at the center." And then he developed this further as the confidence in truth force-- that truth would have greater force in the long run. That's why he had a nonviolent demonstration of power in Birmingham, Alabama and in Montgomery, and we are grateful for that. He decided to side with truth and it gave his cause and vision a greater shelf life, a greater shelf life to that great movement. Thank God for it.

Paul is saying the same things to these Christians, "I want you to stand as children in the world today and hold the light." And then he says one more thing, "...and the word of life." Well, Nero has the power of death on his side but you have the power of life on your side. Martin Luther--another Martin Luther has said this in a hymn he wrote, "The body they may kill, but God's word abideth still. A mighty fortress is our God." God's word is stronger because it has life in it. It has life in it.

Can I tell you a story? From 1964 to 1970, Shirley and I lived in the Philip-

pinetrees and our house was a manse near to the Union Church building. There was a big field between our house and the church. But the field was not nice because it was filled with mud in the rainy season and we actually killed three cobras in that field. I'm not kidding. It's true. The one that bothered me the most was a baby cobra that I myself killed and realized there must be some parents around. So, we did not like that.

And so we decided we had to do something to that field; we mowed it and turned it into a playground, a safe playground for children, slides and all. And then with the rest of it, we turned it into a parking lot. We wanted that anyway because I wanted a place for people to park away from the mud; it increases church attendance. Pastors always see everything in terms of church attendance. And so I wanted a parking lot there so that the people could park. And so we built a parking lot and I was very proud of it. We paved it. We had it steamrollered and then put macadam on it. Oh, it was marvelous. Gravel and then oiled it. It's just terrific. I get to walk then from my house on that --I didn't have to worry about creatures snatching me, like pythons. I could just walk right across on that parking lot to the church every day.

One day, it's a fairly new parking lot and I'm walking by, and I saw little bubbles coming up in the macadam. A little bubble here and a little bubble there. It's kind of like a little dome, a little tiny dome that's forming. And I said, "Well, I bet that's methane gas," because I know in Seattle when they covered the dump they put macadam over it and methane gas came out because of the garbage that was underneath it. They had to actually put pipes up to vent the gas build up. And I said, "Well, maybe that's what we've got -- methane, because of all the agriculture that was under there." And so I watched it thinking maybe I'd see a little spurt of methane gas come out, or something like that. And I kept watching it. Finally, to my amazement, one of the little domes burst open, and guess what I found in that little dome? A mushroom. Mushroom -- that's the weakest thing in all of creation. I reached down, at that point, and took the little mushroom and completely crumpled it up in my fingers. A mushroom. And then we saw the little domes all over the place. There were little mushrooms everywhere. We had to actually put spurts of poison in all these little mushrooms to try to get-- and finally they calmed down and that was the end of that. We kept driving cars over them and things like that. But this little mushroom. And I thought to myself: "What a parable. This little mushroom was coming up through the macadam. Macadam is stronger than a mushroom, except for one thing. The mushroom has life."

I love Yosemite because of El Capitan, but I need to tell you something. You know what's going to finally bring El Capitan, that great sheet of pure granite, bring it down? Little tiny soft plants that are growing on every crack

of El Capitan and are breaking it. And it will eventually break that entire granite face down to the ground because they have life and the granite does not have life. The mushrooms were alive and that little mushroom could push through solid macadam. St. Paul tells the church and tells the Christians at Philippi: You've got two things going for you. You have the light of the truth. Learn the truth, study your Bible, listen to Paul, make an event of what you've discovered, put into practice what you've discovered. That's how you live in the light. And not only that but you have life. You've got life. The life of Jesus Christ in your life -- nourishing you, healing you, giving hope. Others may have the power of death, but you've got the power of life. It's a better power and Paul wants the Philippians to know it. That's why he says, "Listen to me."

Heavenly Father, thank you for this tremendous text from St. Paul. What a text for us and for our generation, to know that we can wager in truth, that we can wager on life because of your love, your love that is the event that happened. And we can make our salvation an event by what we do, with what we've experienced, so may that be true for us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Lewis, C. S. *Screwtape Letters*. London: G. Bles, 1942.

2 King, Martin Luther, Jr. and Clayborne Carson. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* copyright © 1998 by The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr. All rights reserved. New York: Warner Books, 1998.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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