

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 1, 2026

Friends, each time we move from the sharing of the life and ministries of the church to the reading and proclamation of God's word, since I got back from sabbatical, we've been taking a lot of deep breaths together. And we've been doing that to help center ourselves. We've also done it because it is a favorite practice of my favorite professor from seminary. He would gather us in every time we got together for a formation class and he would invite us to take some deep breaths. But he would say something else to us as well. He would say to us that God knows everything that you have brought into this room today, into this space, right? God knows that which is burdening your heart and your mind, that which is also enlivening it right now. And with our breathing, I'm going to invite you to set aside all that you've carried to this place so that you might hear more clearly what God has to teach you in this time. Okay? That was always an important reminder for me as I was in seminary moving from one busy thing to the next busy thing. And I want it to be a reminder for us this morning. God knows what you have carried to this place too. The burdens, the joys. God knows not only those that are personal to you but also communal. I think about, particularly, the uncertainties of the world in the wake of our ongoing military actions in Iran and all that comes with that.

Whatever it is that you've brought, whether personal or communal, to this place, I invite you as we take a couple deep breaths to entrust those things to God's care, to allow them to, at least for a moment, to be lifted off your shoulders that we might hear together God's word for us this day. Okay? So, let's get comfortable in our pews and take a couple deep breaths. Take a deep breath in with me and breathe it out slowly. Take another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies.

And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies. And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you know what we bring with us to this place this day. With each breath in and out, we entrust those things to your gracious care in this time. We pray that by your power and by your grace, you might quiet any voice within us but your own in this time. That we might hear your word read and proclaimed. And that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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So this morning on this second Sunday of Lent, we continue in a sermon series that will carry us all the way to the Cross. A series that we've entitled Marks of a Disciple. This series asks a simple question, a simple but searching question.

What does a faithful disciple of Jesus look like in the world?

Last week, Mary introduced this series to us. But for the remainder, the balance of this series, we are going to spend time in Philippians. Okay? That's what the next couple Sundays have in store for us. And we're going to explore the marks or the qualities that shape a life formed by Christ. We already reflected on boldness. This morning, gratitude. Next week, humility and then perseverance. Then peace and compassion. The invitation is that as we journey towards the Cross, we might consider how these marks are cultivated by the spirit of God working in and through us. So this day we'll read from the first chapter of Philippians. We're going to read the first 11 verses. But just a bit of context before we get going. Philippi, the community that is addressed in this letter from Paul, it was a Roman colony in Macedonia, which is kind of modern northern Greece. It was not a large city, but it was politically important. As a Roman colony, as many in that area, its citizens enjoyed special privileges, including Roman citizenship. It was understood by some to be a privilege. The culture was deeply shaped by Roman identity, Roman values, and Roman power. Paul had visited Philippi some years before he pens this letter. He is credited with planting the church to which we will now hear his words.

Philippians is one of Paul's warmest, most affectionate letters. In many of his writings, Paul is correcting a major theological problem that he sees arise in the church or he's been made aware of. He is writing instead to the Philippians from a place of deep love and admiration. We'll not only hear that this morning, but also in the weeks ahead. So, let us listen to God's word for each of us and indeed to the church in Philippians, chapter 1.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the bishops and deacons. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you because I hold you in my heart. For all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters. So that in the day of Christ, you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

It's important for us not only to know the audience to whom Paul was writing, but also the context from which he writes. Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi from prison. Prison was nothing new to Paul. He boasts of his many imprisonments for the gospel. Put into chains and behind bars for spreading the word of a different ruler, an eternal gracefilled humble ruler. This is the person of Jesus that he was proclaiming, and it is the reason... Jesus is the reason why he is imprisoned. There's some debate over where he was in prison when he penned this note to the Philippians. Most likely, though, it was in Rome, which means that all around him would have been signs of the empire. Not only Roman identity, but the values of Rome, made in pillar and in parade. surrounding him.

This fact is important for us because Paul writes this letter behind bars from a place of confinement and uncertainty. He is writing as we find ourselves in the season of Lent from a wilderness, a time of wilderness. He does not know what is going to happen. There's boasting that can happen after you've been let out of prison, but boy, when you're in it, you don't actually know what is going to happen.

He does know that his life is subject, his earthly life is subject to the authority of the empire, which makes the way in which he writes even more amazing to us. From a place of confinement, from uncertainty, from wilderness, Paul weaves gratitude throughout the entirety of his letter. And I don't know about you, but when I think about what it must have been like to be in a Roman prison a couple thousand years ago, gratitude is not the first thing that comes to mind for me. And so the faithful question, then, that we can ask of Paul this morning is how can he do this when everything around him is built, literally constructed, to produce despair. The bars, the stone. It is constructed to produce resignation on the part of those who are in captivity. The purpose is to not only...not only keep captive the physical person but to lead to the spiritual...the spiritual imprisonment of those who find themselves behind bars as well. The spiritual and emotional confinement. That's the purpose. Prison is built to make you give up. And, yet, over and over in this letter, Paul shows the exact opposite. Over and over from confinement, from the uncertainty, he proclaims gratitude and joy. In verse three, "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 partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." "I thank my God"? How is it that Paul can do this? Well, he says right there, actually, in verse three, "I thank my God every time I remember you." Whitney previewed this with our kids just a few moments ago. It is memory, memory that somehow allows Paul to practice gratitude even in his imprisonment. Memory not only of the partnership of ministry that he has had with the Philippians but, more substantially,

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God's work amongst them. He loves these people. He went to Philippi. He got to know the people there. He planted a church. They nurtured community together. Together they watched as the spirit of God added to their number, and they began to do ministry in that place. He has clear memories of what that ministry and what that time looked like. And there's nothing that bars can do, nothing that can confine that memory from him. "It is right for me to think this way about all of you because I hold you in my heart. For all of you are my partners in God's great grace, both in my imprisonment and in defense and confirmation of the gospel." He is seeing them to be walking alongside him on this journey. He knows by the grace of God that he is not alone. Even if every sign in his cell points to his being alone, he knows that there are people that are partners with him in this work of the gospel.

He knows that God has been at work because he has seen it. And that memory allows him to choose gratitude in the midst of difficulty. I told the session when we gathered on Wednesday evening, for Paul, gratitude is not denial of hardship. It is defiance of despair.

Gratitude is not a denial of hardship. It is defiance of despair. It's not only defiance of despair for him, but it's a lesson he's always teaching. It's a lesson that he has for the Philippians as well. My imagination tells me that with the good pastoral sensibilities that Paul had, he knew that his experience, that his faithfulness could have an impact on the community that he was writing to—the Philippians. He knew that they too would face hardship in the shadow of the empire, with the privilege of their citizenship of Rome and yet also the fear and the worry that came along with it, that imprisonment for them if they spoke out in the name of Jesus Christ could be closely following behind them.

Somehow Paul, over and over in this opening portion of Philippians, just claims and holds up gratitude as a protest to his imprisonment. He says, "I am going to be grateful for not only the people that I have around me that I have seen and experienced the living God with, but I'm going to be grateful that the faith that I have in God reminds me that God is still at work." And there's going to be a time when these people are going to meet their own resistance, and they're going to need a word of gratitude and hope. And so, this letter is going to give it to them. They are going to be in the midst of their own confines, their own uncertainty, their own wilderness, and they are going to have to navigate that. And I'm going to tell them that it is their memory of God's work in their lives and in the world that is going to sustain them in that time. Because if God was at work then, God most certainly is at work now. If God was at work in that early church, then God is most certainly at work in the lives of the Philippians. They simply must remember how God has been faithful and then allow it to change their posture of heart and spirit in this time.

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There is something powerful about remembering God's faithfulness.

Something powerful of looking back at times of difficulty and wandering and wilderness and saying, "While I didn't know God was present in that time, God most certainly was. While I felt confined and uncertain, God was present in graciousness and in transformation." I think this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, it invites us to a different sort of reflection in this season of Lent. What we do in this season is we thrust ourselves into a spiritual time of wilderness in order to test ourselves and to be tested by our God as Jesus was in the wilderness. It strikes me, though, that what might be tested now more than ever is our ability to remember God's faithfulness and God's faithful work. We worship a God who has been present in all of history and has worked to loose the chains of injustice, to unbind those who are bound tightly. one who has met us in our confines and our uncertainty. One that we know to be our liberator.

I was having a conversation with a friend this week about something difficult that they were navigating in their life. It was relational in nature. Because this text was on my tongue and in my mind this week, I was able to offer them a simple prompt. "You've been here before and God was faithful then. God will be faithful now." And I wonder if that's not a bit of what Paul is trying to share with the church. We have known uncertainty. We have known wilderness. We have known it in the past and God was faithful then. We know it now and God will be faithful now.

Here's the thing. I don't know what uncertainty you brought into this place. What weight you carried that feels confining, that feels like wilderness right now. But I do know that all of us in one way or another, while we might not have prison bars or stone walls surrounding us, all of us are navigating something that feels like a bit of the confinement that Paul was navigating at that time. And if we're not experiencing it in our personal lives, and we certainly can see the uncertainty out in the world right now, the fear and violence that is so pervasive, not just at home, but abroad. I wonder if in this season of Lent, we are not being invited to re-member, to believe and to trust that God has been at work in the past and is, indeed because of that, at work now. And to allow that gratitude, that hopefulness to be an incubator for us of something even more. In verse six, Paul says, "I am confident of this." He says to the people of God, "I'm confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will see it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." I wonder if you might in this time reflect upon that which feels imprisoning to you, that feels deeply uncertain to you, and that this word from Paul might be an encouragement to you, that the one who indeed began good work might continue it to the day of its completion in Jesus Christ. Paul's confidence isn't just for the Philippians. It is for you and for me and indeed for God's world.

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What I know about Paul's condition is that it was scary, that it was confining, that it felt every bit as uncertain as any other moment in history. And yet, God was present in that cell and God was present in that community and God is present here. No matter the wilderness and the uncertainty, we worship one who is about the work of completing that good thing that has been started.

So, I'm going to invite you in prayer this morning to bring before God whatever it is that does feel confining, whatever it is that feels deeply uncertain for you that you are navigating right now, to bring it to the foot of the Cross and to trust that Christ will meet us there. So let's pray together.

Gracious and loving one, gratitude is not our first response when we experience the difficulties of your world. When we carry with us the uncertainty of our journeys of health. When we carry with us the uncertainties of relationships. When we carry with us the uncertainty of work and aging. When we carry with us the uncertainties of friendship and parenting.

When we carry with us the uncertainty and the fear that surrounds us in our nation and across the globe. The weight can feel too heavy, the boundaries too confining. And yet, you give us an apostle who chooses to, in remembering, cultivate gratitude. Gratitude for all that you have done and therefore hope for all that you will do. So what we pray for, Lord, this day is that you might cultivate within us a remembering that might make us grateful, and beyond gratitude it might make us hopeful for what work you are still doing in our lives. Help us to not feel abandoned in the wilderness but grateful that you are walking with us through it. Encourage each of us and indeed your church this day that we might overflow with love as we go about ministering in the world. We ask these things in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.