

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 15, 2026

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But one of the things that I was thinking about this week that you may not be aware of has to do with the way in which our Hebrew brothers and sisters understand the name of God. So you are probably or potentially you're familiar with the idea that the word, the name of God would not be spoken aloud. And yet it's phonetically understood to be Yahweh. Right? In seminary, Mary and I were taught that Yahweh is actually a stand in for breath. So that the people of God could not speak God's name aloud, but instead they could breathe. And so it would be something claiming the name of God would sound something like (breath sounds for Yah and Weh.)

So that the understanding of the divine was as near to us as breath, the breathing in and the breathing out, the life indwelling and the life going out into the world. Okay, so see another reason why we just spend a few moments together before we hear scripture and hear it proclaimed by breathing. So I invite you to get comfy in your pews and take a deep breath in with me.

Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly. And breathe in God's mercies.

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

And breathe out God's mercies to others.

You are as close to us, Holy One, as our very next breath. We draw in your life, and we share your mercy as we breathe out. And we are grateful. And we pray that you might dwell within us and around us in these moments that by your power you might quiet any voice within us but your own. that we might hear your word for us this day, 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.

If you are joining us for the first time in this season of Lent, you need to know that we're making our way through a sermon series entitled Marks of a Disciple. We believe that those who follow in the ways of Christ are marked as we go out into the world. Each Sunday in this season of Lent, we have reflected on one of those marks. First, boldness, then gratitude, then humility last week, and this morning perseverance. Perseverance. Philippians has grounded our study for the last few

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weeks, and it will for the next few. This morning we read from Philippians, chapter 3, verse 4b through 14. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to the church.

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death if, somehow, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it. But one thing I have laid hold of, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

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

So we need to know what we are talking about when we talk about perseverance. It'll shape our conversation this morning. Last week we learned about humility from Augustine of Hippo. This week we learn from John Calvin. Calvin is probably the most foundational reformed voice on perseverance. In his commentary on Philippians, Calvin reads Paul's language, this language of pressing on, of straining forward as the ongoing striving of the Christian life. He understands the Christian life as something that is drawing us forward. Perseverance, he believes, is just that. That is this ongoing striving that the Christian must be disciplined in and for. Calvin emphasized that perseverance was not simply human stubbornness masquerading as holy. Instead, perseverance is God's sustaining grace drawing the people of God, pushing us forward in the life of faith. Sometimes we need to be drawn. Sometimes we need to be pushed.

Calvin famously wrote in his Institutes of Christian Religion that “the saints of God persevere because God continues the work God begins in them.” There is a promise implicit in God beginning something new within us and that is God will see it to completion. This idea should sound pretty familiar to us if you've been with us throughout the season of Lent because it connects directly to what Paul shared just a couple weeks ago in Philippians 1:6. “The one who

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began a good work in you will bring it to completion.” This is the promise that Paul makes to the Philippians. It is the promise of God in Christ for all who call upon the name of Jesus. And this is important because it frames perseverance first and foremost as God's work within us. For Calvin, perseverance is not merely human determination. It is evidence of God's faithfulness in the life of God's people. This is an incredibly important message for the Philippians to have heard in this epistle because of the place from which Paul framed these words. We learned this the first week of our study of Philippians. But just as a reminder, the context of this writing of this epistle is prison. Paul composes this letter to the Philippians from prison. It's important for us to reflect on what the purpose of imprisonment was. Imprisonment was meant to stop Paul's proclamation of the gospel. It was intended to wear him down, to steal his hope, to have him resign himself to the fact that God was no longer at work in himself or in the world. And yet from that place he writes this letter, and the Philippians know this because he has told them this already. They also know that this is not the first time that Paul has been imprisoned. In fact, in a scene in Acts 16, Paul and Silas are making their way through Philippi. They are proclaiming the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ in that place. And a woman begins to follow them and, I think they might say, harass them. Others might say she's propping them up. She says these men are filled with the spirit of the living God. But she doesn't just say it once. She keeps following them around, Acts 16 says. You can imagine Paul and Silas making their way through Philippi. And for the first hour or so of this woman following them crazily, they're okay. But then the hours drag on and the days drag on. And the story in Acts 16 says that Paul gets tired of this woman following them and yelling. She's yelling because she's inhabited by a spirit. This spirit actually gives her the ability, the book of Acts says, to see people's futures. It's an interesting business model because this woman is not a free woman. This woman is a slave to a couple there in Philippi. And this couple is using this woman, using her almost like a carnival act, inviting people to come and have her tell their future, read their palms, if you will, right? And so when Paul gets tired of it and he turns around and he tells the spirit to leave her and it does, she is freed. But the couple no longer has what is crucial to their business model, the indentured servantry of a spiritfilled woman. And so they complain in the public square, and Paul and Silas are thrown into prison. The Philippians know firsthand the harm that can come by following in the ways of Jesus. They first see Paul and Silas publicly beaten and stripped naked and then thrown in prison. They have seen the cost with their own eyes. And yet they hear it once again here. And even still, in this epistle, Paul continues to press on because as he writes in verse 10, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” He presses on because as he writes in verse 12, “I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me.” Paul wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. And he believes in the deepest part of himself that God has a purpose for him in the world. And the power of the resurrection for Paul was the power of reconciling the entire world to God in Christ. And he wants to know that power and to see that power set loose in

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Philippi and across the world, and he has been given a calling by God to spread this good news of this power. So the fuel for the intensity that we hear in Philippians chapter 3 is Paul's commitment to the calling to spread the good news of God's reconciliation to all people, specifically, to spread the good news of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The cross and the resurrection grasped together for Paul. They are the sign that the time of dividing people from each other is over and the era of reconciling grace has come.

This is the good news that he is holding fast to in prison. It is the good news that he will not only persevere through the prison of Philippi but also the prison in which he finds himself as he writes this epistle, because he believes that something is at stake.

He believes that something is at stake for the Philippians and for the world. He believes that they need to know and be grounded in the gospel truth that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, God has by God's grace reconciled each human to the other and indeed the whole world.

Paul wants them to know that this good news is worth persevering in and through because Paul knows how difficult it is going to be for them to be faithful disciples in Philippi. Paul knows how important this mark of discipleship will be for the Philippians both personally and communally, because they will, he knows, face obstacles. They will, he knows, face hindrances in their lives personally and communally. He knows that the Philippians are going to face personal struggles in their vocation, in their relationships, in their parenting, in their journey with Jesus Christ. He knows that the church in Philippi is going to face communal struggle in their ministry together, in their relationships, which we'll actually read about in a couple weeks, the way in which they have division there. He knows they will face communal struggle in the midst of a social order which runs contrary to the gospel, to government imposing unjust power upon the people.

So Paul in his letter gives them language and a model for when they face personal struggle, when they navigate communal struggle together. He says in verse 13, "Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." There is a turning that has to happen for the people of God. There is a facing forward that has to be the posture of discipleship in this time. He's hearkening back to the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 43. "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I'm about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." For perseverance to take root, there is a necessary turning that must take place for the people of God. There's a forward looking that the

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Christian must grasp, not in naive, not in a naive, nebulous future, but in one in which God is at work.

I love how Paul frames perseverance because for him, perseverance is not the mark of a strong Christian. It is the mark of an honest Christian. It is one who knows that struggles befall all of us. Who knows that we have not yet reached the divine destination but keeps on pressing toward Christ.

This week a favorite poem of mine came to mind by one of my poets that I come back to over and over when I am in need of that encouragement. Wendell Berry's short poem, *The Real Work*, came to mind, and I wanted to read it for you this morning.

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work.  
And that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey.  
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.  
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

It was that last line that came back to my consciousness this week. "The impeded stream is the one that sings." It struck me that the song does not rise from the stream unless there is an impediment in it, a rock, a heavy thing that feels like it's in the way of the flow, but in fact, it is the thing that makes the flow sing forth into the beauty of God's creation. I thought about that this week because I was reflecting on the vast impediments that we see in our world. I know not what personal impediment you carried with you to this place this day. What personal struggle you have brought with you to this sanctuary. What place feels cut off and cold and darkened, seemingly inescapable, like a prison cell from Paul's time. I know not what impedes your stream, but the fact that you are human means that there are impediments on your path and in your stream as well.

We certainly collectively know about the communal struggles that our nation faces, our community faces in this time.

We know what impedes our communal life together, divisions that seemingly grow deeper each day.

I found some hope in the last line of Berry's poem this week, hope that seemed like an apostle's words to a people a couple thousand years ago in Philippi. I found some hope in the reality that impediments indeed will come, that perseverance will be necessary for the water to flow over

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and around or under that which impedes the stream. But I found hope in the fact that maybe, just maybe, it is the impeded stream that sings even now.

So I wonder what song the spirit of God might draw from the impediment within your stream this day. Whatever struggle or thing that seems to be in your way relationally or even in your faith journey, I wonder what song might rise from that place. What song of hope and promise and good news might be drawn forth by the reminder that God is with you in that place.

I wondered further if the song that might rise from the seeming impediment within our communal life might sound something like the song that rose at the opening of Riverside Church in New York City in 1930. It's a song, a hymn in fact, whose words were penned by Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the pastors of Riverside. I wondered if the words that he penned almost a hundred years ago now might serve for us as a song that might rise from the impeded stream of our communal life.

*God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power.*

*Crown thine ancient church's story. Bring its bud to glorious flower.*

*Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage for the facing of this hour. For the facing of this hour.*

I know not what impedes your stream or even fully the collective stream of our consciousness this day. But I do know that the same God whose spirit of grace enabled Paul to persevere in his time from that prison cell so many years ago is the same God whose grace dwells within you this day, that is potentially pulling you forward or even pushing you, enabling you in every way to persevere through that which impedes your stream. May you find hope in the song that might rise from it. A song full of grace and comfort and mercy. A song that Paul believed and we still claim can transform the entire world.

Let us pray.

Loving and gracious one, if it was up to us, we would lose energy and hope. And yet, it is not, you tell us. It is the good news of your cross and resurrection that serves as the foundation for us to persevere even now. It is the truth that suffering does not last. that indeed your word of new life has the final word. We pray, Lord, this morning that you might meet us, meet us in the impediment of our personal lives and communal life together, that you might in those places let a song rise from us that would glorify you and bring hope to the world.

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Meet us in our need, oh God, as you met your apostles so many years ago, as you greeted your church in Philippi. Greet us again this day. For we trust and we believe that your grace is still sufficient and that you are still at work. We lift these prayers in the name of the one who was crucified and rose again, Jesus the Christ. Amen.