

Philippians 1:3-11  
The Savior at the Center...And the Edges  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
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Matthew Inman, creator of the humorous website *The Oatmeal*, posted this real life story in a cartoon on his website. I wonder if some of you might have heard the story on NPR this week? It aired with this disclaimer..."it's not funny."

On June 18th, 1947, on a Pan Am flight from Calcutta to New York, an engine stopped working, which caused another engine to overheat, which caused a fire, which caused a panic.

While the pilot attempted to land the plane, the 25-year-old co-pilot unbuckled himself. He went into the main cabin to help with the passengers. He sat next to a young woman who was alone. He told her it was going to be OK. He told her this as he watched the engine continue to burn. He told her this as he watched it fall from the wing. He told her this as fuel lines became exposed, fire overtook the aircraft, and the plane pitched downward. He told her this knowing that every single person on that plane was about to die.

The plane hit hard, crashing into the Syrian Desert. Fourteen people died instantly. Two crew members survived, including the copilot. And with a pair of broken ribs, he went back into the burning plane, pulling survivors from the wreckage.

Morning arrived, but a rescue did not. The co-pilot took charge and formed two search parties. They eventually found the village, a village which had a radio. A call was made, and the 22 survivors were rescued. As for the co-pilot, the crash changed him. After that, he didn't want to be a pilot anymore. He wanted to do something different with his life. He resigned from Pan Am to pursue a career in writing and, ultimately, television. His name was Gene Roddenberry, and he created Star Trek.

This story is not intended as an ode to Roddenberry, although he certainly deserves one. Prior to working in television, he was a decorated World War II pilot, a plane-crash investigator, and an L.A. cop. He survived three plane crashes. This story is intended to show you that our journeys are short. Roddenberry saw life's ephemeral nature lit up against a backdrop of stars. He saw that we are all passengers pitching downward into the night. He saw that we're all helpless. So get up, and help someone.

**In this life, we do not end up where we began. The truth is that Jesus Christ is leading each one of us, not in a downward pitch, but in a rising to new life. And that is the hope we cling to here at WPC: God is directing our history, unfolding it before us. Faith in Jesus Christ tells us that our past, present, and future are all held in care by God, and that one day things will be set to right, when, as JRR Tolkien famously quips, "everything that is sad comes untrue." So because this is our story, we can... "get up, and help someone."**

We're somewhere in between the beginning and the end of our journey, and Philippians 1:6 is one of those traveling verses. **He who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.**

Throughout this month of looking at Stewardship, we have looked at the ways in which we are able to bless and honor God, by blessing and honoring one another, but the fact of the matter is that no matter how young or old you are, all of us are somewhere in the middle of our life with Christ.

So, how do we go from being well begun to well done? Beginning well, establishing a sure foundation is key.

A while back, then Sports Illustrated back page columnist Rick Riley wrote a piece on the coach John Wooden, and how the Wizard of Westwood began the very first practice of each season with his freshman class. Wooden, in the first 30 minutes, would teach his players how to put on a sock the right way. "Wrinkles can lead to blisters" he would say. Most of his first year players would cautiously roll their eyes at one another. They were the top recruits coming to the top program in the nation, and this old man was teaching them about socks? Finally, they would get it right. "Good" he'd say. "Now let's work on the other foot."

Paul begins his letter with a statement of gratitude for the Philippians. Now, this isn't just general politeness, this isn't "I hope this email finds you in good spirits." No, Paul is truly grateful, his gratitude is personal. Paul makes reference to specific encounters: how Lydia, the successful businesswoman, and her family all welcomed Paul in and were baptized. These were the first converts in Philippi, and were the ones who helped Paul found this church. Paul's gratitude just spills over here, he says, **"I thank my God every time I remember you."**

JRR Tolkien, the great author and philologist, once wrote a letter to his son Christopher, and in the letter he paid a tribute to his dear friend CS Lewis. He said: "The unpayable debt I owe to my friend Lewis is not advice as it's ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement, he for a long time was my only audience, and only from him did I get the idea that my stuff could be anything more than a private hobby." The "stuff" to which he referred was none other than *The Lord of the Rings*.

The beginning of our faith and life is remembering what Jesus of Nazareth did for us, what we know to be true about us, and then beginning to live as though they were true. That takes encouragement.

But like most of us, the Philippians are somewhere in the middle of their journey. And really the midpoint is the toughest, the midpoint is the most critical.

In verse 9, Paul offers a prayer for the Philippians and for us in the middle of our journey. Like a grandfather or grandmother who prays for their grandchild in college—there is advice for us to hear in the prayer. **"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and discernment."** Paul is talking about this abounding love, overflowing love that comes from two places: knowledge and discernment.

Knowledge, the Greek word is *Epignosis* (epi-forward, gnosis-know), literally forward knowledge. This is broad, expansive knowledge, not for the sake of knowledge, but to help us grow more deeply. And discernment, the Greek word is *Aisthesis*, this is understanding that goes deep. College thesis papers are those that go deep in analyzing a topic, dissecting it, and unpacking it. *Aisthesis* is love that builds discernment and empathy. Paul is praying for us, that we would grow in our breadth of knowledge, but also our depth of discernment.

But how does knowledge become effective, usable stuff? When it's put to work. The Greek word work is *ergon*. It has the connotation of purposeful, productive activity. In physics an "erg" is a measurable unit of work. So what Paul is trying to say is that God's involvement in our lives is purposeful, concrete, and sometimes even measurable.

But you and I both know that sometimes work is a struggle, because sometimes life is a struggle.

I kept for nearly a year the flask-shaped cocoon of an emperor moth. It is very peculiar in its construction. The great disproportion between the means of egress and the size of the imprisoned insect makes one wonder how the exit is ever accomplished at all -- and it never is without great labor and difficulty. It is supposed that the pressure to which the moth's body is subjected in passing through such a narrow opening is a provision of nature for forcing the juices into the vessels of the wings, these being less developed at the period of emerging from the chrysalis than they are in other insects.

I happened to witness the first efforts of my prisoned moth to escape from its long confinement. During a whole forenoon, from time to time, I watched it patiently striving and struggling to get out. It never seemed able to get beyond a certain point, and at last my patience was exhausted. Very probably the confining fibers were drier and less elastic than if the cocoon had been left all winter on its native heather, as nature meant it to be. At all events, I thought I was wiser and more compassionate than its Maker, and I resolved to give it a helping hand. With the point of my scissors, I snipped the confining threads to make the exit just a very little easier, and lo! immediately, and with perfect ease, out crawled my moth dragging a huge swollen body and little shriveled wings. In vain, I watched to see that marvelous process of expansion in which these silently and swiftly develop before one's eyes; and as I traced the exquisite spots and markings of divers colors which were all there in miniature, I longed to see these assume their due proportions and the creature to appear in all its perfect beauty, as it is, in truth, one of the loveliest of its kind. But I looked in vain. My false tenderness had proved its ruin. It never was anything but a stunted abortion, crawling painfully through that brief life which it should have spent flying through the air on rainbow wings.

I have thought of it often, often, when watching with pitiful eyes those who were struggling with sorrow, suffering, and distress; and I would fain cut short the discipline and give deliverance. Short-sighted man! How know I that one of these pangs or groans could be spared? The far-sighted, perfect love that seeks the perfection of its object does not weakly shrink from present, transient suffering. Our Father's love is too true to be weak. Because He loves His children, He chastises them that they may be partakers of His holiness. With this glorious end in view, He

spares not for their crying. Made perfect through sufferings, as the Elder Brother was, the sons of God are trained up to obedience and brought to glory through much tribulation.

*We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

Finally, we come to the third day or third road marker of which Paul speaks, it is what Paul called **“the day of Christ.”** Here is where the story of Jesus Christ offers us hope beyond hope, and it comes to us back in verse 6, where it reads, **that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

Jesus tells us in John chapter 16 that in this world we will face hardship and grief, but that grief will turn to joy. **It is like a woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of the joy that a child is born into the world. Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.**

This is the future that we are called to keep in mind as we act in faith now. Paul calls it “the Day of Christ.” It’s the day when everything sad suddenly comes untrue, because Jesus Christ is risen. In Revelation chapter 4, John tells of the one who sits on the throne of all creation, and it’s not a triumphant warrior king, but a slain lamb. Only he, only the one who has suffered and continues to suffer alongside us, can open the seals, speak a word of hope when all other words are to which no one else has a word.

The hope Paul encourages the Philippians to remain steadfast in is the hope that we have a Savior who lives at the middle of our lives and at the edges as well. In the words of Karl Barth, “Jesus Christ is at the center and the boundaries of our history.” If the Savior is at the center and the boundaries of your life’s story, then we know the story has to end well.