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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Philippians 3:4b-14  
Forgetting, Striving, and Hoping

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Epistle Lesson, from Philippians 3. Saint Paul speaks of “pressing on”:

<sup>13</sup> ... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I *press on* toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 3:13-14, NRSV)

This is a verse for which I have longtime affection, going back to my military days at the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado. I have probably mentioned this to you before: the words “press on” formed a phrase of release at the Academy. It was part of military training that any upperclassman could stop any first-year cadet and examine that cadet. The upperclassman could inspect our uniform, our haircut, the shine on our shoes. Or the upperclassman could demand that we recite military information, like the manufacturer for the F111 fighter jet (General Dynamics), or report on current events, like the score of last Saturday’s Notre Dame/Michigan game. When the upperclassman was done, he would shout those fine words, “Press on!” which meant that you were released and could continue on your path. Those words have an air of victory about them. “You have survived. You have lived to fight another day. You can continue on way.” But also they have an air of energy and striving about them. “Do not imagine your next steps to be easy.” A good life is a contested life. It takes effort and discipline and the rugged determination to overcome obstacles, day by day, sometimes hour by hour or minute by minute.

So it is with Saint Paul: he has traveled many a mile to be where he is in life as he writes to the Philippians. He has accomplished much, suffered much, and erred much, especially in his youthful opposition to Jesus and the early church. But when he says that he “presses on,” he is simultaneously saying that in spite of everything he still stands, alive, and ready to go forward, but that he knows that the way ahead will have its full share of joys and troubles and opportunities to be either faithful to Jesus or to fall away. And with those words “press on,” St. Paul signals that he means to be true to Jesus and to fight the good fight of faith.

It is an impressive testimony, and we would do well to follow his example. Let us too “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Our text has three movements in it. They correspond to the threefold nature of time: past, present, and future. Saint Paul adopts a definite attitude toward time's trinity: he means to *forget* his past, to *aim* for heaven, and to *press on* here and now, in his present. These three movements provide the structure of this sermon. Part One is on forgetting, Part Two is hoping for heaven, and Part Three is the middle part: pressing on here and now.

Let's begin with forgetting.

## FORGETTING

"This one thing I do: *forgetting* what lies behind..." Would you forget everything, Paul? No, I wager not. He does not intend to forget, for example, the many friends and colleagues he has gathered over the years. If we were to simply make a list of the friends to whom he sends greetings in his various epistles, I think we would conclude that Saint Paul was a sociable man, full of thanks for his friends and coworkers in the Lord. He is a warm-hearted fellow, grateful for the people God has sent him in his life.

And certainly he does not mean to forget Jesus Christ. How could he do that? Jesus means the world to him. Indeed, right here in Philippians Chapter 3, Paul testifies to the "surpassing value" of knowing Jesus:

<sup>8</sup>...I regard everything as loss because of the *surpassing value* of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:9, NRSV)

If ever a person could sing, "Give me Jesus, give me Jesus. You may have all the rest, give me Jesus," it would be Saint Paul. Whether he lives or whether he dies, he belongs to the Lord, and he is at complete peace about that (Romans 14:8).

Nor does he mean to forget about his former life as a persecutor of the church. It keeps him humble to remember his former zeal as an enemy of Christ:

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9, RSV)

You and I might call what Paul did an "honest mistake." We might have sympathy for a young man who believed he was doing the right thing when he persecuted the early church. But Paul himself is not so sympathetic. He does not claim that he made an "honest mistake," but rather that he did a deed that rendered him "least of the apostles," indeed "unfit to be called an apostle." No, when Saint Paul says that he forgets "what lies behind," he does not mean to include his errors.

What Paul does mean to forget is anything about which he could boast. He disciplines himself to set those praiseworthy things aside – his noble lineage, his earnest piety, even his many sacrifices and sufferings for Christ. He means to live as if they had not happened – not because he hates them, but because he wants to

maintain focus on something better. Or rather, he wants to remain focused on Someone better:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:9, NRSV)

Some of you remember Pastor Charles Trexler, of blessed memory. In the Lutheran tradition, it is permissible to address certain distinguished clergy as “Father.” That’s how we clergy of New York referred to Pastor Trexler. It was natural for us to call him “Father Trexler.” There are not all that many clergy who receive that affectionate and high title. Nowadays, you know another of them: Rev. Thomas Green. Those of us who know him and love him called him “Father Green.”

Well, one of the good things our Manhattan Dean, Rev. Richard Jeske, did back in 1994 was to invite Fr. Charles Trexler to address the rest of us Manhattan clergy about what he had learned over the course of the many years of his ministry. Fr. Trexler did that, but before he did, he clarified to us that it was hard for him to speak of his own ministry. He said that he had spent a lifetime trying to avoid that pronoun “I.” He had labored hard against the vice of hubris – that is, he had fought against pride in himself and in his accomplishments. The very thing that the rest of us admired in him – his vast learning, his deep piety, and his many interesting experiences – these were precisely the things that Fr. Trexler wanted to forget. You could almost see the dear man joining the ancient testimony of Saint Paul:

*forgetting what lies behind* and straining forward to what lies ahead...

You might know other people like that in your life: they are people of great accomplishments, but they live humbly and modestly as if they had not accomplished so much. It is possible to live that way – to live according to that most simple form of the doctrine of Justification by Faith. As Saint Paul says:

“Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:31, RSV)

Here at Immanuel, there will come a day, the good Lord willing, when we will be done with our Roof and Steeple Project. Then we will have the right to be happy and to say, “We are generation that did this! We did this thing!” This project has been on the horizon and in our planning I bet for a decade. There will come a day when this historic project is finished and then we can pat ourselves on the back and say, “This was a job well-done.”

But then, we must do what Saint Paul says. We must “forget what lies behind” and strive forward in mission to our community. I mean this: Our world is a good

world, but also a hard world, and I think we want the children to have Jesus in their hearts as they face our world. So, I am eager that our Sunday School should grow, for example. I think many of us are!

In one of Charles Spurgeon's sermons on this morning passage, he cautions people about boasting about too much about their own personal growth in piety. His interesting paragraph goes this way:

Perhaps at this moment you might honestly say, "I have overcome a very fierce temper," or, "I have bestirred my naturally indolent spirit." Thank God for that. Stop long enough to say, "Thank God for that," but do not pause to congratulate yourselves as though some great thing had been done, for then it may soon be undone. Perhaps the very moment you are rejoicing over your conquered temper it will leap back upon you, like a lion from the covert, and you will say, "I thought you were dead and buried, and here you are roaring at me again." The very easiest way to give resurrection to old corruptions is to erect a trophy over their graves; they will at once lift up their heads and howl out, "We are alive still."<sup>1</sup>

Isn't it the truth? Our old temptations always threaten to break out again. "We are alive still!" We should not put too much confidence in what we have accomplished in life, because, as Saint Paul says elsewhere,

Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12, RSV)

So, that is the first point: If we would follow the example of Saint Paul, we will forget what lies behind – at least we will forget the things of which we are tempted to boast.

## **HOPING FOR HEAVEN**

Now, let's skip ahead to time's third dimension: the future. Not only does Saint Paul forget the past, but he "strives for what lies ahead." In particular, he hopes for heaven and what he calls the "prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

...this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Onward!" A Sermon Delivered On Lord's-Day Morning May 25th, 1873.

goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 3:13-14, NRSV)

Forgetting the past would leave us aimless if we did not have something good in the future to aim at. Who can let a useful arrow fly if he does not have a target to aim at? Who can cut a straight line of cloth if the scissors are not aiming at a definite point? And how can a Christian live a useful life for Christ if we are not hoping and striving to end up in heaven with him? Let it be the chief aim in our minds and in our deeds: we want to end up in heaven with Jesus. Why, Saint Paul is so transfixed by heaven that he has already admitted to the Philippians just a couple chapters before that he would just as soon be off to be with Christ.

<sup>23</sup>For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: <sup>24</sup>Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. (Philippians 1:23-24, KJV)

This is what Christians do: we hope for heaven, to be with Jesus. We live this life with an eye and a heart straining ahead, searching for Jesus, that someday we will come into his presence carrying some measure of integrity with us. We do not want to stand before Jesus someday and have to admit to him, “Well, I know that I bore your name, but I never really thought much about you, never really thought of preparing myself for eternity with you.”

So, that is time’s third dimension: the future. Saint Paul strives for what is ahead.

## **PRESSING ON**

And for his present, Paul presses on. He has an impressive past behind him and a glorious hope ahead of him. But for here and now, he means to press on. He means to continue his life and his ministry with energy and commitment.

My dear old Sunday School teacher, Sister Mabel Dukes, had this saying: “Any ole dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream.” So it is in the Christian life: to be a live one, we need sometimes, perhaps often, to swim upstream. We need to fight against the flow, to resist the current, to forge ourselves, through God’s grace, into an alternative vision of a good, full, and lovely human life.

A high standard, you might say. Paul discounts his high lineage, his many accomplishments, and presses on toward a prize — the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus. Yes, it is a high standard. But would you have it lowered? <sup>2</sup> Is that really what you want for yourself and for your children and for others in your life?

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Onward!” A Sermon Delivered On Lord’s-Day Morning May 25th, 1873.

Paul wants to draw closer to Jesus. He wants to love him more perfectly and to conform himself to Christ more completely.

And if he does this, if he does draw closer to Jesus, then he will be drawing nearer to the One who above all others was willing to swim upstream. I mean our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For that is what it took. As the hymn puts it, you and I were “sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore” (“Love Lifted Me”). We were upstream from Jesus. Forces were working against him: the opposition of both spiritual and secular authorities, dismay at being abandoned by his disciples, fear of death, and our own unloveliness which made it so very implausible that Jesus should fight and suffer to save us. But he did. And in this morning’s passage, Saint Paul is saying that he means to press on to be more Christlike. “Give me Jesus,” we can imagine him saying. Give me Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.