

## **InVent: Commit**

**Philippians 2:12-17, 3:12-16**

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**Mark S. Bollwinkel**

Our InVent worship series has focused on intentionally moving into the season and spirit of Advent; creating, clearing and committing to a new space for the coming of Christ into our lives and the world.

### **InVent: Create/Clear/Commit**

The first week we explored the power and possibility of creativity. Christ is present in each and every moment of "creative transformation." Are we open to that spirit as we go into the holiday season or do we succumb to "business as usual?"

### **InVent: Create/Clear/Commit**

Last week, Pastor Dirk eloquently introduced us to the concepts of "kenosis," the self-emptying we witness by God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are offered a spiritual "self-emptying" as we clear away and make room for something new, something bigger than our ego. He reminded us of the longing deep inside, that yearning to be filled with love and peace, justice and compassion, spirits that last for eternity, spirits that can shape a lifetime with purpose and meaning; "...we fill the emptiness by emptying ourselves..." That's what we mean by "Clear."

## **InVent: Create/Clear/Commit**

We conclude the series with "commitment." For our worship task force Pastor Sam wrote:

The final stage of this preparation for preparing is to put ourselves in the mode of actually making a faith commitment/decision. For us, as we make this transition into Advent, we need to enter the season with a high level of commitment to know Jesus, and not to just celebrate a season.

It was Pastor Sam's inspired vision to use Philippians as our scriptural basis for this series. It seems almost prophetic today.

Paul is writing to members of the young church he founded in Philippi, a town in the providence of Northern Greece called Macedonia. He is writing from prison, probably in Rome toward the end of his life. You'll remember that while in Philippi years before, he and Silas exorcized the spirit of divination from a slave girl who worked as a fortune teller in the market place. (Acts 16:11-f) Her owner was outraged that the missionary had interfered with one of his top money makers. The owner had Paul and Silas dragged before the local judge who immediately sentenced them to a severe public flogging and then jail. During the night by the miracle of an earthquake they were freed from their shackles. They saved the life of the jailer who was about to commit suicide. He took Paul and Silas to his home where he fed them and tended to their wounds. The jailer and his entire family end up baptized that very day. (Why don't they make a movie of this?)

When the local authorities hear of their escape, they also learn that Paul is a Roman citizen; flogging and jailing a Roman citizen without due legal proceeding is a big "no-no." They apologize and ask that Paul and Silas go away quietly, no questions asked. Paul and Silas will not cooperate and insist on their full legal rights, which requires that they travel to Rome. That will be another long journey and will find Paul eventually imprisoned there and executed for his faith...but that's another story....

Scholars suggest that it is while he is in jail in Rome, Paul writes to the Philippians. While there, the Philippians send a member to Rome to serve Paul while he is imprisoned and deliver the latest news of the church; in those ancient days prisoners had to supply their own food and medicine from the outside, so Epaphroditus is funded to do that, he becomes deathly ill during this time but miraculously recovers. As a good pastor, Paul writes the church in Philippi to thank them for their prayers and physical support through Epaphroditus. He praises them for their extravagant generosity by a monetary gift to "church headquarters back in Jerusalem" (Acts 15). He also learns that there is some distention within their ranks over the on-going controversy about circumcision.

Throughout the Mediterranean, there are a number of new Christians who converted from Judaism and convinced that Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi, is their long awaited Messiah. They are insisting that those Gentiles wishing to become Christian must first "become Jewish" by circumcision. Paul had long argued against this idea, (Acts 15, Galatians 2) equally insisting that we are saved by grace in what God has done for us in Jesus, not by any outward, religious behavior...even the rules of his own Hebraic traditions.(Philippians 3:4-6, Romans 5:6-11).

Paul makes his stand clear but doesn't spend a lot of time condemning those who disagree so much as encouraging the faithful "to keep the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5); "Do all things without murmuring and arguing...shining like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation...."

Paul concludes his letter, writing:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (4:8-9)

Paul's point in this letter is to urge the Philippians to keep their "eyes on the prize", to keep focused on the best possible future and live like it in humility and faith rather than get bogged down in anger, conflict and retribution.

Passionate and sincere people can come to opposing points of view in the church, and it has been so from the beginning.

The media attention given this week to the ecclesiastical trial in Pennsylvania for United Methodist pastor Frank Schaefer has left a lot of folks confused and concerned. It would appear that a formal complaint is about to be filed with the United Methodist Council of Bishops against retired Bishop Melvin G. Talbert for participating in a same gender marriage ceremony in Alabama against the wishes of the Bishop there. (Bishop Talbert was our Bishop here in California-Nevada for 12 years and appointed me your Senior Pastor almost 15 years ago.) The United Methodist denomination officially prohibits the ordination of outwardly members of the LGBTQ community and forbids its clergy to participate in same gender wedding ceremonies, even where it is now legal. A small but vocal minority within our denomination will not accept this and are finding all sorts of ways to resist. I would predict that we will not see this conflict resolved anytime soon and that the reactions of the majority will become harsher.

In Philippians, the Apostle Paul has something to say to all sides of the conflict. "Keep the mind of Christ..."do all things with patience and humility...keep your eyes on the prize, don't let anger and fear bog you down in the past..."

Twenty, forty, sixty years from now a United Methodist general conference will hold a repentance and reconciliation worship service for the way we as a church excluded the LGBTQ community from full participation; and the names of Rev. Frank Schaefer, and Bishop Mel Talbert, Rev. Jimmy Creche and Bishop Mel Wheatly will be lifted up with praise and thanksgiving.

It takes commitment to hold on to the dream of a better future when the world around you is spinning. Paul had such commitment as he built

churches and spread the news of God's inclusive, radical grace throughout his world, even as he sat in jail awaiting his own execution.

It took commitment for the Hebrew people as they waited a thousand years for a messiah that would restore Israel to its true meaning and purpose. Advent reminds us of that waiting and our call to prepare for that future even when it seems so far away.

It takes commitment to "worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all" in a holiday season that equates the celebration of Christ's birth with retail marketing. Most of us do too much, spend too much and imbibe too much from Thanksgiving to New Years. What if we made the commitment this year to do things differently?

In your worship bulletin this morning you'll find a commitment card. I urge all of you to use this over the next month. Put it in a conspicuous place to use it each day of Advent. Commit to reading the daily Bible reading, clearing away the extraneous stuff that gets in the way of the season, participating in the Advent Conspiracy offering on Christmas Eve and slowing down rather than speed up for the next five weeks. Participating in worship here at church is one crucial way of doing just that.

There is a longing deep inside each of us for a better life, a more loving and just world. It is going to take a lot of creativity and commitment to get us there. It begins as we empty ourselves of the clutter and fill ourselves with the love and grace that can never die.

That is really what Advent is all about. To keep our "eyes on the prize" is no easy task, but together we can learn how and practice living in the spirit of that future for which we long:

"...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [we] press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"

Amen.