

“Come before Winter”
Philippians 4:1-7

from the front pew, First Presbyterian Church
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This is a brief sermon about being a good steward of today.

When my much-loved uncle—my Mom’s brother—was dying of cancer, his friends in California said that if I wanted to see him again alive, I’d better come. On the day after Christmas, I was on an airplane to Los Angeles to see Uncle Bob.

His partner, Len, a funny and kind man picked me up from LAX and took me immediately to St. Joseph’s Hospital in Burbank. Len tried to warn me that Bob was pretty sick. Sometimes Bob was confused. There were a lot of tubes.

Before we went into the room, I took a moment in the men’s restroom near the nurses’ station. I remember getting down on my hands and knees—probably not a smart thing to do on a hospital bathroom floor—and I asked God to help me.

I had been memorizing this passage from Philippians.

4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I got up. I had the presence of mind to wash my hands. And I went to visit my Uncle Bob. Those were halcyon days. He was in and out of coherence. But we laughed together. Time was good. I flew home a week later. And his body was flown home to Hampton, VA, two or three weeks after that where he was buried next to his father, my grandfather, on a very cold, windy, winter day.

There is always urgency to Paul’s writing. Here in Philippians he’s telling the church there—the church he loves—to be united in Jesus Christ. In these verses he particularly encourages Euodia and Syntyche to stop feuding. Something has come between them. Heal the division, Paul says, urging them to be of the same mind as Jesus. Whatever the fight is about, put an end to it. What he says in Ephesians (4:26) is intimated here: Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Let anger have its day, but don’t give anger more time that it deserves.

Paul reminds his readers then and now that no season lasts forever. There are things that need to get done now if they are going to get done at all. If we put things off too long, we’ll put them off forever. *Euodia and Synteche, be at peace with each other. Work it out.* Don’t hold on to your anger. Fix your conflict before the night grows too long.

Do you hear Paul’s urgency? You really hear it in his letter to Timothy when he urges his friend to come to him soon, if possible, before winter. In Paul’s writing there is an urgency to act now, before your

warm intentions cool and freeze. Act, love, heal, reconcile now—before winter comes and the season of opportunity passes. Winter will be here sooner than we think. Our good intentions may be frozen if we don't act on them now.

The Lord is near. The time is now. Use all that God has entrusted to your care wisely. Don't waste any of it, least of all the gift of time. Today only lasts for today.

Pandemic has taught us nothing if not that life is uncertain. All things change and they could change radically, rapidly. What we can do today, we may not be able to do tomorrow.

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Paul probably wrote this letter from jail. Possibly from Rome. And it was, possibly, his last imprisonment before his execution. It is no wonder we hear an urgency in this letter. Paul didn't take time for granted. Some things needed doing right now, before the ice of winter makes them impossible to do, before the roads freeze, and the path becomes impassable. *How I appreciate my coworkers Euodia and Syntyche. The church's witness will be stronger if the rift between them is healed.*

Allen Smith said these words from the pulpit of Second Presbyterian Church in Little Rock: "How precious our opportunities are when we realize that they do not last forever . . . Opportunities come along and, if not seized, they are lost. Time passes . . . That is what Jesus meant when he said, 'While it is day, I must do the work of the one who sent me; but night comes, when no one shall work.' It is day—but night comes."^[i]

Night falls. The skies turn grey. And winter sets in.

Summer appears to be long gone. The frost is on the pumpkin. The leaves are changing.

But some opportunities are ready to be seized now.

Before winter.

Before it's too late.

^[i] (Allen Smith, "Come Before Winter," from *The Sovereignty of God's Grace*.)