

“Pressing On”
Isaiah 43:15-21/Philippians 3:12-16

Seven days ago, we celebrated life at DPC. In particular, on the first Sunday of a New Year, we reflected on some of the blessings that occurred here in 2018 as part of our Flourish initiative. Flourish was an entirely new way for us to respond to our call as stewards in which our members were asked to make one pledge to cover all of the church’s financial needs over a period of two years. Our congregation responded with the highest level of financial commitments ever and last week, I shared results from the first year. Your generosity last year enabled us to fund fully all of our ministries, the mortgage payments for our renovation loan, and, as we heard later in the service, to make additional payments on the principal, too. With the \$100,000 announced that morning, the loan balance is just over \$2.1 million; still a sizeable amount, of course, but incredible progress from a starting point of \$4.9 million eight years ago. Today, I want to speak to what is ahead with the second year of Flourish; starting again with Scripture.

Neither of the Biblical passages we read moments ago makes mention of stewardship or loans or ministry per se, yet both do speak with one voice about how we best deal with the past and the future. Both texts were also addressed to particular communities of God’s followers and thus offer something important for us to ponder at this mid-point with Flourish.

“I am the Lord, your Holy One,” God says, “the Creator of Israel, your King.” With those words, our Old Testament reading began. That account was addressed to Jews living in exile. They had been taken from their homes in Israel and now resided in Babylon. God goes on to describe a key moment from Israel’s past. “Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse...they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.” The moment recalled by God was the day Moses led the Israelites through a parted Red Sea and into freedom. It was a transforming event that would shape the people and their faith for all the generations to come, yet after naming that moment, our Maker makes a curious statement. “Do not remember the former things,” God says “or consider the things of old...”

Do not remember? That would be somewhat akin to a speaker opening a DAR gathering by saying “Do not remember Washington crossing the Delaware” or for me to say to Eagles fans “Do not remember Super Bowl LII.” We all have key events from the past that we appropriately remember and celebrate, but on a day long ago God calls the people to forget about their past before adding “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Our reading from Paul’s words to the church in Philippi has a similar message. Throughout that letter, the Apostle has urged those Christians to model unity in the face of hardship. Just prior to our reading, he offers a succession of examples about what that kind of life would look like; lifting up the example of Jesus’ humble service, pointing to two colleagues in ministry as role models and then, naming his own credentials. Paul had the ultimate pedigree as a faithful Jew yet counted it as insignificant because of knowing Christ. Even in his role as the great missionary for Christianity Paul had accomplished much, but knew he wasn’t through.

“Not that I have already obtained this,” he says “or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved,” he continues, “I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” There it is again; a call to forget the past and look ahead.

That’s an important word for us, too, as sometimes people do get stuck in the past.

Thirty-five years ago, a song by Bruce Springsteen made that point in memorable fashion. Entitled “Glory Days,” it begins by telling of two former classmates who run into each other years after graduation. “I had a friend who was a big baseball player,” he sings, “back in high school. He could throw that speedball by you, make you look like a fool. Saw him the other night at this roadside bar, I was walking in, he was walking out. We went back inside and had a few drinks, but all he kept talking about was glory days.” The song goes on to tell of a second classmate, a single mother who had been through a divorce. The singer tells of dropping in on occasion to see how she is doing and how their chats, too, often would drift to the past. “We just sit around talking about the old times,” he sings for “she says when she feels like crying she starts laughing, thinking about glory days. Well, they’ll pass you by. Glory days in the wink of a young girl’s eye. Glory days, glory days.” (Springsteen, Bruce. *Born In the USA*. 1984)

I don’t know if that song describes actual events or is the product of his imagination, but in either case, Springsteen names a human tendency where persons can dwell on the past. That when things take a disappointing turn, or change comes that is hard to accept, how individuals can start to think that life isn’t as good as it once was and focus exclusively on days of old.

He’s not speaking against the natural reminiscing that occurs when long-time friends or loved ones gather. That song doesn’t disparage the best parts of reunions—military or family or school—where we recall key experiences. Nor does it dispute the fact that when we go through painful times, we can grieve pieces to life that will never be the same. No, that song names times when persons dwell on the past to such a degree they lose sight of the present and future.

That seems to be the point of our Scripture readings, too. As certainly the parting of the Red Sea was a pivotal moment in Jewish history. Paul’s successes in spreading the Gospel was something that he appropriately could celebrate, too. One of the reasons we read Scripture is because we know that the lessons gained by those who experienced those moments first-hand teach us still. Yet both God in the passage from Isaiah and then Paul in his letter to the Philippians point to the risk in remaining stuck in the past and thus calls us to look ahead.

One scholar asked “Under what circumstances should [we] not remember former things? At the point where a nostalgic relation to tradition threatens to tie the people to their past and to stultify alertness to present realities, responsiveness to new opportunities, and the potential for growth into yet-unrealized possibilities.” (Hanson, Paul D. *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995, p. 73). It’s at that place where our reflecting on the blessings of Flourish helps as the generosity shown last year with that initiative is something to celebrate without a doubt, but it is now part of the past and on this day we press on.

In looking ahead to 2019 we are confident that the gifts committed through Flourish and those offered by others who give without making a pledge will again fully fund our ministries, including the mortgage. In two weeks, our Session will approve the operating budget for this year; a step that not only establishes the framework for how our officers yet again will be faithful with your gifts, but also allows us to proceed with two other key aspects of the Flourish plan.

For as part of that same initiative, we made a commitment, after providing the resources necessary for two years of operating budgets, to use the remaining gifts in specific ways. My best guess at this point—and it’s only an estimate—is that we will have about \$400,000 over the full expanse of Flourish for additional opportunities. 20% of those gifts have been earmarked for Ministry Enhancement; acts that will strengthen current ministries of DPC and begin some new ones with the remaining \$320,000 or so helping us move ever closer to Debt Freedom.

In terms of Ministry Enhancement, the Session has already allocated funds to improve our audio-visual capabilities in worship and for a part-time staff position to help members find

ways to become more engaged in the life of our church. Other dollars remain for Ministry Enhancement efforts and the decisions about their use in the coming months, like the first two projects, will be ones that support the priorities identified by our Strategic Plan.

The balance of resources not needed for the operating budget will permit us to make payments on the loan principle. As you know, we have done some of that already using a portion of the resources for Debt Freedom, but there is more to come. And by year's end, the installments and pre-payments will take our loan balance to a level well below \$2 million.

Those are the finances. What we do not yet know and will not be able to quantify by the conclusion of 2019 is how many lives will be changed because of Flourish. For who will experience hospitality and compassion through us because of your gifts? Who will have her or his soul opened to the truth of the Gospel through the teaching and small groups of this church because of your generosity? Who will find peace or inspiration in worship and music, who will experience the care of this congregation in times of great heartache, and who outside these walls will come to know the love of Jesus Christ because of what your gifts enable us to do? I can't tally that number or list the names on this day. Nor will I be able to do so at year's end. But without a doubt lives and hearts will be transformed because of your faithful generosity here.

"Do not remember the things of old," God said and almost in reply Paul declared he will be "Forgetting what lies behind." "I am about to do a new thing," our Maker continued, "Do you not perceive it?" while the church's first missionary added "Straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Those are our instructions, my friends. Now it's time to get to work as we press on, too.