

**STAND FIRM IN THE LORD
PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1; PSALM 27
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
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Psalm 27

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall. ³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. ⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. ⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. ⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD. ⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! ⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek. ⁹Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! ¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. ¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. ¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. ¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Our epistle lesson this morning comes from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. The Apostle Paul had a special relationship with the congregation at Philippi. Paul refers to them as his joy and his crown. As a rule, Paul did not accept support from those he served, but he accepted gifts from the Philippians.

Paul knew the challenges the Christians at Philippi faced. The city was a Roman colony. Many of its inhabitants were citizens of Rome. Latin was the predominant language. Roman religious and social practices prevailed. Worship of the emperor, sometimes referred to as Savior, was expected and enforced.

According to the Book of Acts, Paul spent time in a prison at Philippi after he helped a slave girl escape exploitation. He made friends with his jailer and introduced him to the Christian faith. Paul met a wealthy business woman named Lydia in Philippi. He had friends there – people who cared about him and cared about Jesus Christ.

In our passage this morning, Paul encouraged the Christians at Philippi to imitate him. This may sound presumptuous; but earlier in the letter Paul talked about his own efforts to imitate Christ. Apparently there were Christians in Philippi who were not imitating Paul or Christ. Paul called them enemies of the cross. Paul urged faithful Christians at Philippi to stand firm in the Lord. He knew they were pulled in different directions. Listen to God’s Word from **Philippians 3:17-4:1**.

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that

it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Thanks be to God for the reading of this Word. Please join me in prayer. Lord we give you thanks for your Word and for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. We give you thanks for the salvation you offer us in life and in death. God of mercy, you know the burdens we carry this morning. You know the challenges we face. You also know that there are those we should not imitate, but we do. Forgive us. By the power of the Spirit, turn us toward Christ and toward the cross. Open our minds and our hearts to your truth. Grant us the courage to live according to the example we have in Christ and the example we see in his faithful followers. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last Friday as I stood in line to vote, I looked around the high-end grocery store in which the election was conducted and said a prayer of thanksgiving for being an American citizen. I could have been born in Haiti, in Kenya where our missionaries Jeff and Christi Boyd serve, or in Afghanistan, Greece, China or Russia.

I am thankful to be an American citizen, but I realize our country has its challenges. Some people believe that America and the other aging post-industrial democracies may face crises similar to Greece if we do not make significant corrections. Of course, people do not agree about what corrections to make.

Negative politics, polarization and single issue voting are other characteristics we share with western democracies. Friday I voted for a friend I have known since college. Judging from what I have observed in the news and the mail I received, I expect she will lose after many years on the bench. I was eating chili with her and several other judges when the Branch Davidian siege came on the news. She attended my ordination. Our citizenship is complicated. Sometimes our civic life gets mixed up with our professional life, our friendships, our church and our family.

I feel blessed to be an American citizen, but evil is present in our country. There is crime, pornography, greed, corruption, immorality and violence. People get so angry that they fly airplanes into buildings and open fire on innocent children. Our unemployment rate is high, and many people cannot afford medical care and housing.

As I looked around the grocery store Friday, I took in the abundance and gave thanks to God. After I voted I left the store without buying any beautiful flowers, pistachios or gourmet meats, sauces and vegetables. Friday was my sermon writing day. It was time to focus on the Christian journey through Lent. The road we travel through Lent is real life. It is complicated. As Christians we live in this world, but we do not belong to this world.

Paul addressed our other-worldliness in his Letter to the Philippians. Paul was a Roman citizen. Paul was a good Jew, but now Paul was a Christian and, therefore, a citizen of heaven. It was Jesus Christ he followed, not the emperor. It was Jesus Christ Paul imitated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Not all those in Philippi who called themselves Christian were imitating Christ. We do not know exactly what the enemies of Christ were doing. Those whose god was their belly may have engaged in orgies of food and drink that were popular among the wealthier classes of Roman society. Paul

criticized such behavior in the congregation at Corinth. Some of the wealthier Corinthians came early to the Lord's Supper, which was more like a meal in those days. By the time the working class members arrived, the food was gone and people were drunk on the wine. It is not surprising that such behavior might occur elsewhere. Such feasts were common among Greek and Roman religious celebrations.

Paul said the glory of the enemies of Christ was also their shame. People were proud of their wealth. No doubt they dressed in fine clothes. They enjoyed a good party.

Too often in both ancient and present day culture, the behaviors that are part of being popular, powerful or successful may also result in our downfall. Our glory becomes our shame.

When our minds are set on earthly things, the Apostle Paul warned that we move toward destruction. We see it happen with political figures, athletes and movie stars, but it also happens closer to home – to our friends and family members. They start hanging out with the wrong crowd. Their values and priorities get messed up. They turn away from the cross.

In contrast, faithful Christians keep focused on heaven, the kingdom of God. According to Paul, Christians are already citizens of heaven. Citizenship provides benefits, but it also entails responsibilities and obligations. Jesus said his followers must take up the cross of discipleship. Christian citizenship is more than saying the right words in front of the church. Christian citizenship is about obeying and serving God in our daily lives.

For Christ and for his followers, cross bearing involves sacrifice and suffering, but any humiliation we experience will be transformed into glory by the grace of God. The trials we endure become blessings. *According to Paul, all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purposes* (Romans 8:28).

The psalmist said we need only wait for the Lord. God is our stronghold. God is our eternal salvation, but God is also our salvation while we live. We can claim the Lord as our stronghold right now, whatever trial we face.

We are citizens of heaven. Our hope is in God. The Lord is our light and our salvation. Like the Apostle Paul and the psalmist, we need to claim the powerful love we have received. If we have trouble doing that, the Apostle Paul tells us to imitate him and imitate Christ until we finally "get it."

Imitating Christ is what we do as the body of Christ. When we gather to worship and serve the Lord, we imitate Christ. When we reach out to others with the love of Christ, we imitate Christ. When we forgive people who do not deserve it or love someone who is difficult, we imitate Christ. When we serve those in need and comfort people in distress, we imitate Christ.

Like the psalmist we may wish we could just stay in God's house. Perhaps what we face at home, at school, at work or with our finances, our health, our relationships or our families is tough right now. Maybe we are tired. Some of us may be scared or lonely. We may find peace here, a peace we do not experience elsewhere.

Hear the Good News. Any cross we carry is not the end. God will bring us through whatever we are facing. As the body of Christ, we are in this together. In our vows of membership we promise to

support each other as we serve Christ. God works through pastors, deacons, shepherds, Stephen Ministers and Christian friends. God speaks to us through smiles and hugs, through the laughter of children, through music and the Word, through a cup of coffee and conversation with a Christian friend who cares enough to listen. We sing for joy together, and we weep in sorrow together.

We are the body of Christ, the household of God. We build each other up so that we may serve Christ in the world. When we gather with other believers, we catch a glimpse of heaven that strengthens us for the journey.

If Paul's Letter to the Philippians is any indication, we are likely to meet all kinds of people on our journey with Christ through Lent. Our journey is not a walk in the park. In fact, poet Ann Weems ([Kneeling in Jerusalem](#)) believes "The Way" may be more like a busy highway at rush hour.

The way to Jerusalem looks suspiciously like I-35 (Highway 40), and the pilgrims look suspiciously like you and me. I expected the road to Jerusalem to be crowded with holy people...clerics and saints...people who have kindness wrinkled in their faces and comfort lingering in their voices, but this is more like rush hour...horns blowing, people pushing, voices cursing...This is not what I expected!

O God, I've only begun and already I feel like I have lost my way. Surely this is not the road and surely these are not the ones to travel with me. This Lenten journey calls for holy retreat, for reflection and repentance.

Instead of holiness the highway is crammed with the cacophony of chaos. Is there no back road to Jerusalem? No quiet path where angels tend to weary travelers? No sanctuary from the noise of the world? Just this? Can this hectic highway be the highway to heaven?

My friends, soon we will leave this place and return to the highway of our lives. Some of the people we meet may be enemies of the cross, though they are regarded well by others at school, at work, in our families or in the community. Out there in the world we may feel humiliated when we try to imitate Christ. We may suffer or grieve.

Let us stand firm in the Lord. The cross is not the end. The cross is not a sign of quiet suffering or submission to the powers-that-be (Willimon, [Pulpit Resource](#), March 11, 2001, 42). The cross is a sign that Christ is victorious over all power and over all evil. The cross stands as God's eternal no and our no to the powers of death. The cross stands as God's eternal yes to humanity.

We wait for the Lord knowing that the end is good. We wait together as a household of God and the body of Christ. We are a place where people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness and testify to the amazing community-creating power of God (Willimon, [Pulpit Resource](#), March 11, 2001, 42).

During our journey through Lent, I hope we read God's Word from scriptures like Psalm 27 and Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The Lord is our light and our salvation. We need not fear, for we stand firm in the Lord.