

## Philippians 1:1-18a

A while ago *The New York Times* did an article<sup>i</sup> on how people were getting through the pandemic, and Anton Troianovski interviewed a Belarusian neonatologist who had been imprisoned and then fired from his hospital for resisting the government's efforts to downplay the virus.

As the president wouldn't act to check the spread of the virus, community groups sprung up and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help equip hospitals. A grass-roots movement, from tech workers to soccer fans, came together to push for voluntary social distancing — a “people's quarantine,” some called it.

After the (actually rigged) August election, some of these groups raised millions of dollars for the victims of police violence and state repression, further energizing the protests and helping build a sense of community.

“All these authoritarian, totalitarian regimes rely on everyone being on their own,” Dr. Vitushka told me. “And here we all came together in the face of a threat.” For now, Mr. Lukashenko remains in power. But Dr. Vitushka is convinced that this year's pain — both for him and for his country — has been worth it. Sooner or later, he says, political change will come.

“We're living through an intense coming-of-age period,” he said. “If I had the choice to go through all of this again or not, I would say that we had to go through it. We had to get on this path.”

Both the doctor's hopefulness and his relationship with the community, each offering the other moral support, sound to me like Paul today.

From what we can surmise, Paul writes to the church at Philippi from prison. It would be natural for him to be afraid and discouraged—after all, prison was brutal then as now, and there was no reason to expect dispassionate or enlightened justice—but his tone is irenic, even hopeful. He thanks God *every time* he thinks of the Philippians, because they are so full of the love of God, both comforting him in his isolation and also enacting it in their own situations. He prays that their love will overflow with knowledge and insight so that they will continue to know what to do. And even though he is in prison, he tells them that their love supports him,

and that his imprisonment is actually helping to spread the gospel, so he feels like this misfortune hasn't slowed down what God is doing one bit. It is just all good.

I'm struck by his phrase, "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight <sup>10</sup>to help you to determine what is best". In other words, how do we know what the right thing to do is? You need your **love** to be filled with knowledge and full insight. And to what end? "so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, <sup>11</sup>having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." In Paul's view, the Philippians are already fully acceptable to God, so it's not about being judged. Rather, I think, it's about more abundant life now, becoming more fully themselves—which is connected to knowing what the right thing to do is, or being motivated by love that is knowledgeable and insightful.

Well, what does that look like when it's at home? We have a certain longing for sets of rules, something to keep us from going totally off the rails, and Paul was certainly aware of the ways in which people went off the rails, displayed most compellingly in Corinth where he had to ream them all out about competing with each other for status, and eating all the food at their church dinners before the poor people showed up, and taking each other to court. But he maintained that even though God is gracious, it's still important for Christians to do their best in this embodied life. He just wasn't going to draw up a code of behavior; you had to be guided by love and figure it out. "Goodness, Paul often argues, is the fruit of a good relationship with God, much more than a following of laws, biblical or otherwise."<sup>ii</sup>

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story called "Three Questions" in which a king decided that if he always knew the right time to begin everything; if he knew who were the right people to listen

to, and whom to avoid, and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything he might undertake.<sup>iii</sup> So as kings do, he proclaimed that there would be a great reward to anyone who could tell him how to discern the right time, the right people, and the most important thing. And as pundits do, learned men came to him with many methods of knowing these things.

In reply to the first question, some said that to know the right time for every action, one must draw up in advance, a table of days, months and years, and must live strictly according to it. Only thus, said they, could everything be done at its proper time. Others declared that it was impossible to decide beforehand the right time for every action; but that, not letting oneself be absorbed in idle pastimes, one should always attend to all that was going on, and then do what was most needful. Others, again, said that however attentive the king might be to what was going on, it was impossible for one man to decide correctly the right time for every action, but that he should have a Council of wise men, who would help him to fix the proper time for everything. But then again others said there were some things which could not wait to be laid before a Council, but about which one had at once to decide whether to undertake them or not. But in order to decide that, one must know beforehand what was going to happen. It is only magicians who know that; and, therefore, in order to know the right time for every action, one must consult magicians.

Equally various were the answers to the second question.

And on it goes, as we could have told the king, but he didn't ask us.

Eventually the king decided to go consult a wise hermit. The hermit was busy digging in his yard, and the king launched right into his litany of questions, but the hermit, a frail old man, just panted and kept digging. The penny dropped, and the king said, "Say, how about if I do some of that digging for you, because you're an old man and I'm young and strong." So he did, and the hermit rested, but the hermit also didn't answer his question, so eventually the king said that maybe in that case he'd take his leave.

"Here comes someone running," said the hermit, "let us see who it is."

The king turned round, and saw a bearded man come running out of the wood. The man held his hands pressed against his stomach, and blood was flowing from under them. When he reached the king, he fell fainting on the ground moaning feebly.

The king and the hermit bandaged up the stranger and put him to bed, and then the king fell asleep too because of all the fresh air and exertion. In the morning, the man begged his forgiveness, and the king didn't understand why. It turned out that the man was the brother of someone the king had treated unjustly. He'd followed the king, hoping to kill him, but had been wounded by his bodyguards at the edge of the forest. Now since the king had saved his life, he was sorry he'd intended to kill him.

The king, to his credit, was happy to have a friend where he'd had an enemy, and promised to make restitution. Then he went to ask the hermit one more time for an answer to his questions.

"You have already been answered!" said the hermit, still crouching on his thin legs, and looking up at the king, who stood before him.

"How answered? What do you mean?" asked the king.

"Do you not see," replied the hermit. "If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday, and had not dug these beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented of not having stayed with me. So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business. Afterwards, when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without having made peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business. **Remember then: there is only one time that is important – now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most necessary man is he with whom you are, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with anyone else: and the most important affair is to do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life.**"

There is a truism about God always putting us where we need to be, and I'm not sure I want to sign on to that, because sometimes we find ourselves where no loving God would have put us. But this story, and Paul's letter, suggest something adjacent: wherever we find

ourselves, there is a need for our work to be done. However you got here, even if you were arrested by brutal authorities, the place you are now is a place where you can make a difference, letting love be filled with knowledge and insight. We don't get a script, unfortunately, so we don't get to plan ahead. But we may be confident of this, that the one who began a good work among us will bring it to completion, such that we ourselves, having relied on the goodness of God as the fundamental reality, will live abundantly.

God, you are known wherever people are good to each other, wherever people have compassion on one another and on themselves, and wherever we stop ourselves from living by old scripts and recognize that we are in a unique moment. May we know you in those ways, for the sake of our own deepening and abundance, and for the sake of the world you love so deeply. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/24/world/coronavirus-resilience.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://billloader.com/CEpAdvent2.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Tolstoy, *The Gospel in Tolstoy*, ed. Miriam LeBlanc. Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015.