
I Thank My God Every Time I Remember You

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Advent 2 – Year C

I thank my God every time I remember you. Philippians 1:3

That's how the Apostle Paul began his letter to the church in Philippi in the middle of the first century. Paul may have been in prison at the time, but he was loyally keeping up with the church he had helped start. After he started churches in places like Corinth, and Galatia, and Philippi, and Thessalonica, and then went on his way, he often wrote back to these new Christians. He encouraged and taught them.

Paul's words were so striking and so inspiring, and so true, that those local parishes kept the letters and read them again; they even passed them on to newer congregations. That's how those letters became scripture. They didn't just appear magically. They started as regular letters, maybe like love letters. Holy scripture was the result of a faithful Christian pastor doing his teaching duty. Saint Paul was keeping up with his parish.

And so he wrote to the Philippians, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:3-6).

I love these words anyway, but I especially appreciate them today, the Second Sunday of Advent and the day of the Annual Meeting of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip. In two respects, we are beginning a new year this week. In the greater Christian way of keeping a calendar, our new year and new cycle of readings always begins four Sundays before Christmas, on the First Sunday of Advent. We have just begun our new Christian year.

In addition, our own particular parish holds its annual meeting today. We hear reports from the past year, and we elect new Chapter members for the coming year.

Thus, we are beginning a new year in two respects today, and I believe that the best way to begin a new year is to give thanks.

Now, there are surely other ways to begin a new year. Our ancestors in the Jewish tradition begin a new year, Rosh Hashanah, with the blowing of the horn. That leads to ten days of repentance, with judgment themes, until Yom Kippur, the holy day of atonement, when the people of God ask for forgiveness.

Americans actually begin our new year, on January 1, in a similar way, when we make "New Year's Resolutions," repenting of breaking all our diet plans! Trying to do better next year!

I must confess that I do not find helpful our traditional gospel lessons for these first two Sundays of the new year. They stress the second coming of Christ as a day of judgment, even causing fear. Of course, there is holy precedent for these gospel choices, and I admit my personal need for judgment. I claim, however, that Lent is a better season for those themes.

Instead, I have found a theme in the epistle lessons for this day that is more valuable for me as I note a new year. It is the theme of Thanksgiving. Obviously, that theme is a happy coincidence for American Christians who have just celebrated Thanksgiving Day during the week before Advent starts. Many of us observed Thanksgiving by gathering with people who

have been close to us, people with whom we have shared our lives.

Well, the gathering of church is meant to be the same thing: a Great Thanksgiving! (the name of our Eucharistic Prayer every Sunday) Paul could give thanks for his Philippian church because he had shared his life with them, and they had shared their lives with him. They had shared their lives together, and they had shared their love together.

I am not Paul, by any means, but I, too, enjoy sharing my life with you: this parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip! My other clergy colleagues enjoy that, too. So, I want to begin this Advent new year by giving thanks for letting us share your lives, too. We have known you in so many circumstances! We have known you here in this sacred place, the church, and we have really got to know you in other places: at schools, in restaurants, serving the poor together, building a Habitat house together, at parties, in the city and outside in the woods, in business meetings, in conversations, and in prayers. Thank you for letting us share life with you.

Thank you for sharing your joy, but thank you, too, for sharing your sadness. In this church, we have known baptisms and weddings together, but we have also known sickness and funerals together. There is much to remember, and not all of it is pleasant. But Paul told his parish that he thanked God in every remembrance of them—not just the fun parts.

In the church, we share our lives together. That's what church is: it is holy community. It is Koinonia! Spiritual communion! Thank you for sharing community with me.

"I thank my God every time I remember you," said Saint Paul. Thankful remembering, however, is not just about the past. It is about the future. Good remembrance is a way of hoping for the future, too. This is why thankful remembering is important when we observe a new church year. When we remember, we are also claiming the same good relationships for the future. Last year was just another step in our journey towards wholeness and completion together.

Listen, then, again to what Saint Paul told the Philippians in his love letter: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:3-6). St. Paul said that to his church two thousand years ago, and he says it to us today!

AMEN.

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