Where Can I Flee?

Psalm 139:1-12; Philemon 1-21
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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I'm guessing Philemon isn't the most familiar part of Scripture for many of us. I've never heard a sermon on Philemon and I've certainly never preached one!

We're going to to get to the story of Philemon in a minute. But first, I want to talk about joy and about how we tell stories.

Christian Wiman is a poet, an author, and currently a professor of religion and literature at Yale University. I've quoted him before. He's one of my favourite writers.

A few years ago, Wiman wrote a piece in *The New York Times* called "The Poet of Light" where he reflected on the nature of storytelling and joy. Or, more frequently, joy's absence.

We live in times where it often seems like the darker the themes of a given story—writing, movies, television, whatever—the more "authentic" it must be.

Happy endings are passé. Joy is obsolescent. No serious artist or consumer of art would want to be outed as a cheerful optimist. Dark, brooding, gritty—this is where the action seems to be.

(I have to admit that I am among the chief of sinners here. I tend to gravitate toward the more "authentic" corners of Netflix, too. Nobody wants to be a Pollyanna in their viewing, right?)

Well, Wiman, who was diagnosed with cancer in his thirties, knows all about dark themes. In his article, he talks about the common assumption that "light writes white":

> The exact source of this phrase is hard to pin down, but its meaning is clear enough: If you're happy, then your page stays blank. There must be some friction for the words to catch fire [what a line!]. No suffering, no song [how many Psalms would have been written without suffering?]. No absence, no art.[1]

This certainly has some truth to it. All stories require a struggle to be interesting. There is no narrative arc in the absence of conflict.

This is true even of Scripture. Take away the rebellion and infidelity and heartache and lament and sorrow and pathos of the Bible, and there's not much of a story.

Darkness makes the light shine all the brighter. The best storytelling does indeed seem to require this.

But Wiman wonders if we spend too much time on the darkness and not enough on the light:

> Of course we need art to explore the darkest recesses of our lives and minds. **But we also need art to tell us why this world is worth loving, and therefore saving.**

Well, amen and amen. To do this, I am increasingly becoming convinced, is an act of faith. Our world and the stories it contains will never run low on darkness. And these stories must be told.

But we need more than this. We need stories that show us that while the world is achingly sad, at times, it is also heartrendingly beautiful and full of possibility.

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/books/review/richard-wilbur-poetry-happiness.html

As Wendell Berry puts it in a poem with one of the best titles you'll ever come across: "Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front,"

> Be joyful
> though you have considered all the facts.[2]

Or, as Christian Wiman summarizes:

> Joy is one kind of courage.

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Which brings me to the story of Philemon.

Like you, I'm guessing, it's been a while since I've read Philemon. I was caught off guard to see it among the lectionary readings this week.

So I read it. And when I had finished reading it, I was somewhat surprised to feel happy. It wasn't like a mountaintop story like the story of the Prodigal Son or anything, but I found it inspiring.

It was a very good story. A source of joy, even.

The book of Philemon is actually a letter from the Apostle Paul who is writing from prison (Rome, possibly) to a man named Philemon, a Christian in Colossae, likely one of Paul's converts.

He is writing concerning a certain Onesimus, who happens to be a runaway slave who belonged to Philemon. Onesimus has converted to Christianity mid-flight and become something like a son to Paul, helping him while in prison.

But now Paul is writing to Philemon to try to convince him to take his runaway back.

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[2] https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html

The language Paul uses is warm and affectionate. He tells Philemon that in sending Onesimus back to him, he is sending “my own heart” (v. 12). He urges Philemon to accept him back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (v. 16). He even says that if Onesimus has wronged Philemon in any way (perhaps he has stolen something), Paul will repay the debt (v. 19).

Paul concludes by urging Philemon to refresh Paul’s heart in Christ.” He even expresses confidence that Philemon will do the Christian thing and welcome Onesimus back, perhaps even doing “even more” than Paul asks him to (v. 21).

Surely, Paul here is asking Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom.

All in all, this short often-ignored book seemed like a beautiful story of the possibilities of Christian redemption. There were seeds and hints of forgiveness, atonement, substitution, grace, mercy, liberation, mutuality.

It spoke to the way that hierarchies and social arrangements of any given context are upended and rearranged by the gospel.

What a fantastic, hope-filled, joyful story! Right?

Well, not so fast. I started reading commentaries and articles on Philemon. And a bit of darkness started to creep in. And the more I read, the less happy I felt.

And by the time Friday rolled around and I began to put the pieces together for this sermon, I wasn’t quite sure how to feel.

The picture of Philemon painted by some commentaries wasn’t quite as rosy as the story I just sketched.

For starters, there’s the little issue of slavery. How, many commentators wondered, could Paul be so accepting of the institution of slavery.

Why is he so beholden to Roman law here? Does Paul not know that Onesimus has committed a capital offence and that he could be sending him back to quite severe punishment at best?

Why doesn't Paul engage in a bit of civil disobedience and simply refuse to send Onesimus back at all? Better yet, why doesn't he condemn slavery outright? Is not this the duty of a Christian?

The issue of slavery looms large over this letter and many are unwilling to let Paul off the hook for not challenging it.

And then there is the letter itself. Many read it as a bit of sly manipulation on Paul's part. He's careful to ingratiate himself to Philemon, dropping more than a few hints as to what he has done for him along the way.

He reminds him that he would be more than within his rights to "command" Philemon to do his Christian duty, he would rather appeal to him on the basis of love. Which some might say is just a different way of issuing a command.

And then there's verse 21 again, where Paul urges Philemon to go beyond mere acceptance and "do more than I say."

Some have thought that Paul might be here subtly asking Philemon to send Onesimus right back to Paul so he can continue working for him. Does he not say, earlier, in the letter, that Onesimus is "useful both to you and to me" (v. 11)?

(The name "Onesimus" is a Greek name that literally means "useful.")

In short, I discovered that there were some fairly critical, even cynical interpretations of this letter out there!

Now, it may surprise you to learn that I, too, can occasionally be accused of cynicism.

But as I read some of these interpretations, I found myself thinking, "Oh come on, can't we interpret things a bit more charitably?"

Can't I just have my happy story of Christian redemption, for goodness' sake?!"

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Well, in keeping with the advice from Christian Wiman that I began with, I *am* going to keep my happy story of Christian redemption.

I do believe that joy is indeed one form of courage. And we all need more joy in our lives, don't we?

And I do believe that, even with all the criticisms of this book out there (and however legitimate they may or may not be), this is fundamentally a happy and hopeful story.

First, regarding slavery. Yes, this is obviously problematic from our vantage point two thousand or so years later.

But it's very easy to judge the past from the perch of the present while ignoring the role that the past (and texts from the past) played in getting to the present.

Our culture has a really persistent habit of doing this. We express near constant outrage and seek to edit out those parts of our history that don't reflect our present moral sensibilities (while ignoring that these, too, may turn out to not be as admirable as we think they are).

Verse 16 is interesting to think about. Paul urges Philemon to welcome his runaway slave back, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother."

Does this bring any song to mind? A Christmas carol?

I can't prove it, but I suspect it was the inspiration for this line from O Holy Night:

> Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother. And in his name, all oppression shall cease.

It's interesting to think that this line from a little letter that is often criticized for not being critical enough of slavery has lodged itself in a broader Christian imagination that eventually did away with slavery.

All oppression has obviously not yet ceased, but the Christian hope is that it must and it shall, in the name of the divine slave who is also our brother.

And with respect to the tone of the letter. Is Paul engaging in a bit of sly rhetoric to try to move Philemon to his side? Sure.

But Paul lays himself and his reputation on the line for this runaway.

He tells Philemon that in sending Onesimus back to him, he is sending "my own heart. He tells Philemon to "welcome him as you would welcome me."

He says that if Onesimus has wronged Philemon in any way or owes him anything (maybe he dipped into the proverbial change purse on the way out the door?) he should charge it to Paul's account. Paul will pay the debt.

In his commentary on this passage, N.T. Wright puts it like this:

> [Paul] will stand in the place of risk and pain, with arms outstretched towards the slave and the owner; he will stand at one of the pressure points of the human race from that day until very recently; he will close the gap not just between Philemon and Onesimus but between the two sides of the great divide that ran through, and in some places still runs through, the life of the world. Paul, firmly rooted in the saving gospel of the cross of Jesus is "entrusted with the gospel of reconciliation." This is what it looks like in practice.[3]

And whether or not Paul is hinting at Philemon granting Onesimus his freedom or slyly telling him to send him back to him, in both cases his goal seems clear.

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[3] N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002), 208.

He himself sees Onesimus as a brother in Christ. And he wants Philemon will do the same.

Wherever Onesimus ends up, both Paul and Philemon have the duty to put into practice what Paul described in theory in the book of Galatians:

> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

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The title of my sermon this morning is “Where Can I Flee?” It’s taken from the Psalm that we begin our worship service with.

Where can I flee from your presence?, David rhetorically asks. Wherever I go, there you are.

It is a song of praise to the inescapable God who is always pursuing us, always stubbornly offering redemption, always bringing good out of bad, light out of darkness.

“Even the darkness is not dark to you,” David says. “The night is as bright as the day” (Psalm 139:12).

Where can we flee? The implied answer is… nowhere.

Onesimus fled from Philemon for very understandable reasons. And then he became a Christian and found himself in a different kind of story.

A story where it’s not enough to just get away from the bad people or the bad institutions or the bad cultural practices.

He finds himself in a story that says that the categories must change, that slaves and their owners can become “beloved brothers.”

He found that God was present and active, even in the middle of a conflicted story.

Perhaps, Paul says to Philemon, this all happened for a reason. Maybe it was so that you could welcome Onesimus back not as a slave, not as someone inferior, not as a piece of property, but as a member of your family, a fellow disciple in the body of Christ

Perhaps, God can work even within wicked institutions like slavery in order to bring about goodness, and light, and hope, and joy.

Perhaps grace can make beauty out of ugly things, to borrow a line from the rock band U2.

What is true for Onesimus and for Paul and for Philemon is true for each one of us.

In each one of our lives, there are ugly things. There are things that we would not choose. There are trials that we would rather not face if we were given the option.

There are hard things that we cannot control and that we did not ask for.

There are histories and futures that exert pressure on our presents that sometimes seem like more than we can bear.

The story of Philemon offers a simple message to us. Take heart. God is at work, behind the scenes. There is much that can be redeemed, much that can be forgiven, much that can be healed.

Slaves can become beloved brothers.

There is no corner of creation that we can flee to where God is absent or uninvolved. There is no darkness we can endure (or create) that God cannot bring light out of.

So, be happy. Because joy is a kind of courage. Grace is a kind of hope.

And love is a kind of faith that trusts that there is no reality, however apparently hopeless, that cannot be transformed and illuminated and redeemed by the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Amen.