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Title: A Good Work Continues

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Text: [Philippians 1:3-11](#)

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I am not good at knowing how to say goodbye. A few years back, a good colleague accused me of this, just after I shared that I'd completed 30 years at Geist Christian Church. "Randy, you've never learned to say goodbye. A pastor needs to be able to leave, to move on." He would know. During my years here, he climbed a ladder and served eight

churches. For better or worse, I haven't been able to leave since arriving in Indianapolis to plant this church in 1985. So please forgive me if you will. It has been 36 years since I have written a sermon like this. I did find my final sermon at Central Christian Church in Glendale, CA. You can't imagine some of the things that I've found cleaning out my office. Sadly, it isn't helpful.

Thirty-six years ago today, Ann and I came to Indianapolis for a quick visit to secure housing. She talked to her soon to be boss about her position as Vice-President of Homeland Ministries. I visited with the Steering Committee for the New Church project. Then, we had dinner with a couple who heard that a Disciples congregation was being planned for Fishers. The McQuinns, Jeff and Marsha, picked us up and we spent that evening in their Beam Reach home just a mile from here. It was around their table that we began. We had our first family and a new target area. The New Church Start in Fishers was now The New Church Start in Geist. We doubled the membership of our new church in one night. Tripled if you counted their teenage children. I have never had such a day of growth since.

We were young and didn't know what we were doing. We returned to California and went to a seminar offered by Fuller Seminary, title "How to Plant a Church." I still have the manual. Here it is. I looked in it. There is nothing in it about saying goodbye. Not a word.

I looked in the Bible. I thought, "I'll just do a search and come up with a few goodbye passages." And do you know what? There isn't one. The word goodbye isn't found in scripture. How can that be? Adam and Eve didn't get a goodbye as they were leaving the Garden. Just a "don't let the fiery sword hit you in the backside on the way out." Moses, having led all those grumpy Israelites fussing, complaining about the food and water for 40 miserable

years: no goodbye. King David, who united God's people into one nation: no goodbye. Jesus doesn't even offer the word. Ascending into heaven on a cloud of glory, he didn't bother with goodbye. Rather, he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20a) There's not goodbye in that. It's just the opposite because he says one last thing. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b)

He was reminding them of a promise. I'm not abandoning you. I'm not deserting you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you..." (John 14:18) While we will be separating for a little while, while my body goes, my love remains. And that sound you hear within will be me cheering you on from heaven, being your Advocate and companion.ⁱ

There is no goodbye in that because there is no goodbye. He is with us. And there is no goodbye because we aren't finished. That's what Jesus was saying. You've got work to do. Disciples to find and believers to baptize. Students to teach and commandments to follow. It's Jesus telling us that we are a part of a story, a story being written and we are in the middle of it. It's a love story, God's love story that begins with creation and the breath of life. It has a cross in the middle, in the end, a king, who will embrace us with His redeeming love.

This is exactly what Paul is saying to his new church plant in Philippi. I've always had affection for his new church ministry. Acts 16 says while on a missionary journey, he came to the city of Philippi. There were no Christians in the city. There weren't even enough Jews to have a synagogue. The best Paul could find was a small Jewish prayer meeting, composed mostly of women, which met under some trees by the river. He joined them, began to speak about Christ, and the Lord opened the heart of one of the ladies named Lydia.ⁱⁱ

Just like that McQuinn family, she made her home available and the church was born right then and there. It was a church that God watches over and blessed, just like us. They prayed together, just like us. They love each other, just as we have loved each other. It brought Paul immense joy just as you have brought me joy in serving you.

Paul writes from prison, not to say goodbye but to remind them what Jesus teaches. He says, "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 1:6) The story isn't finished. God's love story is still being written. It won't be finished until the redemptive day of Jesus Christ. And

with God as his witness, he prays that their love may overflow as their good work continues and it will produce a "harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:11)

It is a good word for us today because, too often, we forgot this about this challenge in a difficult season of our lives, and oh what a difficult season we are in. We can become overwhelmed by all of the problems—raging pandemic, racial injustice, political turmoil, and social unrest. It is such a difficult time and so many problems.

Our Lord teaches us this truth. Life is not a problem to be solved. It is a story to be written. Again, life is not a problem to be solved. It is a story to be written and for those who are believers, each bears the responsibility to help write this love story. We do that with good works and even in the most difficult time, we can because He is with us. He cheers us on as our Advocate and companion. You can see why there are no goodbyes in the Bible.

There is, of course, another reason. The word goodbye doesn't show up in the English language until the 16th century. It evolved over time, a contraction of a phrase, God be with thee, God be with you. For centuries before that, when people were departing, they didn't just say, I'm leaving. They offered, God be with you. It was a prayer, a heartfelt wish. A benediction. While I cannot be with you, may God be with you.

About 150 years ago, there was a hymnist name Jeremy Rankin. When he too discovered that this was the origin of the word goodbye, he wrote a hymn. "God be with you till we meet again. By His counsel's guide, uphold you, With His sheep securely fold you; God is with you till we meet again."

He wrote it so that every week the people in that little church that he was serving could sing those words over each other. And it was so powerful, that when World War 1 came, they put those words on postcards and sent them with soldiers so that they could face whatever comes. God be with you. But of course, isn't that what Jesus is saying "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b)

So, we don't say goodbye. We say God be with you. And God has been with us. From the beginning moments 36 years ago to this very day, God has richly blessed our congregation, with you. Each of you, whether they're at the very beginning or newly arrived, God's good work in Christ Jesus continued because you brought your story into our story and it became God's story. You brought your heart for God and heart for people and together we've praise God and cared for one another. And that good work

continues. Your spiritual growth, your gifts of service are true signs of God's presence among us. And all of that good work continues because "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will continue you until it is brought to completion by Jesus Christ."

So, God be with you. God be with you, young people. You have a long, bright, and wonderful future in front of you with big dreams. I hope it is far more than you can imagine but I hope you write your story in ways that will help the good work continue, that you will love God, follow Jesus, and care for your neighbor. ⁱⁱⁱ

God be with you old folks because since I started this church, I have joyfully joined your ranks. Your future is shorter than it once was and you might be puzzled about your life or even disappointed about how things are turning out, given the challenges you face, we face. If so, I remind you that Paul says to all of us. Everything... reputation, money, status, position, health can be taken from us will be taken from us. But it doesn't matter. Why? "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Because God is with us, with you! Continue to invest, your heart, your resources, your love so that a good work continues.

God be with you middle folk for very soon, far sooner than you imagine, you will be old people. You don't need to hurry to get there. Don't live exhausted. Don't chase that which in the end will waste away. And don't live alone. Love God and the world God has given you. Love your neighbor so that a good work continues.

God be with you, staff. What a wonderful staff we had and have. Over the 36 years, gifted and dedicated people and with many who have served alongside me for several decades. They deserve the greatest credit for the accomplishments of our congregation and I'm sure that because of their heart for God and heart for people I am confident a good work will continue and it will bring me joy.

God be with you Mud Creek; God be with you Promise Road. Dream big. Aim high. Be Great. Passionately invite. Pray unceasingly as you love God and love people. If you do, like Paul, "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)

Above all, God be with each of you in the person of Jesus. May each of you know him as your constant companion as you write your story, in this place, and your life journey. He promises he won't abandon you, won't leave you

orphaned. All you have to do is ask him in and God will be with you in Jesus, cheering you on as your Advocate and companion.

The word goodbye may not be in the Bible but there is a little word that often comes when things reach an end. It's the word Amen. It is a unique word that was only found in Jesus' language, Aramaic. They couldn't find a word like it in Greek so it is the very same word. It's the same issue in English.

What a powerful word Amen it. It's this glorious affirmation; it's yes on steroids. It's all God's promises are yes and Amen in Jesus. It is when we affirm with all our being just the way we want it. It comes at the end but there is something about it that always looks forward. May it be so. Let it be done. It is the very last word in the bible in the book of Revelation. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen." (Revelation 22:21)

Because life is not a problem to be solved but a story to be written. I'm so grateful that my story got to be a part of your story for 36 years. And though I won't be with you in body, my love will. And the sound you hear will be cheering you on, your advocate and prayerful companion as a good work continues.

Now, Geist Christian Church. God be with you. Amen.

ⁱ Ortberg, John. Farewell. Menlo Park Church. August 2, 2020

ⁱⁱ Sunukjia, Don. The Blazing Fastball That Gives Us Confidence. Retrieved by subscription @preachingtoday.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Challenges and ending is adapted from Ortberg.