

Focus: God is still working in me.

It was the day after Thanksgiving and I had already lost. No suspense. No down to the wire race.

I pulled into my driveway to see my neighbor Jeff three rungs up his ladder hanging up his Christmas lights.

0-16... We have lived in that house for 16 years with three different next door neighbors and have never been the first to hang our lights. Truth be told there have been many Christmases we would have been totally dark if my father-in-law hadn't saved the day.

I like Christmas lights. I enjoy Christmas lights. I'm in favor of decorating. I'm just never as put together as the people around me.

How will you measure Christmas success?

When another Christmas is in the books, how will you have scored it?

Will you count up how many presents you gave?

How many you received?

Is it about how prepared you were for the family celebrations?

Or, how many moments of peace you counted?

Will it be about the presents that hit the mark, or the one that woefully missed?

Will it be based on the feedback of your kids, your grandkids, your spouse, or your parents?

If we're being honest, is there any hope of you getting a win this Christmas?

If your outlook is frightful, then Paul's bold words may be the best gift for you today.

The Apostle Paul is writing from prison to the people he loves in Philippi. He offers these words of encouragement.

I'm sure of this that He who began a good work within you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion...

Modern day translation: **Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet!**

I'm sure you've heard this saying before, but it bears repeating today.
Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet!

Sometimes we may need to say this to the people we let down. Sometimes our best audience for this message will be a mirror.

This message can be tough to accept, because we want to be better. We're constantly comparing ourselves to where we think we should be.

By this time in life I was going to be so much further along professionally.
I was going to write a book.
I was going to have so much more money saved up.
I was going to have some money saved up.
I was going to be in the type of physical shape that would make me proud.
At least I was going to get my Christmas lights up this year.

Paul is promising that no matter where you are in your journey through this life, he is confident that you're going to get there. He encourages his hearers to strive to be loving, to be wise, to be filled with every good gift. Give this life all you've got. It will be worth it.

But in the final analysis, Paul knows that we will get there because while we struggle and strive. We're not our own. We're a work of God.

A work in progress no doubt -- but we're God's work -- not our own.

This is reflected in our Old Testament reading as well. When Malachi talks about God's refining work within the lives of His people. He says:

God will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

What's that look like? It's a painful process. A process that involves quite a bit of discomfort, and more than a little heat. God does some of his best refining when we're squirming.

And this is worth considering... the where am I going piece? Paul knows we are going to get there, but where is there? Who exactly am I meant to become? Our guesses here

may be very wrong. We may grasp at things that aren't intended for us. There are a lot of decisions in life that God just leaves open to us without closing a door, or guiding us in a specific direction.

If I'm a work of God my final destination is set by Him, not by me. How does a silversmith know when he is done? When he can see his own face reflected in the metal. If God is the refiner, completion for us will be a clear reflection of Christ in our lives.

The churchy word for this is sanctification. It's the process by which the Holy Spirit makes us holier. We don't get sanctified in the hopes that God will save us. We become sanctified because God has saved us. He has saved us and through the sweetness of the Gospel He begins a new work in us from the inside out.

And so, the focus for us is to try to do our best knowing that Christ will do the rest.

John the Baptist is doing some difficult refining work down by the river in our Gospel lesson. He is setup on what may be best described as a holy highway. John is just north of the Dead Sea in a desert area. This was a popular trail for the Jewish people because it took them around Samaria clearly avoiding the Samaritan people who they found to be so detestable.

John positions himself right there to do what seems to be an odd thing. He is preaching to the holy people. It's not your typical Sunday Sermon as John calls out to them.

You brood of Vipers! Repent!

This would be an audience that wouldn't believe they have need to change. In fact, they saw themselves on such high ground that they are taking this path just to avoid those lowly Samaritans. And yet, there stands John preaching for all he is worth, telling the people God is displeased with their behavior. The time to change direction is now. For many he baptizes, which would be a really strange thing as baptism before John was reserved for pagans as they came to faith.

John gets their attention, and the people ask him "What should we do?"

John answers... if you have two tunics give one away.

If you have more food than you need... Share it with someone else.

Do you work honestly.

Be content with what you have.

This is truly Christmas preparation.

Give to the needy. Feed the hungry. Take stock of your blessings. Thank God for his goodness.

And make way for the goodness of God to work within you. Advent takes us to the manger reminding us that God came into the world to be born in the middle of creation.

Today God remains in the middle of His creation as His Holy Spirit works within us. This good work that began in our baptisms is carried out until Christ comes again.

Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet!

... Is a true assessment of our situation. As I watch the faithful of St. Paul bring in food at Thanksgiving, pack shoeboxes, take angels off the tree in the hallway, sponsor school families, serve with smiles on your faces, these are all signs of the good work that God has begun in you.

And yet, the Apostle Paul reminds us that this is only the beginning. **And so, I'm sure of this that He who began a good work within you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**