This passage from Philippians is the very beginning of the letter, excluding only the “Dear Philippians” part. According to William Loader, my man in Australia, “Paul was never interested in winning converts as if the main game was numbers. He was concerned about people entering a new relationship with God that keeps going.” This excerpt makes that clear.

More Loader: “It all sounds straightforward and uncomplicated, but . . . there were real dangers which could easily have undone all that Paul had begun,” including “what Paul's Christian opponents might do, especially those who were convinced that Paul had watered down the scriptures in not enforcing circumcision and . . . other laws which scripture unambiguously attributed to God.” Just after our passage “he writes of some preachers who are simply acting out of self-interest. Later he will warn against [the] ‘dogs’ [who were] promoting circumcision. Paul was forever having to struggle with what we today would call fundamentalist attitudes towards the Bible. So [his] introductory comments are far from formal niceties - and the Philippians would doubtless know it.”

He makes “a real effort to cement the relationship,” speaking and writing frequently about the need for Christians to have a loving relationship with each other, especially as that reflects the love of God we all enjoy. “He gives it a particular focus” here—“love which is well-informed and able to be critical, to differentiate faith from phony or destructive forms of (Christian and other) religion.” That “includes dealing with the assaults of those who see Paul's very open, love-centred form of Christ's gospel as ‘unscriptural’ and far too ‘way out’. Paul wants people to be genuine/ honest/sincere and faultless/having a clear conscience. Rigid adherence to laws is something Paul sees not only as erroneous, but also as destructive and the opposite of everything he would understand as holy and good. That is because for Paul God's holiness consists in God's love, not in a kind of self-protective obsession with order and rightness where laws and rules matter more than people. Paul's stance echoes Jesus' declara-tion that the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath.”

Verse eleven “completes this section of the letter with another image of what matters most for Paul. It is having people live lives which produce the fruit of righteousness/justice which we see demonstrated in Jesus. His image of praising God has less to do with hymns and songs than it has to do with real people living changed lives.

“Behind this language is one of the big arguments which people launched against Paul. If you take this free approach of saying people are not to live by the Law as a set of instructions and if you say that scripture is pointing to hope and renewal rather than laying out a manual of what one should do to get life, won't that lead people to disregard what is good and go off the rails?

“Goodness, he often argues, is the fruit of a good relationship with God, much more than a following of laws, biblical or otherwise. The goodness that God wants is nothing less than the flow of love which marks the heart of God's doing and being. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit as love. Here he speaks of the fruit of righteousness/justice - it is the same thing. Many Christians then and now struggle to understand this.”

Loader leaves me with little to say, except that it is Advent, and all the other readings seem to be about prophets as messengers, two of them specifically about John the Baptist, with a little Malachi thrown in for good measure.

So, contextualizing a bit, I would only add that Paul is writing after the fact of all this anticipation, yearning to make clear to the Philippians, and beyond, that this is what it all was and is about.

It took generations of heralds and angels and prophets and messengers to help people see that there is something greater in God’s love for us than that very sacred contractual relationship, marked (as contracts are) by laws and rules and regulations and clauses and subclauses. There is one reigning principle: love. And not some heart-and-flowers mushy kind of love, but love that stands by us at all times. And to stand by us that love has been made incarnate, has been made human flesh and blood, as any one of us. That incarnate love is what draws us together and keeps us together, just as Paul prayed that it would keep the faithful in Philippi together.

Those loving relationships inspired one of today’s hymns: “Comfort, comfort ye my people.” It’s a prayer to God, of course, but it might also be taken as a reassurance to all of us with the addition of just one comma: “Comfort, comfort, my people.” God is coming, has come, and will always be with us to give that comfort, and calls us to continue as that comforting presence for all our sisters and brothers. + + +