

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

## RUNNING THE WRONG WAY

In a 1964 National Football League game, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman Jim Marshall scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49ers receiver.

He saw daylight ahead of him. None of the opposing team's red uniforms stood between him and the end zone, some 60 yards away.

So he took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go. It wasn't often that a defensive lineman gets to score a touchdown. He was totally focused on the goal.

He heard the crowd roaring around him. He ran harder.

He saw his teammates running alongside him waving their arms on the sideline. He ran even harder.

He cruised the last few yards into the end zone and celebrated his touchdown by joyfully tossing the football up into the stands.

Then a player on the other team walked up and gave him a big hug.

His eyes were opened. You see, Jim Marshall had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored two points for the guys in red.

When you watch the television replay, you hear the announcer yelling, over and over, "He's running the wrong way! Marshall is running the wrong way!"

The only person in the stadium who didn't realize Jim Marshall was running the wrong way was Jim Marshall.

That happened to the Apostle Paul.

Paul had a goal in his life. He was dedicated to the Jewish faith. He was a superior theologian. He was a Pharisee and kept the law to the nth degree.

And Paul was especially dedicated to keeping the faith pure, that's why he was persecuting the church. He felt the early Christians were dangerous heretics who needed to be stopped.

But then Paul ran down the road to Damascus one day. He was in a hurry to take some Christians to jail. And he ran right into Jesus. Jesus said to Paul,

"Paul, you're running in the wrong direction! You have to turn around and go the other way."

## REPENTANCE

Some silly people think that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you have faith. Jesus didn't think that way. Sometimes our religious zeal can be misguided at best and demonic at worst.

And so, Jesus still tells us that we have to turn around and go in another direction. It's called repentance, and it's essential for those who want to follow Jesus.

When Paul ran into Jesus on the road to Damascus everything in his life changed.

He had to lay down the trophies of the past in order to embrace a new way of life. The things that he once thought were so important turned out to be nothing but rubbish.

Paul described the process in this way. He said that he was trying to forget the past and press on toward the goal of God's future.

All of us go through times of transition. We find out through a hard experience that we have been going in the wrong direction.

We have problems that turn us inside out and upside down. We are forced by circumstances to lay down the trophies of the past and reevaluate our priorities.

But, can these difficult times of transition also be a holy time? Can God really give us a new nature? Can God teach us to love what He loves and lay down those prized trophies of the past in favor of His future?

## A MARATHON

Paul said, “Yes, it is possible. But, it’s a process.”

In our lesson for today Paul notes that the old way of life no longer holds an attraction for him. And yet he still has a way to go when it comes to the walk of faith.

He is still striving to know Christ. He is still striving to understand the power of the resurrection.

He is still striving to know what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus. He is still striving to forget the past and strain toward God’s future. (Philippians 3:10-13)

The same is true for us. Following Jesus begins on the road to Damascus. Faith begins at that moment when we run into Jesus.

But that is just the beginning.

Following Jesus is not easy. When we run with Jesus it means that we have to take up the cross of self-denial in order to follow him. That road is long and winding and often difficult.

Paul sees his whole life as a kind of long and difficult marathon. He is like a runner hitting the wall and straining forward to break the tape at the finish line, trusting that it is all worth the pain and the burn.

He wrote, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward ... the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13-14 NRSV).

The Greek word that we translate as “press on” in this passage suggests a chase. Paul is chasing after Christ.

We do not find Jesus by running away from the cross, running away from difficulties. We only find Jesus by running toward the cross, running toward a life of self-sacrifice.

We do not find God by seeking to avoid the wilderness. We find God in the wilderness.

## RUNNING THROUGH THE THISTLES

Several years ago the Alban Institute published a book on making a successful pastoral transition. It was entitled *Running Through the Thistles*. The author, Roy Oswald contended that in order to make a successful transition it’s necessary for the church and the pastor to forget the past and strive toward the future.

But, this transition cannot be made too rapidly. Both the pastor the church will need to acknowledge and experience the pain of this transition in order to move on in their journey of faith.

He illustrates this process by telling a story about some young boys who used to play barefoot in the Deep South. Sometimes they would forget the time and would find themselves late for supper. Trust me. Mommas in the Deep South do not tolerate boys being late for supper!

So, in order to save some time and avoid the wrath of their mothers, these boys would take a shortcut through the field. Unfortunately there were thistles in that field.

In order to keep pain to a minimum they would run through the thistles. I can just see those boys yelping and yelling as they made their way through those painful minefields as quickly as possible.

Many of us try to minimize the pain in our life using the same technique.

We try to forget the past as quickly as we can and press on to something else. We run through the thistles in an attempt to get to a better, safer place.

But, I'm not so sure running through the thistles is a helpful technique for people or churches that have a big problem.

When you run through the thistles the thorns go deep, and they are difficult to remove.

## TRANSFORMED BY THE WILDERNESS

When Paul talked about forgetting the past and pressing on toward the future, he was not saying that we should run away from our problems. He didn't want us to make a mad dash through the thistles.

He was telling us to look at our problems from a different perspective. He was asking us to think about how our faith in Christ can transform our view of the past and our hopes for the future.

God's people had to spend time in the wilderness before they could enter the Promised Land. And so do we.

In the wilderness we learn to trust God totally. In the wilderness we learn to follow the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

In the wilderness we come to depend upon what God gives us and not upon what we can do for ourselves.

Yes, times of transition are painful.

We will not make it through unscathed. The wilderness always leaves its mark. But, the wilderness has a wonderful way of teaching us what is really important.

### FOLLOW YOUR PASSION

Steve Jobs, the cofounder of Apple computer was an amazing person. Steve created a very successful computer company from very meager beginnings. I think he started the business in his family's garage with a loan of \$1,400 from his parents. By the time he was thirty he was wealthy and successful.

And then they hired a new guy at Apple. The new guy made a pitch to the board of directors. And at the age of 30 Steve Jobs was fired from the company he helped create. He was depressed.

But, Steve still loved what he did. So, instead of worrying about all that he had lost he began to think about all that he could do.

In the end losing his job at Apple was actually good for him. It allowed him to think outside of the box and be the amazingly creative person he was called to be. He started several new companies.

And he eventually was able to assume control of his old company and made it into the most successful computer company in the world. Steve followed his passion. Almost until the day he died he was motivated and animated by that passion.

I think there's something to admire in that.

### THE HEAVENLY CALL

And it causes me to ask us this question. Shouldn't we be motivated and animated by our passion?

Our passion is Christ, and the good news of God's forgiveness. And it is our passion for the call of Christ that should guide our life.

There's a gospel song that goes, "With trouble all around me I can sing amazing grace." That's our job, to sing amazing grace no matter what the circumstances.

Steve Jobs would have led a miserable life if he had let his firing from Apple define his life. But, he didn't do it. He took that bitter pill as an opportunity.

Paul tells us to forget the past, the good and the bad, and press toward that kingdom that comes. That future will be defined by (as Paul puts it) "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul's goal and our goal is the "heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus".

Whenever I think of the heavenly call I think of that quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes. He talked about those folks who are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.

I have met some of those folks, and I suspect you have as well. That's not what we're talking about.

In the church we define the heavenly call in a very "earthly" way. Specifically we talk about the Word becoming flesh. We say that God was in Christ. And we seek to be in Christ.

You may have noticed that in our lesson Paul talked about the death and resurrection of Jesus in an unusual way. Paul wrote,

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus are not just facts to be believed, but a roadmap for discipleship.

A good example of this is found earlier in this letter, Philippians 2:5-11.

In that famous passage Paul tells the Philippians that their attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. His humility on the cross provides an example for us. The humility of the cross gives us a reason to humble and patient in our dealings with others.

And I believe the resurrection of Jesus gives us a reason to have hope even in the worst of circumstances.

But, it is a hope that must be cultivated by the way we live. How can we proclaim the hope of eternal life if our daily life is filled with sarcasm and negativity? If we are redeemed, then we need to show it.

We must help each other in this regard.

I'm not a big fan of bumper sticker theology, but in this case there is one that I like. It goes, "Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet." That one is true. God isn't finished with us yet.

Others may say that we're finished. We may even wonder some times if we're finished. But, God does not give up on us that easily. Instead God in Christ has provided a hope for this life and for the life to come.

We rightly say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him. But, we sometimes forget that this means more than just repeating the orthodox phrases about Jesus.

It means that we actually follow the way of Jesus, the path that Jesus followed. We strive to run down that path.

It is the path of compassion. It is the path of forgiveness. It is the path of service and sacrifice.

This is our goal. This is the beacon that points us in the right direction.

This is what Paul called the “heavenly call of God”. (Philippians 4:16) When we do these things heaven and earth come together. When we do these things our lives are turned around and we have a goal worth pursuing.

Heaven is the goal for the Christian, but heaven is not a static goal. Heaven is more than just saying that one day when we die we will go to heaven.

Heaven is according to Paul a calling. In other words the goal of heaven animates our actions today. It gives our lives focus and direction. It is the heavenly call of God that gets all of us running.

## LENT

The season of Lent gives us some time to think about what is most important in our life. It begins on Ash Wednesday when we are reminded of our own mortality, and it continues until Holy Week.

The ultimate goal of Lent is to help us survey the wondrous cross of Christ, and think about what is most important in our life.

When we reflect upon the sacrifice made for us on the cross (as the hymn puts it), “our greatest gain we count but loss and pour contempt on all our pride.”

What are you proud of? What is the greatest achievement in your life?

Do you have any trophies that you proudly display on the bookshelf at home? Do you have any certificates of accomplishment or degrees that you hang on the wall?

How important are those achievements when all is said and done?

When you think about your own mortality and the sacrifice of the cross, how do those trophies stack up?

How important are they really?

Paul said that his greatest accomplishments were nothing but rubbish in comparison to the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. Paul was determined to put those trophies down and run in a different direction.

God in Christ had turned him around and pointed him toward the proper goal line.

And Paul was running flat out for glory.

I wonder. Are you running in the wrong direction? Are your priorities all mixed up?

I invite you to spend a little time this week surveying the wondrous cross.

Think about God's love and forgiveness.

Think about his sacrifice.

Think about his heavenly call.

And then start running in the right direction. It makes all the difference.

Amen.