

“Pressing On”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 13, 2016
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Readings from Scripture: Isaiah 43:16-21 and Philippians 3:4b-14

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick; do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Isaiah 43:16-21

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 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 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. 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.

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. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:4b-14

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words we have heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that word do its work within us, among us and through us, especially in this hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

At first blush when you read this passage or hear it read, it kind of, to me, has this Knute Rockne cadence to it. I used to be that, I used to be this, I used to be that, but then I counted it as nothing, but now I press on, I keep going, I keep at it...and on and on and on and on. Nothing to me can be further from the essence of what Paul was trying to communicate than somehow trying to whip up the people of the faith to just keep going, no

matter what. Keep going, keep striving, keep trying to get to Jesus, keep trying to get that prize that's dangling just out in front of you, that you are so close to you can almost touch it but you're not good enough to touch it, so keep at it. That is not what Paul is saying in this passage. This passage comes to us on the last Sunday of Lent, in a season in the life of the church where we begin with ashes etched on our foreheads in the sign of the cross. The season that reminds us that we are dust and spirit, beautifully co-mingling together while we have the gift of life and that someday that spirit that makes us alive will depart our dust and to dust we, again, will return. Lent is the time when we are unafraid to look at what it means to be a people that are created, not perfect, but created, a place where spirit and dust mingle.

Some people spend Lent as a time of taking inventory in their lives, of looking back at the things that they've done in the past year or maybe in their lifetime, recognizing the mistakes or foibles that they've made and realizing that instead of being the ultimate end, these things maybe were a place where they could see God's grace at work. Lent is a time to look back, to pay attention, but only insofar as it gets us ready to celebrate yet again the mystery and magic of Easter. The fact that Jesus came to give salvation to everyone in all of creation, to make everything new by grace and love and mercy. So we look back and look at our lives not fearfully. We don't strive to attain something that's out in front of us. Instead we spend this time and think about how God is at work in us and through us, not just in those things which we want to have plastered in front of everyone else. But how might God be at work in those things that we're just a smidgen or a lot embarrassed about?

This past week, a week ago Wednesday, I found myself at BJC preparing to get a new eyeball. I was in the preoperative section of the hospital and as I was lying there watching the clock tick very slowly, incredibly slowly, I was thinking about preaching and wondering where am I going to go with this? The idea that came to me, probably not unrelated was, I wonder what my obituary would say? What if the doctor sneezes while he has a scalpel....I went to some weird places. But I thought about it. The Reverend Doctor David Allen Holyan, 52, died pastor of this church and then associate pastor of that one and pastor of this, and graduate of Columbia Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary and Seattle University and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. All these accolades and big shiny things that I want everyone to look at. That was before the nurse came in and gave me that little happy juice. Because then I began to think what would a real obituary look like? What would an honest obituary look like? What would my obituary look like if I made peace with the fact that I am dust imbued with the Spirit of God? and then instead of trying to make that look prettier than it is, I just was at peace with it.

So I thought to myself, I'm going to rewrite my obituary and be a little more honest. David Holyan, lover of early morning lattes, quiet prayer, preaching, trout fishing, skeet shooting and dinner with family and friends. May he rest in peace. Or something like that. It dawned on me that we spend so much time getting stuff that we miss the reality that what really matters in our lives are not those things. And this passage that says a lot about pressing on and carrying on and keep going may sound like fuel for you to keep at those things. I'm not saying those things are not important, I'm just saying at the end of life, they may not matter as much as those smaller, quieter, more meaningful encounters that we all have. But then I thought to myself, if I was going to be really honest, I'm not sure that that obituary would be it. And the reason that I think that is because I am convinced and in this passage is one of those phrases that Paul uses that has been translated incorrectly in English every time you've ever heard it. It's in Galatians 3:22, it's in Romans, it's here in Philippians, it's in some of his other letters as well, and the phrase is *pisteos Iesou Christou*. Here it says simply that righteousness comes to you through faith in Christ. But it does not say that in the Greek. Paul did not write that when he wrote this letter to the people in Philippi. What he said is that the righteousness that he's claiming comes through the faithfulness of Christ. I don't know about you but for me when I think about trying to be good, it's always from a place of deficit and striving to get to some place of adequacy. If I need to have my faith be in Christ, there are times when I'm not faithful. There are times when my belief is zero or less than zero. And if my salvation depends on my

consistently having faith in Christ, I'm in trouble. But if my salvation depends upon the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, depends upon the faithfulness of the one who allowed himself to be nailed to a cross for all of us and all of creation so that every sin we've ever committed, every wrong we've ever done, every stupid thing we've ever said, every hurt we've ever caused can be erased and forgiven, then maybe we have a chance.

So I have been wondering about maybe a collective obituary for all of us. Broke a friend's arm when eight years old. Crashed the car and blamed it on my friend. Got married to someone I did not love and was unfaithful to them. Stole money from my job. Not sure I'm doing the right thing with my life, but I just need to pay the bills so I keep going. On and on and on. The last line of the gospel obituary that I think Paul is trying to help us get our heads wrapped around says simply, 'and yet, we are saved through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.' The gospel in this season of Lent is that the grace and love and salvation and wholeness and promise of God is so big that it holds all of who we are, all of what we've done, so that we don't have to strive for anything anymore. What we need to do is do what it says in Isaiah, perceive a new thing, perceive that God's love is already at work in our lives and rather than striving for it, we now need to give it away. We need to pass it on. We need to share it. Paul does not say to keep going because you don't have something. Paul is saying you have an amazing gift, so keep going. Amen.