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National Presbyterian Church

On the Road With Jesus IV: Staying The Course

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Luke 14:28-30

David Renwick

Whether from a secular point of view or from a Christian and Biblical point of view life is often viewed as a journey. And this fall, the idea of “the journey” and in particular the spiritual journey i.e., the impact of our relationship with God on our lives – on our character, our actions, our choices as we move through life – is the central theme or guiding image of our Sunday morning sermons

So, in the last couple of weeks, for example, we’ve thought about the importance of having a guide, or mentor, or shepherd on our journey. Someone ahead of us, beckoning us forward who ensures that the journey is safe and successful – and not simply (as Malcolm Muggeridge’s biography is called so poignantly) “a chronicle of wasted time.”

And so, in Christian terms, one of the critical promises of Jesus is that he will be the very leader (guide, shepherd, mentor) we need, leading him to say with utter conviction and repeatedly, “Follow ME!”

And then, in the past 2 weeks, we’ve thought as well about the difficulties involved in “getting going” on a journey – any journey no matter who we follow.

In physics, this problem is called inertia: it’s the resistance to any change in motion, which includes the difficulty of getting going – think of a locomotive or big truck, picking up speed from scratch.

So, in our case, we often find ourselves looking back to the past, and find it hard to let go of some-one or some-thing or some place in our past, and therefore to say “goodbye” and get moving!

Or, we look to the future, and find it can be hard not to be fearful of the unknown: real fears or imaginary. And so, in Christian terms, what we’re called to believe is that God knows this, and understands, and says, “Trust me: I can take care of both the past and the future.”

250 years ago a Christian named Katharina Von Schlegel described this kind of faith for the journey/ this kind of provision of God in her hymn, “Be Still my Soul”:

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.*

So she believed that her God could deal with the past. And she also believed that God could deal with the future:

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake

*To guide the future, as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last . . .
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below.*

And that's really what I want us to think about this morning the waves and winds mentioned in the last two lines: the kind of waves and winds that we meet on the Christian journey; the kind obstacles that arise after we set out and we're on our way and that can

- distract us from the path so that we lose our vision and our way
- or disillusion us, and leave us cynical about the value of the journey: wondering if it's worth it or TRUE, at all
- or create panic and distress (robbing us of energy to keep on going)

The Apostle Paul in his *Letter to the Ephesians* calls these obstacles (these winds and waves) "the fiery darts of the evil one" (6:16); they're like arrows out of nowhere that knock the stuffing out of us and make us quit or turn back or simply go so slow, without much life in us. So slow at times that we might as well not be going at all. Some of these winds and waves maybe as simple as life not going our way when we want it to:

Every summer when Currie and I lived in Texas we'd load up the mini-van with small children and suit cases, and a carrier on top, and drive the 1024 miles to my wife's home Georgia It was long at the best of times – and draining!

But one summer when the temperature was in the high 90s outside, with, I'm sure 90+% humidity, the car A/C died when we were somewhere close to Houston. And I know I went: "*Lord, please, I don't need this right now!*" – as we turned around and headed home to get it fixed.

Pretty trivial, of course, in the great scheme of things: after all we were safe. **Whereas sometimes when things go wrong, they go really wrong.**

I cannot even begin to think about what it must be like in Puerto Rico right now: where do you even begin to clean up the mess from Hurricane Maria?

Or thinking again of Houston, and this time of Hurricane Harvey. I read recently about the Tobar family – a mother, father and two sons.

- Just 14 months ago, in June 2016, their house was destroyed in a flood that probably didn't make national news.
- Wisely, they were slowly rebuilding their new house on 10 feet high pillars to avoid any future flooding.
- And the father lost his job
- And then in May this year, they were all in the family van when it was hit by an uninsured truck driver, leaving one son in wheel chair, with serious injuries.
- And sure enough, before their rebuilding was complete, Harvey struck and swept everything away again

NBC NEWS September 22, 2017, Maggie Fox

In their case, not just an inconvenience, but lives threatened and livelihood at stake and at the time it seems to make no sense. And at such times as these -- as in times of war or famine or

disease there really IS a reason to cry at God and even scream at God: “*LORD, WHERE ARE YOU? I don’t need this right now! Ever! All the winds and waves! Are just too much for me and I’m finding it hard to believe.*”

And this can be true, too, not only in the face of tragedies of one kind or another, but when we are confronted by **inconsistencies in the lives of institutions and individuals** (including ourselves) that we thought could be trusted as human guides and shepherds leading the way.

So we find ourselves crying out, for example

- How in the world can the Gospel of Jesus (if it’s true) make so little difference in the lives of people who claim to believe?
- How in the world could any part of the church support slavery or segregation or white supremacy or the Nazis or the Inquisition or the abuse of children?”

And then, on a smaller scale, but sometimes just as devastating. How do we handle people who say they believe like us. But when we look at their lives and actions we want to scream “that’s not what I stand for” – though, of course, it’s good to remember that they may be screaming the same thing about us!

A few years ago, the National Sunday School Association administered a poll among 2000 conservative protestant churches.

- When they asked teenagers alienated from the church “Why?” -- one of the top factors was “Adult Hypocrisy”

[Keeping Your Teen in Touch With God by Robert Laurent, 1988]

And last year, (August 2016) late night TV host, James Corden, echoed the poll when he mentioned in an interview that he’d grown up in a devoutly Christian family. He still loves and admires his parents who are devout Christians, but says of himself now that he’s no longer a believer. He said:

"There are some wonderful people who are involved in the church but looking back... I can only describe some church members as some of the least Christian people I’ve ever met. So [I actually felt] as if I didn’t want people to come and join my church

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/1625504/james-corden-had-doubts-about-his-beliefs-and-admits-he-turned-his-back-on-christian-upbringing/>

Ouch! But it’s the truth: That the journey of faith can come to a grinding halt, not just because of the waves and winds of tragedy, and evil and suffering, but because of the waves and winds of hypocrisy and inconsistency in the church as a whole, and in the lives of others, and perhaps in our own lives too.

And then there’s the realm of the mind: waves and winds linked to the mind and the intellect -- to genuine questions of one kind or another that can be hard to deal with. Questions like:

- What do you do with the parts of the Bible that speak about slaughter of peoples in the name of God?
- What do you do with questions of science and evolution and the teaching of Genesis?
- What do you do with multiple religions in the world?

Are they all wrong? and we all right? And, “Are there any answers out there?” Or do we just bury our heads in the sand and commit what some people call “intellectual suicide”?

Well of course, my answer is NO! If you look on our website (www.nationalpres.org) a year or so ago you can find me preaching on questions like these. And best book out there that I recommend that deals with some of these kinds of questions is “*The Reason for God*” by Tim Keller.

Today, though, I only mention these issues simply to say that we live in a world with genuine questions and rampant skepticism, And while that skepticism is directed at all faiths, the fact is that in recent years in the West it’s been especially directed at Christian faith, *and* in a way that is more forceful, belligerent and powerful than it has been in years. Which isn’t all bad: sometimes challenges like these sharpen us: make us sit up and think twice. But sometimes they can hit us like a wave and stop us in our tracks so that the journey slows down, or loses energy or comes to a grinding halt.

And this, in part, is what Jesus is warning us about in the story we read as our Scripture reading: that we call the parable of the sower.

In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Matthew 13, Jesus says this at v.18:

¹⁸⁻¹⁹“This is story of the farmer planting seed.
When anyone hears news of God’s kingdom and doesn’t take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person’s heart -- This is the *seed the farmer scatters on the road*.
²⁰⁻²¹“*The seed cast in the gravel?* — this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.
²²“*The seed cast in the weeds?* This is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it.
²³“And then, *the seed cast on good earth* is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”

Most often when we read this parable we put ourselves in the place of the soil, as if we were the person (or soil) receiving the seed that the farmer sows. And the message is that we have to

- *Make sure* that when we hear God’s word -- which is like a seed – that we don’t take it lightly, but pay attention to our spiritual life; pay attention to the path of our spiritual journey; pay attention to our Guide and Shepherd.
- *Make sure* that we let God’s word work in our life so that we reach the day of harvest, and meet God face-to-face with fulfilment and joy “beyond our wildest dreams.”

In other words: Do everything in our power not to let distractions or opposition or obstacles of one kind or another become winds and waves that throw us off course. And that’s a powerful message: ***Hold tight! Stay the course!*** A message made even more powerful when we read the story of Jesus another way

You see, it’s just as likely that Jesus was telling the story so that we should see ourselves not only as the soil, but as the farmer planting the seed. In which case the message is even more

dramatic. It not only functions as a challenge to stay the course, but (and this may sound strange) an *assurance* of hard times! A *guarantee* of hard times!

Jesus is saying that the Christian life is like baseball: at least 3 times out of four (the road, the gravel, the weeds) you're going to strike out. Get over it: it's the nature of the game. In fact, if you set out to follow me then you're bound to meet all kinds of obstacles along the way

- People who don't believe you at all
- Fair weather friends who look as if they believe but don't
- The temptation to get sucked in by the busyness of life
- Times when no one seems to believe any more
- Times when the reasons for not believing seem stronger than ever
- Times when the things of this world make the gospel seem unreal or irrelevant

So, *“Don't be taken by surprise: stay the course. And if you do, if you keep on the journey long enough, the fruit will come: a harvest beyond your wildest dreams.”*

And this, of course is **part of the message of the communion table that Christians across the world gather around today**. At the table we come face to face with the fact that we follow a savior who was hit by one wave or obstacle after another: until he dies.

But what we proclaim at the table is this: that it's not death that wins in the end. Jesus' death is followed by resurrection; and even in his death itself, we believe that God is at work carrying the sin of the world for you and me. And it's this same Jesus who says **TRUST ME! FOLLOW ME! THERE'S NOWHERE I ASK YOU TO GO THAT I HAVE NOT BEEN.**

- Stay the course, hold tight, don't quit, and don't be surprised or naïve – the journey can be hard
- But Lean on me, I KNOW THE WAY Trust me as your shepherd and guide
- Feed on me at the table, find your strength in me, let my path and strength enter you – and we'll get to the right place, together, in the end. That's what I want for myself – and that's what I believe and I pray for you too.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800