

October 2, 2011
Proper 22, A
Philippians 3:4b-14

In the black church of the United States, where preaching is very definitely a horse of a different colour than here, there is a long tradition of preaching not on a whole text from the bible, but on one verse. I seldom preach on one verse – but the passage that we have been given today from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is so dense, and so complex – as usual, with Paul – and also so beautiful, that trying to say anything simple about it has me just about driven nuts. We spent a wonderful chunk of time with it on Thursday at the Bible Study this week- and they had to cut me off before the end, because it was tea time. There was just too much to say.

So, rather than try to do a lot, this morning, I am going to invite us to do a little – not to swim across the whole lake, but to plunge deep into one particular place – like diving for pearls. We’re going deep.

Here is our verse, part of verse 13, and all of 14 in chapter 3: **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.**

Here it is again: **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.**

There is a common assumption that we make in our culture about who we are. We often assume that we are the product of our experiences, that who we are now, at this point in time, is the result of some kind of evolutionary process whereby we are mutating and growing through time into something else. Everything we have experienced, everything we have lived through, every event we have participated in has formed us, and shaped us and influenced us to be who we are today.

And this can be a good thing. Especially if you like who you are today. Looking back on your life history you might be able to say with some sense of pride, look at who I have become. I faced barriers, I overcame obstacles, I endured privations, I accumulated knowledge. I have been getting stronger and wiser and better as the years have gone on. I am the product of my life.

Good for you. I wish it were that way for all of us. But of course, it isn’t. Some of us look back with a different set of emotions. Not, perhaps, pride, so much as regret – I wish I hadn’t done that. Or maybe anger – I didn’t deserve what happened to me. Or maybe horror – no one should have to live through what I survived. The past looks very different then, doesn’t it?

Paul had a past. A problematic past, actually. Many of you know it. He summarizes it for us up here in verse 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, AS TO ZEAL, A PERSECUTOR OF THE CHURCH; AS TO RIGHTEOUSNESS UNDER THE LAW, BLAMELESS.

That may sound like chest-thumping to you – Paul listing off his credentials like a military officer rhyming off the medals on his chest – but the problem is that by the time he was writing this letter, Paul had repudiated all of those marks of honour. He had turned his back on them all, in fact, he was embarrassed by them. Because of his conversion.

Everything he had once held so dear, and that he was so proud of at one time in his life he suddenly came to see in a new way once he became a follower of Jesus Christ. All his former accomplishments turned to dust and blew away. **YET WHATEVER GAINS I HAD, THESE I HAVE COME TO REGARD AS LOSS BECAUSE OF CHRIST.** He even calls them **RUBBISH.**

He underwent a radical re-orientation of his value system – everything turned on its head for him, everything he once saw as pluses suddenly seemed like minuses, once he came to know Christ.

That can happen to any of us. Something we once valued can come to be meaningless to us, when we set our course by a different star. Maybe you know something about that. Falling in love can sometimes do it to you – everything changes in that instant. Or surviving a serious illness. It can change your priorities a lot. Winning a million probably does, too!

And we all know stories of desperate addicts turning a new leaf, or hardened criminals turning their lives around – maybe you have a turning point in your life. But you don't have to, actually. It's not a requirement. Because I really think that Paul is saying something deeper than 'your past doesn't have to own you.'

I think he is saying, whether your past is something to be proud of, or your past is something to let go of, it doesn't matter. **FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND ...** Paul is saying, in God's eyes, your past is irrelevant. Forget what lies behind.

And then he goes on: **FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND AND STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD...**

STRAINING FORWARD... it makes me think of horses running a race, straining their necks out to cross that ribbon at the finish line. It makes me think of oxen yoked to a plow, straining their legs and their backs to haul heavy machinery through wet, clinging earth. It makes me think of Terry Fox hop-running his way across half of Canada, an unknown teenager on an impossible quest to raise awareness of cancer.

STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD. What a great image of the Christian life. Let go of the past – what ever it is. Cut it loose – our past is nothing more than chains around our legs, dragging us down, slowing us down, impeding our progress. Don't rest on your laurels, don't feel sorry for yourself – don't look backwards at all, but strain forward, strain forward, strain, with all your might, forward, into the future, into what is coming, into the not-yet. We are

forward people.

FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND AND STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD, says Paul, I PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL FOR THE PRIZE OF THE HEAVENLY CALL OF GOD...

What a writer! I just love how this one sentence just gets richer and richer as we tease it apart. **I PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL FOR THE PRIZE OF THE HEAVENLY CALL OF GOD.**

The goal, the prize – Paul is inviting us to cast our anchors out ahead of ourselves, and to pull ourselves into the future along the chain of hope and of faith. Christian hope can sometimes seem a sort of vague thing. The author of Hebrews talks about **THINGS HOPED FOR as THINGS NOT SEEN** (Hb 11:1). And the Kingdom of God can seem inconsequential in the face of the kingdoms of this world, not to mention just plain old life, and stress, and worry, and nagging anxiety. Hard to keep your eyes up on the horizon when the mortgage is due and the kids have chicken pox.

But Paul is clear. The goal is a **PRIZE, THE PRIZE OF THE HEAVENLY CALL OF GOD**. Just like the feeling of snatching the golden ring on the merry-go-round the **CALL OF GOD** should feel like a **PRIZE**. It did to Paul – but of course, he got knocked off his horse, and blinded by the light, and visited by the presence of Jesus Christ. That would be enough to convince me!

It's a little harder for us to get as excited as Paul. The church has been around for a long time, and sometimes it is easy to get discouraged. The Kingdom hasn't come yet, we whisper to each other – maybe it's not coming at all.

Today we get to remember Paul's energy, and Paul's passion, and Paul's vision of what it means to be in Christ. **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.**

This week, friends, **PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL**. This week, brothers and sisters, keep your eyes on **THE PRIZE**. This week, my friends, if your accomplishments make your chest swell, or your failures make your head hang, **FORGET WHAT LIES BEHIND**. This week **STRAIN FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD**. Try living as Paul lived – breathless with excitement, transformed by faith, and consumed by the joy of your salvation. Amen.

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew's United Church, London, Ont.
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