

Text: I Corinthians 10: 1-14
Title: Strength for the Journey
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Roger Allen Nelson

What metaphor is helpful as you think about your life?

I know that assumes that you think about your life and that in doing so you employ a metaphor, but just for fun and as a way into text and sermon...

What metaphor helps you define your life?

Life is battle.

Life is a garden.

Life is a box of chocolates.

Life is a roller coaster.

Life is a classroom.

Life is a prison.

Life is

Life is a journey.

Journey is a common metaphor for human experience. In literature and movies and music it is a central organizing theme. From the Odyssey, to Pilgrims Progress, to Huckleberry Finn, to "Easy Rider," to "Thelma and Louise," to every song that Springsteen ever wrote, life is celebrated as a journey and not a destination ~ to sort of quote Ralph Waldo Emerson. Life as a journey is a framework used by therapists and a common metaphor for much of contemporary spirituality.

Life is a journey. We are all on a journey. So, this morning....

Where are you on the journey? What is this patch of road like? Where are you headed? What is sustaining you as you travel? Who is in the bus with you? What are the pot holes and where are the ditches? How much you got left in the tank?

It is no stretch to say that the central story of the Old Testament is the exodus. The defining "metaphor" of the Old Testament is the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. It is a journey from bondage to freedom, from alienation to home, from hard labor to the Promised Land. The people of God traversed the wilderness and God was the sustaining guide of their journey. Much of the Old Testament sets the stage for that journey and much of what comes after replays the issues and lessons of that journey.

So, Paul in writing to the church in Corinth picks up that central image of the journey. He uses it both as encouragement and as warning; and he offers a curious reference to Christ as the rock that traveled with them during that journey.

It might be helpful to fill out this picture.

The church in Corinth was an urban-multicultural-polyglot-melting-pot. Paul writes to them, in part, because some were attending the meals and festivals of pagan gods, just as they had done before becoming Christ-followers. In their view this was normal ~ you dine at the divine deli and select whatever works. (We're spiritual and not religious.) In Paul's view they were dabbling, distracted, and in danger because it smacked of idolatry and a misunderstanding of the nature of life and liberation in Christ.

Therefore, Paul constructs an argument about the trouble they are courting by their synchronistic behavior. In chapter 8 he raises concern for how this would impact weaker members of the community who might be led astray. In chapter 9 he calls on the strong to follow his example in surrendering rights for the sake of others. And, in chapter 10 he shifts the focus and offers that another compelling reason to avoid dining with idols is that not only did they endanger the weak, but they also putting themselves in spiritual peril....

And, to make that point Paul dredges up the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness. He refers the events of the exodus as a *typoi* ~ which is often translated as a warning but its root sense is that of pattern or mold. As if to say, “Here is the pattern for your journey....” He reminds them that their “spiritual ancestors” were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea ~ an allusion to their own baptisms. He reminds them that while journeying through the wilderness God provided food and drink ~ an allusion to communion.

Just as they were on a journey, so you are on a journey.

Just as that journey started with a kind of baptism, so your journey starts with baptism.

Just as they were sustained by manna and water, so you are being sustained by the breaking of the bread and the sharing of wine.

Just as many on that journey fell into trouble and temptation and were scattered all over the ground, so you are....

Gulp!

The twist here is that there are dangers on the journey.

The warning is that the Israelites,

and the church in Corinth,

and by extension ~ us ~

travel through a wilderness beset by trials and temptations on all sides.

Our journey is through a harsh hard landscape with many dangers, toils, and snares. We’re like Westley and Princess Buttercup making our way through the dreaded Fire Swamp. We are in danger of being singed by the fire spurts, or falling into the lighting sand, or being eaten alive by the “Rodents of Unusual Size....”

Can we say ~ without being flip ~ that we journey through a wilderness that is dark and swampy with danger and there are temptations that pull us away from following the way of Christ, there are idols that suck away our best intentions, there are “Rodents of Unusual Size” that devour our spirits and destroy our lives?

Life is a journey ~ through dangers, toils, and snares.

It is a hard text.

Paul looks back at the journey of the Israelites and sets up a series affirmations:

All were under the cloud.

All were baptized into Moses.

All were fed by the same spiritual food.

All were quenched by the same spiritual drink.

But, some were scattered in the wilderness.

But, some....

There is a hard judgment and a demanding jealous God. To quote Richard Hays:

The God with whom we have to do is the God of Israel, a jealous God who sternly condemns idol-worship and punishes all who dare to dabble in it. The Corinthians who lightly flit about to temples, supposing themselves impervious to harm, are courting destruction....

Gulp! Make that a double big gulp...

The metaphor of life as a journey is a delightful whimsical image. We are traveling up a road together with the sun on our backs and a gentle breeze in our faces. It is a good gift to look back and see how far we have come or look around and see who we're traveling with. Enjoy the mile that you're in! It is a metaphor that makes space for change and growth and adventure....

But! But, the idea that the journey is tenuous, the thought of a God who would punish for wandering off the path, the image of those who didn't make into the Promised Land because they slipped or stumbled is sobering. And, I don't know how to wiggle out of that part of this text....

Paul uses this kind of language:

Now these things occurred as examples (typoi) to keep us from setting our hearts on evil...

These things happened as examples and were written down as warnings...

So, if you think you are standing, be careful that you don't fall...

I usually refrain from sports stories and illustrations. Despite being an athlete and loving sports, I don't use sports metaphors because they often just stoke the fires of sports idolatry and they quickly eliminate half the congregation that could care less about one more sports story. But, this morning, allow for an exception.

In 1999 I was trying to qualify for the Boston Marathon ~ the holy grail of American running. The qualifying standards are age based and I had just turned 40. They get slower as you get older. The standard was in reach. So, I trained and trained. I worked on speed and endurance. I was singular of focus.

I ran a qualifying marathon in Hartford, Connecticut. Much of the course was along a flat straight river bed. We ran past revolutionary war historical markers and the birthplace of Jonathon Edwards. Think: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Well, I was....

I was on target to qualify at 13 miles.

I was on target to qualify at 16 miles.

I was on target to qualify at 18 miles.

But, but.... somewhere in mile 19 the wheels came off. I don't know if I hit a wall, but I do know that I just got slower and slower. I couldn't sustain the pace.

Now, this was not a course lined with people like the Chicago Marathon. This quickly became a lonely grind. I wasn't going to qualify. I had 6 more miles to go. I was alone and miserable. And then in my peripheral vision I saw my truck. It was just a block away ~ sitting in the sun. I could just pull out, walk over, get in, drive home, and no one would know, no one would care. I wasn't going to Boston anyway....

Here is where I become the hero. But, I didn't quit. I kept running ~ or some manner of shuffling that passed for running. The temptation on the side of the road would not deter me from finishing the race.

Dire warnings aside ~ Paul is encouraging the Corinthians
to finish the race,
to run straight,
to shed and whatever distracts,
to trust in God ~ who is faithful to see them through to the end,
to endure ~ because God will endure.
God's mercy is stronger than any temptation.

Dear friends, a Lenten Spirituality is a journey from death to *shalom*.
We are all dead in sin (Ash Wednesday),
but we are called by God in Christ (Lent One)
toward the coming of the fullness of *shalom* (Lent Two).

We are already but not yet there. And we've been given strength for the journey:
the promise of baptism,
the sustaining bread and wine,
the community that we travel with,
the light of scripture,
the gift of the Spirit....

But, the way is treacherous and the journey is full of temptations. We still live with vestiges of death. We are called but the voice gets muted, muffled, and ignored. We hope in heaven coming to us, but we can still be stuck in hell.

This morning, no matter where you are on the journey, may you hear
the call to endure,
the call to keep on keepin' on,
the call to lay aside every idol that would weigh you down.

But, may you also hear the deep and abiding promise that God...

*is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall;
But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not faint.*

Isaiah 40: 28-31

Thanks be to God.
Amen.