

## “The Call of the Future”

### Philippians 3:4b-14

We all know what it’s like to set out with great enthusiasm on a grand plan for some worthwhile project, then get lost in the weeds. Let’s say you decide to exercise more often, or eat healthy, or give birth to seven children, set aside a daily early-morning prayer time. Day One is great. Day Two, pretty good. But then comes that morning when you roll out of bed, fully intending to keep that contract with yourself and with God. Then you look at your to-do list for the day and it’s all over. Not today, you say to yourself. Too busy. Tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow comes, and the next day, and the next — and before you know it, you have a case of the guilts. The last thing you want to do is feel guilty, so you try not to think about it — which makes it even worse. When you do think about it, you feel even *more* guilty. It’s a vicious cycle, a downward spiral into self-humiliation.

How small-minded are we to imagine that our disciplines — Lenten or otherwise — are broken beyond repair! We serve the wilderness road-builder, the river-wrangler and the desert gardener after all! There’s still a way ahead for us if we are so bold as to take the first step.

Today’s epistle lesson is a guide to such a determined, resilient journey. In Philippians, chapter 3, Paul speaks with stunning honesty about the pitfalls in his own spiritual life and how he overcame them.

On the surface, Paul’s life — or, we should say, Saul’s, because this was pre-conversion — looked pretty good. He writes about it in the first verses of this chapter:

*“...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” (3:5-6).*

Saul thought he had it made, spiritually. He'd done the right thing, played by the rules, fulfilled the expectations of everyone around him. But there was one problem: he felt spiritually dead inside. That frustration, that suppressed rage, built up inside him. He began to focus it outward, on that new sect called “Christians.”

Saul, that *uber*-righteous Pharisee, traveled up and down the length of the land, hunting down Christians and turning them over to the authorities. His fanaticism drew praise from his fellow militants, but it didn't make him any happier. On the contrary, the more he saw of Christians and their simple, joyful way of living, the more he began to wonder what was missing in his own life.

The book of Acts tells how Saul presided over the stoning of the martyr, Stephen. Saul ran the coat-check while the mob did their grisly work. The Acts account concludes with this chilling line: “And Saul approved of their killing him.” It goes on, shortly after, to say, “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison” (Acts 8:1-3).

Saul, in short, was not a nice man. He was a first century Putin. A chapter later, Acts tells how he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1). It's vivid language: Saul was subsisting on his angry, bitter thoughts, breathing them in and breathing them out again. With each bitter breath, he became a little less human.

Finally, it all built to a crescendo of misery. Then he heard a voice one day, on the Road to Damascus — the voice of Jesus, saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul became psychologically and spiritually unglued.

Three years later, he was back: a changed man. Wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, Saul — that feared persecutor of Christians — had become a Christ-follower himself! Years later, he wrote these words to the Philippians, which convey the secret of how to get out of that place of feeling spiritually stuck: “... 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.”

To live a victorious Christian life, we need to *forsake the pull of the past* (“forgetting what lies behind”). We need to *overcome the inertia of the present* (“straining forward to what lies ahead”). Finally, we need to *listen to the call of the future* (“pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”).

First, *forsaking the pull of the past*. Sometimes the past is our worst enemy. Things happened in all our pasts. Terrible, painful things. Things we’d rather not remember, but which, despite our best intentions to just leave them be, come back to haunt us. Blessed are we when we can set past pain aside!

The late Senator John McCain was famed not only for his service as a U.S. senator and a presidential candidate, but also as a war hero. As a young Navy pilot during the Vietnam War, McCain had been a POW after being shot down. In 2000, he returned to Vietnam and visited the lake near Hanoi into which he’d parachuted after ejecting from his stricken plane. He recalled how, on that day in 1967, the North Vietnamese had dragged him ashore,

beaten him severely, then sent him off to more than five years of imprisonment — much of it in solitary confinement.

Reporters wanted to know how the senator felt about visiting Vietnam after all that time. Was he bitter? Was he angry?

“I put the Vietnam War behind me a long time ago,” replied Senator McCain. “I harbor no anger, no rancor.” McCain turned out to be a leading advocate, in Congress, of more financial support for the Vietnamese government. He forsook what lay behind.

There’s an old story about the famous baseball pitcher, and Cleveland Indian for a while, Orel Hershiser. In a book, *Out of the Blue*, Hershiser shares the secret of his success. Throughout his years of playing, he cultivated a peculiar focus as he ascended the pitcher’s mound. He acquired the ability to concentrate on the next pitch, and the next pitch only. He couldn’t afford to worry about bad pitches he’d thrown, or bad calls the umpire might have made. No sooner did these things happen, than Hershiser banished them from his mind. The only thing in the world was the next pitch.

In a similar way, we do well to give our full attention to each day as it comes. Yesterday is over and done with. We can’t change it, but it surely can change us, if we let it. Imagine what we could all accomplish, if we could direct our energy to one day, and one day alone, without fretting about the past. Now imagine that day is today.

The second thing we must do is overcome the inertia of the present. Paul speaks of this as “straining forward to what lies ahead.” It’s a familiar image to his athletics-loving Greek and Roman audience: the image of a footrace.

Those Greeks and Romans were big fans of stadium contests. These were largely military cultures. One way the soldiers of the Empire stayed in fighting shape was through what we'd call "track and field" events. Especially valued were the distance races: contests of fortitude and endurance. When Paul speaks of "straining forward to what lies ahead," the image he's using is that of a runner throwing his chest forward as he crosses the finish line. To run a footrace is to battle the physical force known as inertia. With each impact of his foot on the track, with each heaving breath, the runner moves closer to the goal.

Just as there's physical inertia, there's also such a thing as spiritual inertia. How easily we grow comfortable and complacent in our spiritual lives, holding tightly to the "same-old, same-old"! New hymn? I don't want to learn it! Guitars and drums in the sanctuary? I don't want any part of that. I can't really tell you why not, but it just doesn't *feel* like my tradition! What's that, you say: you want me to get more actively involved in my church? I've been coming here for years, as a visitor, and I'm comfortable with that. No commitments for me!

There's a word for the inertia of the present. It's a fine old theological term, one that's numbered among the Seven Deadly Sins. The word is "sloth."

When most of us think of sloth, we think of laziness. But it's more than that. True sloth is more than simply being a couch potato. Sloth is a kind of virus of the soul that keeps us from focusing on that which brings life and meaning.

Kathleen Norris is a Presbyterian elder who has written extensively about her spiritual journey. Her books, *Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*, tell of her experiences as a visitor in a Benedictine monastery in North Dakota: how she, a writer and poet, discovered new meaning in the ancient contemplative tradition of Christianity.

After all that literary success, something happened to Kathleen's spiritual life. Her husband got cancer and needed constant care. Her aging father needed more help and support than her aging mother could give him. So, Kathleen moved back to her native Honolulu, and cared for her husband and father. Here's what she wrote about the experience:

*"I could generally meet my responsibilities as a caregiver to my husband and my dying father, and help support my mother, but I felt dead inside. I dreaded waking in the morning, and sometimes went straight from bed to the couch, where I would watch television or do crossword puzzles until it became absolutely necessary to rouse myself to action. The hateful 'noon-day demon' of the desert monks had found me in the lush environs of Honolulu, and made me unable to respond to the beauty of the planet. I was a far weaker soul than I cared to admit, a person pathetically subject to the sin of sloth. We often think of sloth as a harmless form of physical laziness, and joke about how long it's been since we vacuumed the carpet. But sloth is much more than laziness. It is an inability to concentrate on serious matters, and profound weariness of soul."*

Kathleen learned it was all about her inability to focus. She felt pulled in so many different directions: so many chores to do, so many people who needed her help. She slipped into a kind of passivity, able to do only the bare minimum of what needed to be done.

So, too, with us. We lose our ability to *press forward to what lies ahead*, sitting back on our haunches instead and just taking it all in.

The final thing we need to do, in the spiritual life, is *listen to the call of the future*. We "press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Having cast aside past regrets and broken free from the inertia of the present, the spiritual challenge is to open our hearts to the voice of God, who's beckoning us into the future.

Why does the runner run? Unless he or she happens to be on a treadmill, the runner runs to get somewhere. There's a goal in mind, a finish line.

The French Jesuit scientist and theologian, Pierre Teilhard, once wrote: "The whole future of the Earth, as of religion, seems to me to depend on the awakening of our faith in the future." Yet, how easy it is to get ourselves into the mode of fearing and distrusting the future! Especially in a time of rapid change, in a time of Covid and war, it feels more natural to hold onto the comfortable, the familiar.

Churches are especially prone to such paralyzing thinking. We're institutions that cherish and value tradition. It's one reason we're here: to protect and nurture that tradition and pass it on to the next generations. The thing about tradition in the church, though, is that it's a *living* thing. Each generation must take up the traditions of the past and refashion them to fit the present.

Victoria and Shane have made a huge contribution to our next generation with Grayson, Kate, Lana, Keegan, Grady, Jake and Ace. As baptized children of God, we will teach them the traditions of the past and then they will refashion them to fit a future that will be very different than our present.

This morning we welcome Jake and Ace on their first birthday into our Divinity family, preparing them for the future.

This morning, we also give thanks for the other end of the timeline in Mary Ann Filipow's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

She did her part in preparing children for the future, when she taught first graders for most of her 26 years of teaching in Cleveland schools, helping to shape and mold the hearts of many children.

But it is the hearts of her own children, Susan and Mark, and her grandchildren, Mackenzie and Mason, and the hearts of many of us here that Mary Ann has helped shape and mold over the years. I know she has certainly helped enlarge my heart every year with delicious nut rolls!

For me, it's Mary Ann's and many other Divinity member's battles with cancer that inspires us to open our hearts to the voice of God, who's beckoning us into the future.

We have a future promise. It's the promise of our faith, the promise that God isn't finished with us yet, the promise that one day all that is now indistinct will be made clear. Because we have heard that promise, and know it to be true, we can get up from the place where we are — the place where we so frequently feel stuck and immobilized — and move on. To the eye of faith, it's always a new day!

May the peace of God . . .

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