

Philippians 3:4b-14

About 400,000 people traveled in their covered wagons along the Oregon Trail in the mid 19th Century. They began at the trailhead over near Independence, Missouri, crossed into Kansas, through Nebraska and Wyoming, to points beyond. There are nine places along the trail where you can still see the wheel ruts that are deeply carved into the ground. It took a pioneer spirit for these families to forge ahead considering the obstacles they had to endure. A wooden sign posted by the trail tells it like it is: *The cowards never even started. The weak died along the way. Only the strong survived.*

There is a parallel here with our journey through life as Christians. St. Paul draws our attention to it in our Philippians text: *"I press on,"* he says, *"because Christ Jesus has made me His own. 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

We who are Christians can appreciate what Paul is saying here. He uses some captivating verbs; verbs we can relate to: *forgetting...straining...pressing on.* We are pioneers in this sense. We place our wagon wheels into the ruts and day after day we forge ahead. We encounter obstacles as Christians living in this dying world. But we know the prize that awaits us. And so we strain and struggle forward. We press on.

Some of those wagon trains endured days when they barely made any headway at all. The elements were against them. Savage Indians attacked them. Illnesses plagued them. More than a few wanted to give up. And some did. Some turned back. But to leave the safety of the wagon train was foolish. They became easy targets for marauding bands of Indians. To move forward they had to put the past out of their mind and think only of where they were going.

St. Paul was a pioneer in this way. He had a lot to put behind him; a lot to forget. He was once an attacker of the Faith. He savagely marauded Christians. He had lived a life he was ashamed of. But Christ Jesus made Paul His own. He forgave his past. And He commanded him to move forward in the faith.

What do you have in your past? I have plenty to forget; plenty of which I am ashamed. But the past is completely pardoned - mine and yours. This, Paul proclaims for us to believe. Whatever demons in your past are still haunting you; whatever guilt is there, go back to one precious event in your past: your baptism into Christ. Your baptism is a sign for you that stands forever. It daily reminds you that you are God's forgiven child in Jesus no matter what you have done. Nothing can change who you are in Christ. You are forgiven of all sin and guilt.

But we like to go back in the past and wallow in regrets. And we also like to take pride in our achievements. Achievements, that is, which we think earn us God's favor. Here, too, we must say with Paul, *"I forget what lies behind."* Our good works do nothing for us. They only help others. You already have God's favor on account of Christ and what He did for you. Heaven is already gifted to you in Jesus. You cannot earn a gift. Leave your good works in the past and press on in Christ.

And this, says Paul, is a strain, for we carry our sinful flesh with us. We are forgiven, but sin always fights against us. So does the devil, and also the unbelieving world. The strain and struggle we endure to press on in Christ is helped by knowing that other Christians endure with us. The wagon trains only made it in their quest because they traveled together. When someone became ill, others attended to him. When someone wanted to quit, others encouraged him. They fought the savages together. They braved the elements with the help of each other. Only the strong survived, true...but those who did make it learned that by themselves they were weak. They were only strong by being together.

Oh how we need to learn this in our day! There is a reason why God the Holy Spirit places us into a congregation. We cannot make it on our own. We are weak Christians...all of us. We are no more able to press on than was a single wagon able to endure by itself against all the obstacles that were against it. We are strong together because we gather together in the name of our Lord. We gather around Jesus; around His Word and His Sacraments. We don't just press on; we press on in Christ. And doing so, we will gain the prize.

But you know...the devil is no idiot. He is even more cunning than the savages who tried to outwit the pioneers. If they stayed in the ruts with their wagons, they stayed on course. So the marauding bands tried to confuse them, divide them, and thus overwhelm them and defeat them.

The ruts are there for us also...not to ignore, but to allow us to stay the course. We have the Word of God. We have our hymnal. We have our catechism. We have our liturgical worship service, and the pattern is the same. We come each Sunday morning. We begin in the name of our Triune God. We confess our sins and receive His absolution, We hear His words of life and we sing those words. We confess the Faith and receive the blessed Sacrament. And yes, this is a rut. It's supposed to be so that we do not get off track.

This rut was made for us by generations of Christians who have gone before us. They made it. They endured and received the prize. So why wouldn't we want to stay in the rut they made for us?

It's because we are so smart today; smarter than those Christians who have gone before us. We think we know better how to press on. And so we take our wheels out of their ruts and we set our own course. But then we are not traveling together; together with all the saints in heaven who cry out: We made it! Stay in the ruts we carved for you!

These ruts run red with the blood of Christ, and also with the blood of the martyrs who died confessing Jesus. These ruts are filled with the cleansing water of Holy Baptism. These ruts, carved out for us, are where the Holy Spirit is at work.

Those who die along the way are those who leave these ruts. And so let us keep our wheels in the ruts. In this way we press on in Christ. In this way He helps us endure. Christ is the path, the rut, and He is the prize. The prize, my friend, that awaits you as you stay in the rut with Christ. Amen.