

Philippians 3:8-14

In the nineteenth century many thousands of people moved westward across the American continent, many of them beginning their journey right here in the St. Louis area. Today, if you get in your car and start driving out through Kansas and Colorado, maybe up into Nebraska or down into Oklahoma, you will see quite a few historical markers along the roads. These signs tell you that a buffalo herd passed through here, an Indian massacre took place over there, on this site a peace treaty was signed. You come across wooden forts where the Calvary was stationed. You see the trails taken by the riders of the Pony Express. And if you stop and look at the ground in certain places, you see deep ruts--ruts made by the wheels of the Conestoga wagons. Many such wagons made the journey west in those decades. Many people with a pioneer spirit forged ahead, despite the obstacles, to settle the West. Many did not make it. There is a wooden sign posted along one of these Conestoga wagon trails that tells it like it is: "The cowards never even started, the weak died along the way, only the strong survived."

In a very real sense we are like those pioneers from long ago. We, too, are on a journey; a difficult journey in which we encounter many obstacles. It's a journey in the Faith; a journey toward the Promised Land of heaven. Our Conestoga wagon is the church. The old settlers began their journey when they passed through the waters of the Mississippi. Our journey began in the waters of our baptism. Just as the settlers traveled together for protection and encouragement, so we as God's people journey together in the church. We worship together. We study the Word together. We pray together and encourage one another in the Faith. And we, in our wagon, follow the same ruts that were made by God's people before us. We don't venture out on our own. We stay on the trail. Settlers who struck out on their own, trying to find a shortcut to California and Oregon, were often discovered years later, killed by Indians or dead of starvation.

One of our trail blazers who helped lay down the path for us is the Apostle Paul. He knew something about making journeys. He was traveling to Damascus when Jesus found him and made him a Christian and an apostle. Three times Paul traveled around the civilized world preaching Christ. God was leading him. He was with Paul through many difficult obstacles so that a trail in the Faith would be blazed for us. And now the ruts are in the ground. God made them through Paul and through many others, and those ruts speak to us today. If we want to be, not those who died along the way, but those who survived, then we want the wisdom to follow the ruts in the trail and to listen to what they have to say to us.

"I press on," says Paul, ("I forge ahead) 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." Once a family joined a wagon train in the journey, it was fool-hardy to give up and turn around. And yet some did. Some did not have the courage to deal with the challenges along the way. They gave up the dream. They gave up hope. They went back to the old way of life. St. Paul could not do that. His life before Christ was a life without faith, a life lived in the old law and not in the freedom of the Gospel; a life of sin, not a life of forgiveness. Despite the many challenges he faced, Paul made it his goal to press on for the prize in Christ Jesus.

It's tempting for us at times to give up and go back to the old way of life. It's tempting because the devil, the world, and our own flesh are constantly trying to pull us back. Satan does not want you to journey forward in faith. He wants you to live a life of sin. This world pressures us to be like everyone else and not to stand out as Christians. Even our own flesh does not want to move forward in Christ. Coming to church, reading and studying the Bible is seen by our flesh as boring and

monotonous. And the challenges which we face because we are Christians seem to stop us in our tracks. Although we are journeying toward heaven, our flesh would much prefer to give up the journey altogether.

But the ruts keep moving forward. Paul urges us to press on. Other Christians around us encourage us to set our sights ahead. And we know of saints before us who did not look back. All of us have loved ones who followed the trail faithfully; who stayed in the ruts; who braved the obstacles; and who made it to the Land of Promise, and they now, have permanent settlements in heaven's fair home.

In pressing on, Paul says that he has to forget what lies behind. The old settlers had to do that. The West was a mystery to them. Who knew what life would be like? To keep moving forward, they needed to forget the past and live for the future. They had to believe that their true home lay ahead, not behind them. And also for us. If we allow the past to stay with us, it will be difficult to press on. There is so much sin, and guilt, and regret in our past. There are so many unkind words which have come to our lips. There is so much good we could have done but chose not to; there is so much bad that we chose to do instead.

Friend and fellow traveler, your past is forgiven. Jesus is the Savior of your past, present, and future. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He died for you, and you can let go of the past. God does not dwell on your past failures. He does not see the sins and lust of your past. He sees you in Christ. He calls you His forgiven child. In Jesus you are able to press on in the journey of faith.

And as you press on, God takes care of you. The settlers followed a trail which was blazed usually along a river where there was water for them, and through pastures where there was buffalo to hunt. They could not take enough food and water with them to last through the journey. They had to drink water along the way and eat the flesh of the animals they killed. God leads us, in our Conestoga wagon, along the trail of His Word and Sacraments. He provides for you the water of life. He feeds you the nourishing flesh and blood of Christ your Savior. Early settlers were wise to stay with the others on the trail for food and water. God's trail for you is in the hearing and reading of His Word and at His Table whenever His Sacrament is offered. And you are wise for remaining in the ruts where others have gone before us in the trail of faith.

We know from their stories that when settlers followed the trail, the days often became long and boring. They saw the same old scenery over and over--grass, and trees, and hills, and plains...plains, and hills, and trees, and grass. Is it not the same for us? We sing the same hymns over and over. We pray the same prayers. We go through Advent, and Epiphany, and Lent, and Easter, and the long season of Pentecost, and then do it all over again. The scenery is the same for us. We see Jesus in a manger. We see Him on the plains teaching. We see Him dying on a hill. Day after day, year after year, we always know what will happen next.

It was the same for Paul. He told the very same good news of Jesus a thousand times over. And it was always the same reaction. Many rejected the message and persecuted him. But some listened and believed and followed Christ. And he kept at it. He kept moving forward from town to town. He kept pressing on in the Faith, trusting his dear Lord even as he preached His saving name.

Those early pioneers who pressed on were rewarded with a place in the fertile lands of the West, with plenty of room to spread out and settle a homestead. And they made it because they followed the trail. They stayed in the ruts. They kept moving forward. They pressed on. And so with you. You

see...our hymns, and liturgies, the words of Christ we hear over and over--yes, it's the same old scenery, but these are the ruts. This is the trail. This is the path to heaven.

And the prize is worth it. It's a mystery to us as it was to the settlers. But God tells us that there is nothing on earth like it. It is better than the fertile lands out west that drew many. It is better than the gold rush that drew many others. And friends, you will be there because you stay in the ruts of the trail. Your sins cannot keep you out; they are forgiven. Satan's attacks cannot prevent you; your Lord defeated him for you. Press on, friends, move forward in Christ. He is the path and He is the prize. Amen.