

“Driving While Looking in the Rear-view Mirror”

Philippians 3:10-14 and Luke 9:61-62

By John Gill

There are many colorful stories in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Storytellers throughout the centuries must have enjoyed passing on these traditional tales from one generation to the next – and parents would have shared these stories at bedtime with their children. Especially intriguing are the stories with elements that are miraculous or hard to explain...a story about a giant boat big enough for every species of animal on the earth...a story about a man who got into a wrestling match with an angel...a story about a giant fish that swallows a prophet...even a story about a man and his talking donkey! All these remarkable stories are more than some kind of fanciful fairy tale. They each have a valuable lesson to teach us, if we are willing to listen carefully.

One of my personal favorites is the story about a woman who turns into a pillar of salt. You remember the story: Lot and his family were fleeing the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as God was destroying them with fire and brimstone. An angel tells them to flee as fast as they can, and DON'T LOOK BACK! And as you will recall, Lot's wife does look back, and because of her disobedience, turns into a pillar of salt. Of course, the lesson that story teaches is the foolishness of looking backwards, when God has called you to move forward.

One Sunday morning, a Sunday School teacher was telling her class this story about how Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back. A little boy piped up, "That's nothing. My dad looked back while he was driving and turned into a telephone pole!"

You know, one of the lessons I learned in driver's ed was that it is important to check your rear-view mirror from time to time. But what would happen if you never looked away from the rear-view mirror? None of us would ever consider driving while looking the rear-view mirror! Yet, as we journey down the road of life, many of us do just that: we try moving forward into the future with our eyes glued to the rear-view mirror. For whatever reason, we become like Lot's wife: so preoccupied with something in our past that we can't move forward in life.

But the Old Testament isn't the only place we are told not to look back. Jesus teaches the same thing in our passage from Luke's Gospel. Jesus was calling people to follow Him, but each one began to make excuses. They all wanted to do other things first, to deal with something in their past lives before they gave their lives to Christ. Jesus makes it clear: *"Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:62 TEV) Again, DON'T LOOK BACK!

Always looking over your shoulder at the past is not healthy for at least four reasons:

First of all, **it makes you long for the "good old days."** Now, don't misunderstand me. It is important to remember good times and to honor the past (I'm not denying that). But oftentimes, much of what we pine for in the past was not really as "good" as we remember: Let me give you a few examples:

-Do you remember when the Israelites had made their exodus from slavery in Egypt? Instead of a "promised land, flowing with milk and honey," they found themselves facing an endless journey through

the desert, and began to experience real hunger. And what did they do? Before you knew it, they were longing for the “fleshpots of Egypt” they had left behind – and the “good ole days” of slavery.

-Or Consider the Amish people who live in certain parts of our own country. They see virtue in living in a by-gone era, and as a result, miss out on enjoying all the advancements of the 21st century.

-Then there are those in the South who romanticize the Civil War era and hark back to the “good old days” of racism, bigotry, and hate.

-And sometimes, it even happens with new Christians: After the excitement of their newfound faith wears off and the demands of discipleship become real, they long for the “good old days,” for a return to a life of sin and “freedom” from moral constraints.

No, the “good old days” often were not so “good” after all. But sometimes, the “good old days” truly were wonderful, better than the present. Dwelling on the memories of a beloved spouse, child or parent who has died is natural and healthy (unless, of course, it becomes an obsession). As we age, we all pine for days of youth, or happy days of family life and rearing children, or when we had better health, or a time when loved ones were still living. But those days may be behind us. And, in order for us to find contentment in our lives today, we must learn to accept ourselves and our circumstances the way we are, and resolve to live every day to the fullest.

Even here at Sebastian United Methodist Church, I’m sure there is some nostalgia for the past. In my short time here, I have heard some of you share about the past – happy times in the long history of this congregation – or painful times where there was division and struggle. It’s natural that we as a church remember fondly the wonderful times of days-gone-by, even as we are aware that the Sebastian community of today is very different than it was years ago. The world has a way of moving steadily into the future, whether we want it to, or not!

You see, it’s important to remember that we cannot live in the past, no matter how wonderful it may have been. When we do try to live in the past, we are using the past as an escape from the present or from the uncertainty of the future. Pining for the “good old days” can prevent us from claiming our present opportunities for a bright new beginning. No, we must not try to live in the past.

Second, dwelling on your past prevents you from letting go of troubles, sins and grievances that haunt you. Often we are unable to move forward into the future that God intends for us because we are imprisoned by something in our past which acts as a chain around our neck:

-For some of us, that chain may be unrepented sin.

-For others, it may be sins for which God has forgiven us, but for which we can’t manage to forgive ourselves.

-For still others, it could be unforgiveness on our part...a grudge we hold against someone else who has sinned against us.

Until we find the key to unlock that chain that shackles us to the past, we can never move into the future with joy, freedom and hope. The “Key” to unlocking that chain is Jesus. It is by the power of Jesus’ blood that we can experience forgiveness of our past sins. Then, once we recognize that God has forgiven us, it helps us forgive ourselves. And finally, because we have experienced the joy of

forgiveness in our own lives, then we can find it in our heart to forgive others. And when we do, something miraculous happens – not only do we set them free, we find true freedom ourselves, because we are no longer imprisoned by past hurts. So, ask Jesus to help you move into your future by letting go of your past.

Third, constantly looking over your shoulder causes you to bump into obstacles and road blocks.

About 15 years ago while we were serving in LaBelle, I was walking with my daughter Joanna (then about 3) from the church to the parsonage next door. She was more interested in watching something going on in the parking lot than paying attention to where she was going and she ran right into a picnic table. She wasn't really hurt, but that's a great illustration of what I'm saying.

How many of you have had that experience (not bumping your head on a picnic table)...I mean, you're moving ahead in one direction, toward some goal in your life, only to become distracted by something, perhaps something in your past, and you bumps up against a brick wall?

That almost happened to me. Before I met my wife, Terri, there had been another young woman in my life. She was my girlfriend through out my freshman year of college, but we broke up during our sophomore year. I thought I was over her, but I was only fooling myself...I was obsessed with her. Years past, and I went on to seminary. Then, right in the middle of my seminary experience, she walked back into my life. I'll spare you all the gory details, but that relationship almost upset all my plans for the ministry. You see, I was so obsessed about reliving my past freshmen year of college that I couldn't see clearly the truth that was right in front of my face. Because I allowed myself to be distracted by the past, I almost hit a brick wall on my way into the ministry.

How about you? As you were moving forward in life, have you ever hit a brick wall because you were distracted by your past? Don't ever let the past distract you from moving into the future God has for you.

Finally, obsessing on your past keeps you from ever reaching your goal. Someone once said, "If you don't know where you are going, you are sure to get there every time." You know, Jesus wasn't a farmer, but He loved to teach using agricultural images (sowing seeds, planting vineyards, harvesting crops). Our text today is no different: plowing fields. Jesus says, "*Anyone who starts to plow and then keeps looking back is of no use for the Kingdom of God.*"

I don't know much about farming myself, but I understand that it's not easy to plow a straight furrow. The trick, so I'm told, is to pick out a spot on the other end of the field, keep your eyes focused there, and plow straight till you reach that goal. People distracted or trapped by their past are so busy glancing over their shoulders that the "fields" of their lives are covered with crooked furrows that don't go anyplace. They never reach their intended destination. Why?

Paul gives us the answer in our other lesson. He takes Jesus' teachings one step further. He tells us that it's not enough just to say "DON'T LOOK BACK." You must also, as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, "stain forward to what lies ahead." What he's telling us is that, just like that farmer plowing his field, we must both put the past behind us, and never take our eyes off the goal.

Just as Jesus loved agricultural images, Paul likes to use athletic metaphors. All throughout his letters, Paul uses images from sports. And clearly, his favorite image was that of a foot race. In our text, Paul is comparing the Christian life to a race, and we are the runners: "*I...forget what is behind me (Paul writes)*

and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.” (Philippians 3:13-14 TEV)

Let's do an experiment: Try to picture yourself as an Olympic athlete running the 400 meter race. Now let's say you stumble out of the blocks and so you fall behind a little bit. You're in your third 100 meters and you are having trouble getting positioned in the pack like you want, struggling to stay with the leaders. Now you're in the final stretch, and the whole world is watching.

If you are going to have a chance to win, you will have to do two things:

First, you have to forget everything that has happened so far in the race. It doesn't matter that you stumbled at the start, or that you couldn't get into the position you wanted. You have to put all that out of your mind, stop fretting and bemoaning your bad luck or your stupid error, and get down to the matter at hand: winning the race. That's the first thing you have to do... "forget what is behind."

The other thing you have to do to win the race is to "do (your) best to reach what is ahead." This is the moment you have been training for all your life, it's now or never. So you press forward with every ounce of energy you can muster, eyes fixed on the finish line, imagining what it will feel like to have a gold medal dangling from your neck, straining forward to the finish line. THAT'S how you win the race.

And, that's what the Christian life is like, Paul says. We're all in the race to win the prize. And frankly, it doesn't really matter what has come before in our lives. All that really matters is "What are we going to do NOW." It's not how you begin, but how you finish that counts. Are we going to allow our pasts to drag us down, or are we going to "go for the gold?" And the only way to do that is by never taking our eyes off the prize.

And, what is the prize that makes it all worthwhile? What are our eyes focused on at the finish line? What is the goal we'll sacrifice anything and everything to achieve? NOTHING LESS THAN HEAVEN ITSELF!

Paul says it like this, "I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above."

Picture it this way: As you run toward the finish line of life, look up and see Jesus calling to you, cheering you on, inviting you to take your place with Him in heaven – and then, picture yourself running straight into His open arms. That's a prize that makes an Olympic gold medal look like a Cracker Jack toy.

My friends, perhaps this morning, you are distracted by the past. Maybe you are driving through life with our eyes glued to the rear-view mirror, focused on our failures, sins, regrets, and griefs. Friend – you can't get to the finish line that way.

The lesson from God's word this morning is that you will always have difficulty obtaining the prize... of claiming the future God has in store for you... if you can't bring yourself to let go of the past. You can't drive forward, while staring in the rear-view mirror.

As Paul said it: *"I...forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above."*

Or as a great new hymn in our hymnal (that we sang my first Sunday here) expresses it: "This is a day of new beginnings

...time to remember

...and move on."

Let us Pray:

O Lord, both as individuals and as a congregation, we want to follow You, but the baggage of our past is holding us back. Help us to put aside what is past, so that we may live with joy and confidence into the future, a future You have prepared for us. Amen.