

Lent 2C, Saint John's Olney, 17 March 2019  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35; Psalm 27

S.D.G.

Because someone in our household is in the midst of physical therapy, I was reminded recently of the old sports adage - short term pain / long term gain. This phrase is based upon the premise that the interval training, the wind sprints, the workout sessions that leave you gasping for air and having to use two hands to drink from a bottle of water, all pay dividends in the long term.

When there are choices it can be difficult to remember this. We can be enticed with the quick and easy choice and shy away from the long difficult route. I remember being told as a child that I could learn the guitar in 3 easy lessons, and several hundred hard ones. In my experience, it is along the long and difficult route where the scenery is the best.

Robert Frost left us with the memorable line: *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.*

Good landscape photographers know that the best photos are not found conveniently at 10am after breakfast with a short walk from a roadside overlook. Some of my best photos required hiking more than an hour in the dark, and then waiting in the freezing temperatures for the dawn light to produce its golden light.

With Photoshop software, and online tutorials, it is possible to reproduce the effect of this golden light; but it will never be the same. The manipulated image will never tell the same story or illustrate the true affect of the gold morning light. Taking the short cut will never produce the same image.

Abram, soon to be called Abraham, took the road less traveled in fulfilling the covenant that the Lord made that day. Abraham was in it for the long haul; it was not the easy road, but it was the road that led to the fulfillment of God's call.

The easy road is tempting.

The privileged of society have often had the option of an easier road that is not available to the vast majority. The news this past week highlighted how the privileged few have manipulated college admissions with money. It has long been known that donating \$2.5 million to Harvard was a good way to assure your child, worthy or not, would be admitted. But now the stress of taking SAT exams, or earning admissions through an athletic team was all reduced to the effort needed to write a check rather than the hard work of studying or training.

These parents did not have enough faith that their children, based upon their own merit, would get into the preferred college, so they bought an acceptance letter and an unearned admission. In so doing, they implicitly said to their children, we love you for who we want you to be, not for who you are. The easy road has many pitfalls.

Saint Paul encourages his listeners to forego, as he has done, the privileges that he and they enjoy, and instead he encourages us to focus on the way of the Cross. Paul enjoys privileges as a Roman citizen, privileges that he employs only so far as they permit him to travel and spread the good news of God in Christ. In Paul's heart he is no longer a citizen of Rome, but of heaven. In this epistle, he encourages others to live as he does, following the way of the cross and seeking God's glory.

Eugene Peterson's interpretation of the Bible, *The Message*, has language that makes this journey very personal and hedonistic.

*Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal. There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them. I've warned you of them many times; sadly, I'm having to do it again. All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites. (Msg)*

"Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites." Saint Paul is warning us, a self-centered, a self-focused life is not the way of the Cross; it is not the way of Christ. Follow an example, follow his example, and live according to Christ.

Even with the example set before us, even being led in the proper direction, we can not be sure that others, let alone ourselves, will follow the path that is set before us.

Rabbinic wisdom highlights for us just how difficult it can be to lead others:

*Once on the Great Sabbath (before the Passover) the rabbi of Roptchitz came home from the house of prayer with weary steps. "What made you so tired?" asked his wife. "It was the sermon," he replied. "I had to speak of the poor and their many needs for the coming Passover. Unleavened bread and wine and everything else is terribly high this year."*

*"And what did you accomplish with your sermon?" his wife asked.*

*"Half of what is needed," he answered. "You see, the poor are now ready to take. As for the other half, whether the rich are ready to give – I don't know about that yet." (William B. Silverman, Rabbinic Wisdom and Jewish Values)*

Jesus has his sights set firmly upon Jerusalem, where he will walk the way of the cross. He is threatened with death at the hands of Herod, and knows that his death lies in Jerusalem, but remains persistent and steadfast in his journey. There is little argument that Jesus takes not only the road less traveled, but also the road most challenging.

There is a wonderful image in this passage that can be lost to the modern reader. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

In reading this passage with a description of a hen stretching out her wings to bring her children under her care we can also see an image of Jesus, with outstretched arms on the cross. That image goes further.

In the crowded cities of the ancient world, fire was a constant threat. History tells us about large fires that devastated entire regions of Rome. As people flee from fire animals are left to cope based upon their own unique resources; some are able to flee, and others shelter under cover. As the ravages of fire pass, the lifeless bodies of mother hens have been found on the ground only to reveal that under her wings,

sheltered from the heat and smoke, her brood of chicks have been carefully sheltered and survived the torment.

Jesus stretched out his arms upon the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace. (BCP)

Persistent in the face of death Jesus continued his work and continues his journey to Jerusalem. Before his birth the road was chosen for Jesus and he persisted in walking it.

Our path was also named before our birth, it is the way of the Cross. The choice of whether we walk that path, or choose the easy road, is up to us; each day, each moment we live out that choice.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.*

Amen,