

September 26, 2021  
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Life in the Back Seat”

Mark 9:38-50

Road trips were a lot different back in the days before screens. Kids in the back seat today have their minds shifted into neutral staring at movies or games as the miles tick by hour after hour. Not so in former days. When my sisters and I were young on that 14-hour drive from Illinois to my relatives in Tennessee our minds were fully engaged and active and oh so, so bored! It was horrible. As children we wanted to be anywhere else but stuck in that car. We constantly whined, “How much farther?” or “Are we there yet?”, at least until my father threatened our backside if we didn’t keep quiet.

The thing is that when we arrived at our destination we had a gas! We got to see and be doted on by all our aunts and uncles. We got to play with all our cousins, explore new places and giggle at the funny southern accents. We went to wonderful places like Ruby Falls, Lookout Mountain, the Incline Railway and many others. It was always a great time. Yet, we loathed to being stuck in that horrible back seat.

The children of God aren’t so different. They’ve left slavery in Egypt by God’s mighty hand. They’re on the way to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey and cities that they did not build and vineyards that they did not plant. God Himself is going to fight for them, conquer this land and this people Israel will be able to live in His presence and be showered by His blessings. But they just can’t look forward to the promised destination. They suffer a little discomfort on the way and they start whining, complaining, thinking Egypt was a better place to be and start complaining against God.

Are the children of God today any different? Well, yes, I hope we are. But you can’t say that we don’t struggle with the same temptation.

Has anyone questioned God in the past few weeks? Has anyone doubted His gracious provision? Have you somehow, in thought if not in word, said, “God, this is totally unacceptable. This hurricane devastation, this path you’ve set before me is just plain wrong”? We often are indeed the children of God whining in the back seat, “Dad, how much farther? I can’t take this anymore! This is horrible!”

People of God, it is imperative that you remember and remind yourself: this is the journey, not the destination. This ride, tough as it is, will come to an end. And Dad, the Father who has planned the trip, who is the driver in control no matter how trying things may seem, has promised us the most glorious of destinations. Compared to the joy awaiting us, these trials and tribulations we face today are not worth mentioning. They will forever be less than a memory.

This is more than just encouragement. This is a truth that we strive to put into practice in life every day. It’s dangerous not to. Jesus makes that perfectly and terrifyingly clear. He starts by warning how awful it is for someone to trip someone else up in this journey and then makes clear the consequences if we give up on making the trip: *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the*

*kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*

The hyperbole with which Jesus’ speaks is petrifying, but it is not condemnation; it is warning and exhortation. It is confirmation that those who believe in Him are indeed in the kingdom of God yet are still journeying toward its full realization, and it is imperative we remember to whom we belong and where He leads those who do not abandon the faith.

Jesus is of course speaking about sin, but what is sin when you boil it down to its core? It’s idolatry. It’s choosing something other than the true God of creation to be a god to you. It is following something other than the only one leading you to the true Promised Land.

This warning is needed because we have a habit of falling into this stupid way of thinking that says we can somehow manage our sin and our salvation together—that one can coexist with the other. That can’t happen! Jesus is talking about tearing out eyes when it comes to sin! He’s calling for the most extreme polar opposite of coexisting with sin because the path of the world and sin and the path of salvation are polar opposites. And when we forget that we stand in the midst of a journey with Christ through the world to paradise, we start thinking that this fallen world and its sin is our home and we get comfortable with it. That is choosing a path, and it is not the one where Christ leads His children. It’s the path to the hell of fire.

That’s scary, and it should be. You know what, my dad was scary when he turned around in the front seat and said, “If you make me pull this car over I’ll give you something to whine about!” I can’t say he was as righteous as God Almighty in his anger, but he was right. He was taking us somewhere wonderful and we were wrong to whine and moan about the journey when his desire was to bring us nothing but joy and happiness on a wonderful vacation.

Our God is intent on bringing us to His kingdom and the completion of His promise of restoration to the perfect eternal life in His presence we were designed for. Jesus has not made accommodation for our sin so that it may coexist with us. He has removed it from us as far as the east is from the west by His cross and empty tomb. Walking with Him in faith we are His holy saints today, walking in blessedness on His path to our Promised Land. Remember you are on this path, shun the sin that tempts you, and beg forgiveness when you stumble to the right or to the left. Jesus loves to forgive but He isn’t unclear—toying with sin is dangerous because it is a different path—the path of damnation.

The fallen world may be sorely tempting you right now to make a god out of the things you lost, to make getting back to the comfortable life you enjoyed before the storm your greatest good. Don’t fall for it. This life is just the back seat of the car. It’s where you are for the trip and it gives us children plenty to moan and whine about if we only care about the here and the now. But the here and the now we see in front of us isn’t the destination, it’s only the journey. The here and now in front of us isn’t even our true reality, because we have been baptized into a new reality, that of Jesus Christ crucified and risen to life eternal. That life is our reality now...and not yet.

So if your prayer to God the Father is this: “Dad, are we there yet?” The answer is “Yes,” you stand baptized this very day into the full forgiveness in Christ that covers a multitude of sins and saves your soul from death. And the answer is also “No,” you have a road to walk by faith under the grace of God in a fallen world full of tribulation until you arrive home. But all of it is a great place to be, because you’re on Christ’s road and both the “now” and the “yet to come” in Him is salvation.

So again I say, remember that this life is the journey, not the destination. Israel blew it. The folks in our Old Testament lesson ultimately refused to look beyond the world in front of

them and trust in God's promise of the land He had prepared for them. They "got out of the car" so to speak, and they then wandered and died in the wilderness. That's sad and scary and a good warning to each one of us.

Keep the faith. The Promised Land had been promised to you, gained for you by Christ and sealed for you by the Holy Spirit in your baptism. No matter what calamity this world throws at you, no matter what temptation the devil lays in front of you, no matter what heinous sin clings to you—follow Christ. Repent, and remain in God's back seat, so to speak. Trusting in His power to do so, He will surely see you safely to His destination for you.

Amen.