



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
Ann Arbor | Michigan

Sermons from

“KEEP PEDALING”

The Rev. Evans McGowan
February 24, 2013 - 8:00a.m.
Second Sunday in Lent
Psalm 27
Luke 9:28-36

I remember the first time I learned to ride a bike. I was in Monroe, Louisiana. Like most evenings in Louisiana, it was hot and it was humid. My grandfather, Daddy Roy, had just assembled a beautiful red bike for the grandchildren. As the eldest, I would be the first to learn how to ride it. Up and down the driveway we went, my grandfather holding the handlebars and the seat, guiding me back and forth. After a while he let go of the handlebars, and I was left to keep them steady and true. He then moved his other hand from the seat of the bike to my back. So focused was I on keeping the bike upright, I didn't realize he had let go until I no longer felt the warmth of his hand. Suddenly I felt all alone and everything became hazy, and I began to wobble as my confidence wavered. Then I heard my grandfather's voice, "Keep pedaling!"

Psalm 27 begins in confidence before the psalmist begins to wobble. The first six verses are full of strong statements:

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord as light is the only appearance here in the Hebrew Scriptures. It draws a contrast to the integrity that light exposes versus the deceitfulness that darkness hides. The Lord as salvation (vv. 1, 9) refers to God as the giver of life, especially when death looms, as we see in the next line: *The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?* The Lord as salvation and stronghold, as the source and sustainer of life.

The theme of not fearing continues in verse 3: *Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear, though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.* For the psalmist, the opposite of faith then isn't so much doubt as it is fear, reminding us of Psalm 23, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me."* Indeed, *In the day of trouble the Lord will keep me safe* (v. 5). Even when there is trouble in our lives, the Lord will set us on a firm foundation.

Yet the psalmist appears to waver in confidence in the latter half of the psalm, turning from confident assertions of God's salvation (v. 1-6) to strident pleas of supplication to God:

- *Hear O Lord when I cry aloud...* (7)
- *Do not hide your face from me...* (9)
- *Do not cast me off, do not forsake me...* (9)
- *Do not give me up for the will of my adversaries...* (12)

Finally in the last two verses some confidence returns. Indeed, "yet I will be confident" (v. 3d) can be translated as "through this I am trusting." Through all of this, the psalmist will seek the goodness of the Lord in the Land of the Living, urging all those who are listening: Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.

Notice that the psalmist repeats himself. "Wait for the Lord" begins and ends verse, suggesting strength and courage begin and end with hope. It is an active hope that the Lord will arrive, will not leave us in a lurch and fumbling around in the dark.

Where in our lives are we waiting for the Lord to arrive? Maybe it's in a broken relationship. Maybe it's in a terminal diagnosis. Maybe it's in an impossible situation at home, at work, at school or somewhere else. How can we have a hope that actively waits on the Lord? Where do we find such hope in our lives?

Right before the Transfiguration, the disciples received some very troubling news: their leader, Jesus, thought to be the Messiah, the one who could and would save them all, had just told them he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by all in authority, and be killed. Oh yeah, and on the third day be raised, whatever that means! He then challenges them with these words:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

Wait, does that mean we have to suffer and die, too? I'm sure the thought crossed the minds of the disciples. I can only imagine what discouragement and despair they must have felt.

Then comes the Transfiguration, a very special event. Luke uses “Behold...” (v. 30) (translated in the NRSV as “suddenly”; Greek: *idou*) only two other times – at the resurrection and the ascension. So the transfiguration is seen as an otherworldly event that happens here on earth. And what happens? Dead men appear – Moses, representing the law, and Elijah, the prophets. And what were they talking about? Jesus’ departure, his exodus, his path towards death that led through Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus is a dead man, too. That’s why Peter’s idea to build dwellings for all three makes no sense – dead men don’t need houses. Then the question becomes, why follow a dead man? That’s when God envelopes them in a cloud and confirms Jesus’ identity as God’s Son, “my Chosen,” and to listen to him.

The Transfiguration confirms the Journey to Jerusalem, the journey we take together this Lenten season through the life of Jesus and to the cross, and what lies beyond the grave. Very few people retain followers after they're dead: Jesus, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Elvis... In the Transfiguration we see Jesus as a dead man, and we also get a glimpse that through this doorway of death there will be something magical on the other side. Yet first we must all pass through this doorway.

There will come a time for the disciples when Jesus is no longer seen, either as human or transfigured. And when Jesus can no longer be seen, heard or felt, will they – will WE – still pick up our cross and follow in his footsteps on the Journey to Jerusalem?

Discipleship is not simply about following. It’s not about being guided with each step, always a hand on your back. Discipleship is about following and then *riding on* in faith, even when there is no light, even when there is only death, even when the one you are following is no longer present. It’s about keep pedaling. This is what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. God is still there, even when we can’t see any evidence of God’s presence.

We can wait, as the psalmist says, in despair or in hope. There is a silence that is empty, where nothing remains and nothing is expected, no hand and no voice. And then there is a silence that is pregnant, where something is waiting to be heard, felt, seen. Are you waiting in despair, bored with what may or may not come, or are you waiting in hope, excited by what is to come?

In the land of the living, we might understand life backwards, but we must live it forward. We might know how to ride a bike, but until we pedal onward we don’t know

what awaits us. We may understand the path we've been on, but we have yet to blaze the path not yet taken.

So how do we know we're on the right path? Well, if we're still upright, that's one clue. Another clue might be found from a saying in India: Everything will be all right in the end... if it's not all right then it's not yet the end. (from the film: *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*)

Let me end with verses from two songs. The first is from *The Summons*, which asks,

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

We each need to answer The Summons of God. We are called to "Ride On" or "Walk On," as the band U2 sings:

*And if the darkness is to keep us apart
And if the daylight feels like it's a long way off
And if your glass heart should crack
And for a second you turn back
Oh no, be strong*

*Walk on, walk on
What you've got they can't deny it
Can't sell it, or buy it
Walk on, walk on
Stay safe tonight*

*and I know it aches
How your heart it breaks
And you can only take so much
Walk on, walk on*

As disciples of Christ on this Lenten Journey to Jerusalem, let us follow in Christ's footsteps. Let us "walk on" in the darkness until we see God's goodness in the Land of the Living. Let us wait on the Lord, growing in the strength of the Spirit and the

courage of Christ. Let us keep pedaling, clinging to a hope and a love that did not let Jesus go, and will not let us go, however we act and wherever we go.

To God be all glory and honor. Amen.

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