

Trinity 23 (HC-EP) (2018)

When I was a boy, we had a piano in our front room, and sometimes my mother would play it.

She was trained to play classical music, but I don't remember her playing much of that. Rather, she played hymns, often ones, which even then, were quaint and dated.

One was entitled "Life is like a mountain railroad".

I looked it up this week on the Internet and found it was written in the 1890s by a Baptist minister in Georgia by the name of M.E. Abbey.

The first stanza goes like this:

Life is like a mountain railroad,
With an engineer that's brave;
We must make the run successful,
From the cradle to the grave;
Watch the curves, the fills, the tunnels;
Never falter, never quail;
Keep your hand upon the throttle,
And your eye upon the rail.

A refrain follows:

Blessed Saviour, Thou wilt guide us,
Till we reach the blissful shore,
Where the angels wait to join us
In Thy praise forevermore.

Dated? Yes. Nevertheless, the language is very pictorial and evocative.

Can you not see one of those old black steam locomotives rounding the corner on a grade with smoke billowing out the stack? Inside the engineer will be doing exactly what M.E. Abbey said he would be doing, minding the throttle, making sure the goods and passengers entrusted to him arrive safely at their destination.

Quaint or not, this song reminds us of three things, all of which are true:

1. We are on a journey, the journey of life;
2. There are dangers along the way. In our case, the false values of the world seek to draw our attention away from the genuine . . . from God, the true, the pure, the beautiful, the honourable, what is of good report;
3. We must remain vigilant, just as that engineer must do.

If I were to give today's sermon a title, it would be:

Continuing straight on a crooked path.

Isn't that the challenge that is set before all the saints of God – all those who have been set apart for Christ's service in Holy Baptism?

We must stay on course, and staying on course involves being on guard against the dangers that lurk around every corner of life.

In this morning's Epistle, we find the Apostle Paul warning the Philippians of one of those dangers.

The danger Paul sees lying ahead for this group of Christians will come from false teachers, teachers who will come in and try to derail the faith and good order of that congregation.

In particular, he sees men imbued with a certain Greek philosophy which says:

What you do with your body is of little consequence. What really matters is the life of the spirit or soul – that immaterial part of a person.

No doubt there are people who think that way today. Once you 'get saved' you can go off and do as you please with your body. After all, it's the soul that God is going to snatch up to heaven.

But for Paul, there could be no such divide between soul and body. God is the maker of both and purposes to redeem both.

Speaking of this future redemption, he says in today's Epistle:

“Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his [Christ's] glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”

“Vile” here should be thought of as “perishable”. Our present bodies get old, wear out and let us down. Not so, with the bodies that will be handed out at our Lord's Second Coming.

So, if you feel some aches and pains this morning, hang on, don't give up hope, a better body is in the making!

But, again, Paul's point is that soul and body cannot be separated.

If you want to “make the run successful” pay attention to both and be on the outlook for these false teachers. Sooner or later they will show up.

Paul's concern for the Philippians should be our concern today. We too are on a crooked road lined with dangers. Just as there were false teachers then, so there are false teachers today.

If you don't believe me turn on your television and watch Joel Olsteen . . . just to cite one obvious example.

There is a battle for our minds around every corner. So, we too must be “on guard” . . . must keep our hand upon the throttle and our eye upon the rail” . . . for our own sake, but also *for the sake of others*.

What do I mean “for the sake of others”?

Well, I am thinking of Paul's opening words in today's Epistle: **“Be followers together of me.”**

“Follow me, as I follow Christ,” is what he is saying.

Isn't Paul being a bit egotistical here?

Perhaps, but on second thought, NO!

He is saying that Christian leaders such as himself should not just be telling people to follow Christ, they themselves must be leading the parade.

Does that mean that Paul thought he had arrived at state of spiritual perfection?

Certainly not, as he said a few verses before we picked up reading: “I pressed toward the mark.”

Have you ever been driving at night in bad weather? It’s all foggy and dark and you can’t see the road before you?

But, let’s suppose that there is a car up front that is navigating the road successfully.

What do you do? You fall in behind that driver and follow him.

Well, that is something like what Paul has in mind when he says, “Follow me.”

But, what might the application be here for us?

It is this: those in positions of leadership in the church must be very mindful to stay on the straight path so that they themselves don’t go into the ditch, but also so that those who are following them don’t go into the ditch.

But, I think we can extend that thought further, apply it to all Christians. Whether you are a bishop, priest, deacon, Sunday school teacher, what have you, one thing is certain – whether you know it or not – someone is following. That someone may be a child, a grandchild, a complete stranger.

Stay on course for yourself, but also stay on course for them.

But. how do we do this? How do we make the run successful? After all we are weak and fallible human beings and the dangers are many and great. ///

The final stanza of the song with which I opened tells us, and with these words I close:

You will often find obstructions,
Look for storms and wind and rain;
On a fill, or curve, or trestle
They will almost ditch your train;
Put your trust alone in Jesus,
Never falter, never fail;
Keep your hand upon the throttle,
And your eye upon the rail.