

First Sunday in Lent  
March 16, 2025  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
No Detours Allowed

Philippians 3.17-4.1 (EHV)

*Brothers, join together in imitating me and in paying attention to those who are walking according to the pattern we gave you. <sup>18</sup>To be sure, many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. I told you about them often, and now I am saying it while weeping. <sup>19</sup>Their end is destruction, their god is their appetite, and their glory is in their shame. They are thinking only about earthly things. <sup>20</sup>But our citizenship is in heaven. We are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>By the power that enables him to subject all things to himself, he will transform our humble bodies to be like his glorious body.*

*4 So then, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way keep standing firm in the Lord, my dear friends.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Old Fall River Road is located in Rocky Mountain National Park. It is an 11-mile dirt road that is only open for vehicles about three months each year. You gain just over 3,000 feet of elevation in those 11 miles, ending up at close to 12,000 feet above sea level. And this road is one way. Once you start on the road, you cannot turn around and go back to the entrance. You cannot take a detour by turning onto another road. Once you start up this road, there is only one way to go and one destination to reach. There are no guardrails to keep you on the road. The dramatic drop-offs at the edge of the road keep you from getting too close. The switchback turns are so tight that you have to plan your turns in a larger vehicle or you will end up scraping the rock wall beside you. You can't make your own detour by going offroad, no matter what kind of off-road vehicle you might have. There is only one thing to do once you've started driving on the Old Fall River Road and that is to keep driving up the mountain until you reach the top.

God, the Holy Spirit has put us on the Way, Truth, and Life road to eternal life. There is only One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who refused to take any detours on the road of our salvation. Instead of taking the easy way out and remaining at the right hand of his Father in heaven, the Son of God humbled himself to become a true human being, born of the virgin Mary. Instead of seeing himself as above temptation, Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are and yet was without sin. Instead of using his miraculous powers to gain political power and become an earthly ruler as many wanted, he took the hard road to suffering and death. Instead of listening to Peter who did not want Jesus to suffer and die, he set his face toward Jerusalem. Jesus did not take any detours on his way to saving sinners from the eternal wrath of God. He went willingly to the cross, scorning its shame because he had one goal in mind, the eternal salvation of sinners. Jesus is the one Way, the one Truth, and the one Life. There is no other way to the Father and to eternal life.

Through this gospel, the Holy Spirit has called us to believe in this one Jesus. He has set us on the one road to eternal salvation – through faith in Christ alone. Like the Old Fall River Road, this is a one way, no detour road. It has dangers to the right and to the left. Instead of driving, the apostle Paul tells us that we are walking this road and warns us of the dangers of taking any detours along the way.

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Imitating Paul does not save anyone. Imitating Christ cannot save us either. Our forgiveness and eternal salvation are a free gift of God through faith in Christ which is also a free gift from God. Walking the Christian life does not save us, but those who have been saved walk the Christian life. Paul is giving a strong warning about taking a detour from the path we have been put on. When I said that you cannot take a different route on the Old Fall River Road, that is not completely true. You could choose to drive off the edge, which leads to destruction. So also, in our Christian walk along the path to eternal life. The Holy Spirit put us on the path. Jesus is the path. God keeps us on the path with his means of grace. But some will choose to go over the edge and make their own detour. Paul says that “their end is destruction.”

Paul only says this through tears. It is heartbreaking when someone who has been baptized and raised in a Christian family and church to take a hard right and become an atheist or agnostic. Or someone might take a hard left into universalism and into the belief that there are many different ways to eternal life. And maybe someone slowly drifts away from the narrow path of Christ over many years, giving up a bit of the truth of the Bible here and there until they don't believe much of anything. Paul weeps when he thinks of those who have detoured from the faith. We too, are deeply saddened when a loved one turns to their own path, leaving Christ behind. We don't want that for anyone. Paul didn't either. Certainly, Christ does not want any to turn from him.

This warning from Paul is also for us who walk the path to eternal life, following the example of Paul. The Christian life is the life of the cross. Jesus told his disciples to expect to be treated the same way Jesus was treated. Expect suffering in this life. Our natural way of thinking is to avoid suffering at all costs. We want a life in which all our desires are fulfilled. We want to receive whatever we hunger for, whatever our appetite demands. Money, health, vacations, relationships, success, attention, power and so on. Christ and Paul tell us clearly that this is not the Christian life and walk. The devil and the world promise an earthly life of ease and pleasure. Christ promises the cross and suffering.

Paul urges us to imitate his way of life. Paul is currently in prison for preaching Christ crucified and risen. He is walking the walk, enduring suffering in this life. In addition, Paul is writing to the believers in Philippi. When Paul visited them on his mission journeys he was soon beaten and thrown into prison there. The pattern Paul set down for us to follow is one of the cross, to follow Christ no matter what the world does to us, to follow Christ no matter what it may cost us in time or money or any other earthly thing, to take no detours. So, how can we possibly do this?

*<sup>20</sup>But our citizenship is in heaven. We are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

When you are going to the top of the mountain, it doesn't help to always be looking back. Keep your eyes on the goal. Our destination is heaven. This destination has been won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. He has made us citizens of heaven even as we wait on this earth. Knowing where we will live forever helps us endure any cross we may need to carry now.

In addition, knowing that we are even now citizens of heaven, we are empowered to act like citizens of heaven even now. We follow Christ now. He is our joy, our life, our strength, our comfort. We keep our eyes on Christ as we carry out our God-given roles in life as spouse, parent, child, worker, student, neighbor. We act like who we are, a citizen of heaven, with the love and compassion and forgiveness of Christ. We are more concerned about what God says than about what the world says. We are more concerned about what Christ says, than about what our own appetites want in life. And we are more concerned about others than even our own bodies.

Paul's body bore the marks of persecution for the sake of Christ. In 2 Corinthians (11:24-25), Paul lists some of his marks: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. One time I was stoned.” We may not have the marks of persecution on us, but our bodies still suffer in this life: bad knees and hips and shoulders, back

pain, heart problems, diabetes, cancer, and more. How do we keep following Christ with bodies that are falling apart? How did Paul when his body was attacked by the enemies of Christ, even writing this letter from prison?

*<sup>21</sup>By the power that enables him to subject all things to himself, he will transform our humble bodies to be like his glorious body.*

We are promised glorious bodies when Christ returns and raises the dead. Think about what that means. When the Marys took hold of Jesus' feet on Easter morning outside of the tomb, he did not scream in pain. Later, Christ went for a long walk on feet that had been pierced by nails just days earlier. But he didn't limp or wince with each step. A week later Jesus invited Thomas to reach out and touch the places where the nails and the spear had pierced him. The marks were there, but not the pain. The marks were there, but the suffering was over.

We will have marks in our bodies and minds too. The marks in Jesus' body paid for sin. The marks on us and in us are a result of living in a sinful world. But on that glorious day of Christ's return, he will give us a glorious body that no longer suffers, a body that no longer experiences any pain, eyes that don't weep and a heart that never mourns again.

What detour in life is going to get you to a better place than heaven or a better body than one like Christ's glorious body? Imitate Paul by remaining on the way we have been placed and following the Lord Jesus in whom we have been given faith until the end.

*So then, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way keep standing firm in the Lord, my dear friends.*

Amen.