

Weekly Devotions
South Holburn Church
12th January 2021

READINGS

During this time of restrictions, I have enjoyed more than my usual number of walks! Even the cold weather can not deter me from a brisk walk down to the beach or around the town of Stonehaven where we stay.

My son John and I went for a walk one day and really enjoyed looking at the sea and walking around at the front. Going down the hill from our house is always the easiest part...it is going back up that can be challenging. I thought I had a great idea and suggested we go through the park and avoid this road on the way back home. So instead, we walked through the park, enjoyed watching the ducks and then came to another hill in the park. There was a path that looked like it went around the park, so I suggested we take that instead. Indeed, I thought we had done well! Instead of a steep rise that was hard on my knees, we took an easier, though slightly longer, route (or so I thought). As we rounded the corner, however, I saw the paths diverge and realized we were divided from where we needed to go by a wee burn that did not have a bridge over it. We keep walking and hoping that we would come out on the other side near our street. We could see where we needed to be, but it was not crossable. Yes, we could go all the way back to the beginning and take the first or second hill we had avoided, but we stubbornly persevered to the end! We did eventually come out of the wood and onto the road, but it was a good 20 minutes or more longer. It was less steep overall, but we still walked up the hill! In our effort to take the easy way out, we ended up taking the longer way around.

Have you ever done that? Thought you would try a shortcut or easier way and ended up causing more grief for yourself? On that particular day it made me think of our spiritual walk and how easy it is to think we can take a short cut or avoid a hill, or twist or turn. I do not like sacrifice and pain, and sometimes the Christian life is made up of these things. Sometimes I wonder if maybe I should go a different way than the Lord has intended, and I even go off on my own. Thankfully, gently, the Lord leads me back onto his path, but I still need to get out of the woods patiently, intentionally, and persistently.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NRSVA)

So often I rely on my own thinking rather than listening to the soft quiet voice of God's spirit in my life. The proverbs were wisdom sayings in ancient Israel, and they were used to help people discern what was good and right. Without God's guidance I would lose my way. I sometimes fight against what God is teaching me and need to submit myself to his correction. That walk was a reminder that my own insight can easily get me into deeper trouble. When I follow what I know to work and be true, I find a much easier ride. The Israelites often struggled with following God's ways. They wandered for forty years in the desert under Moses' direction, and they still could not get it right when they had King David or even when the wisdom of Solomon was given to them as a guide. Yet God did not give up on them, He walked beside them in their waywardness and never left their side even when they went the long way around.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7 (NRSVA)

Paul wrote to the Colossians because he could not be with them in person. He reminded them that though they were struggling God had a plan to give them deep roots of faith. There were philosophies abounding that suggested an easier way of life and Paul warned the Christians of Colossae to stick to what they knew to be true and to do so together. If they would cling to Jesus, despite the circumstances before them, they would find their faith growing into maturity.

For whether we take the big steep hill or the long meandering way around we still get through the thick of the wood. We climb the places we need to get over, and we pause when the walking becomes too much. I was glad I had John to talk to along the way. We encouraged each other to keep going. It is so great that God gives us partners in this spiritual journey that we can carry one another's burdens and encourage each other to stay on the path. We can also sometimes convince each other to take the big hill standing before us if we do it together!

REFLECTION

The American pastor and theologian, the late Rev. Dr. Eugene Peterson, in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, wrote:

There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.

Sure we all want to further our relationship with God, but growing involves stretching and straining in one direction for a very long time. That process leads us to holiness, yet we often have little patience to get there. If I think of my spiritual walk; I know how quickly I want the easy way out, and how I often cause myself more grief than is necessary. However, I also realize that the long way around can bring me much learning, too, and I have to persevere in the process if I am going to become more like Christ. Peterson also says in *A Long Obedience*:

Traveling in the way of faith and climbing the ascent to Christ may be difficult, but it is not worrisome. The weather may be adverse, but it is never fatal. We may slip and stumble and fall, but the rope will hold us.

I am not promised an easy road when I follow Christ. In fact, Jesus asks me, as he does all his disciples, to pick up my cross and follow him. This obedience is often the last thing I often want to do. Yet, the Christian life cannot avoid the road of sorrow. Along the way, our life will be filled with uncertainty, dips and turns. However, if we persevere, will we not be drawn into a deeper relationship with our Saviour?

I do not know what you are going through today, but I do know one who is right there beside you. Jesus is with us on our long, boring trips in the same direction and in our steep hills and winding highways. We have one that sticks closer than a brother, and I pray we would embrace that truth. Instead of running from struggle, may we learn to grow through it and to not expect instant results. The letter of James was written to the Jews

who were scattered due to persecution after they had come to faith in Jesus. They were going through times of great testing and were persecuted for their faith. They needed to endure so that the message of Jesus would continue and so that their faith would grow. Oftentimes, it is in the hardest, most difficult places in our lives that we learn the most about ourselves and draw the closest to our Saviour.

James 1:2-4 encourages us so that we might become mature in our faith:
My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (NRSVA)

Friends, let me encourage you to turn to others for encouragement and to “keep on keeping on” in this long road of faith in the same direction! There is light at the end of the tunnel. We are learning a lot together as a community of faith, and we can be there for one another! I am praying for you!

Thanks be to God we are on this journey of faith together.

Julia

PRAYER

Faithful Lord,
Thank you for guiding us and for your patience with us.
So often we want the shortcut, but you need us to go up the hill or through the valley.
Help us to be obedient in our impatience.
Give us endurance when it seems to take a long time.
Empower us to reach out to others and to accept their help along the way.
Thank you that you mature us and grow us even in our most stretching times.
Thank you that perseverance will smooth our rough edges and help us to plant roots that go deep into the soil of faith.
Thank you that no experience is wasted in your kingdom.
In Jesus Name, Amen.

In Jesus name
Amen

