Pressing On

PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14 (NRSVUE) ***If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: [5]circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6]as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7]Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. [8]More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9]and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. [10]I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, [11]if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. [12]Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ[l] has laid hold of me. [13]Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14]I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.***
The Word of God for the people of God…

Jo Lynn and I have traveling on our minds these days. Most of you know we had to reschedule our vacation because of COVID; so, as the day gets closer, it's on our minds. It's one of our favorite things to do together. We've traveled in 49 of the 50 states, from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Key West, Florida; from Kennebunkport, Maine to San Diego, California, and most points in between. Even just a drive up Petit Jean Mountain for lunch at Mather Lodge is a treat.

So, how do you travel—say, a trip to Tulsa? Are you "destination oriented"—just want to get there: Interstate all the way, 10-15 mph over the posted speed limit; non-stop; frustrated with traffic? 3:22 via Google Maps; 2:51 @ 85 mph.

Or are you "journey-oriented"—you like to leave early, take 64 instead of the Interstate; jump off at Lamar, drive up 123 to Mt. Judea for breakfast at Kent's General Store; take 74 over to Jasper and across Mt. Shermon, stopping for photos along the way; look for elk along the Boxley Valley, catch 21 up to 412 through Springdale; lunch in Tontitown, then the Cherokee Turnpike on into Tulsa…

Would that trip—six hours, instead of three on the Interstate—would that drive you nuts? Or do you prefer to leave earlier and enjoy the journey?

Yes, there are occasions when time is of the essence: a deadline, an appointment, a kickoff… schedule's tight with no opportunity to leave early… Sometimes you just *need* to get there. But every time?

Each reflects a personality type—a personal preference—and neither is right or wrong. It's simply genetics. And that's OK. Type 'A' personality: driven, goal-oriented, achievement-oriented, destination-oriented. We need those people.

Type 'B' personality: laid back, smell the coffee. We need some of that, too. And sometimes they can correct each other.

In my pastoral training and experience I've come to understand and appreciate a variety of personality types—without judging or evaluating them.

And see, here's the thing: assuming each has a reasonably mature sense of responsibility, both the destination-oriented driver and the journey-oriented driver will get there. So, if you're a get-there-as-fast-as-possible person, may I recommend a trial run at an occasional outing just for the sake of the journey?

Destination-oriented versus journey-oriented reflects not only personality, but also our culture: remember TV w/o a remote? You had to get up and walk across the room to change channels? Tony and Jacob, this may be hard to believe, but I was 13 before I ever saw a TV! I was 16 before we ever had one in our home.

Remember telephones mounted on the wall or tethered to a cord? Remember phones without cameras or Internet access or streaming capabilities? Remember life without cell phones or blue tooth or Alexa?

Now, I don't want to go back to that way of life. I like the creature comforts. I like that medical science has almost eliminated polio from the planet. I like Sirius Radio and a GPS in my car. I like to watch the Dallas Cowboys on my phone.

But beginning with that TV remote control, within a generation our culture's impatience for inconvenience diminished. And with every new convenience, American impatience grew. Impatience is a demon that infects every personality type. And in a remote-control, blue-tooth culture, impatience is pandemic.

So, given a pandemic of impatience, yeah, I understand destination-oriented personality. But associated stress levels play havoc with health and relationships.

And beyond personality and culture, America has become destination oriented at a spiritual level. Now, let me reinforce an earlier point: neither destination orientation nor journey orientation is right or wrong in and of themselves. But, like any social or cultural trait, it is an imbalance that becomes problematic.

In too many cases, destination Christianity has come to be about getting into heaven, and earthly life in the flesh is not important to the faith. And therein lies a disconnect: while Christianity has moved toward a destination spirituality, our scriptures remain filled with references to the life of faith as a journey.

Jesus had much more to say about how we treat each other—how we treat the least of his brothers and sisters—than he ever said about heaven—or prayer. His primary message was that the kingdom of God is near. Life and relationships are important: right here; right now.

And when someone said, "I will follow you wherever you go," he responded, "Foxes have holes; birds have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." There's to destination spirituality there.

He spoke of faith as a "way;" and said, ***"…the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. [14]For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."*** **(Matthew 7:13-14)**

The writer of Hebrews describes discipleship as ***"run(ning) with perseverance the race that is set before us…"*** **(12:1)**

And in today's reading from Philippians Paul writes, "…***forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14]I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."***

"The prize…" Yes, there is a destination in our faith, but Paul hadn't reached it when he wrote that. And neither have we. We're not there yet.

Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," ends:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

The pace of Western culture is exhausting. Of course, that's partly because we make poor choices. Like Paul, we "press on," but sometimes have difficulty with priorities and boundaries. So, fatigue and stress are an almost accepted part of life. The journey is overloaded! We just want to get somewhere and stop and rest!

And then we come to church and the preacher preaches a sermon about "Pressing On." So, since 1967, there has been a steady exodus from recognized communities of faith. I could spend a lot of time examining the reasons behind that exodus. Most of the theological and spiritual reasons are valid. There are just too many religious hucksters and peddlers of prosperity gospels.

But to those who have come to see religion as too demanding for unrealistic reasons, my message—and I hope your message is to examine your life; discern whether religion has become too demanding, or have we simply lost any sense of balance in life? Consider God's marvelous creation—there is a balance and a rhythm to life in every genus and species—except *homo sapiens*.

Paul urges the Philippian Christians to "Press on." But every journey of any length has its pit stops. And the most enjoyable journeys—the least stressful journeys—are enriched by side trips and photo opportunities; discovering Coconut Cream pie at some off-the-map Mom & Pop sweet shop along the way.

The writer of Hebrews urges us to ***"run with perseverance the race that is set before us…"*** Every distance runner knows the importance of pacing oneself.

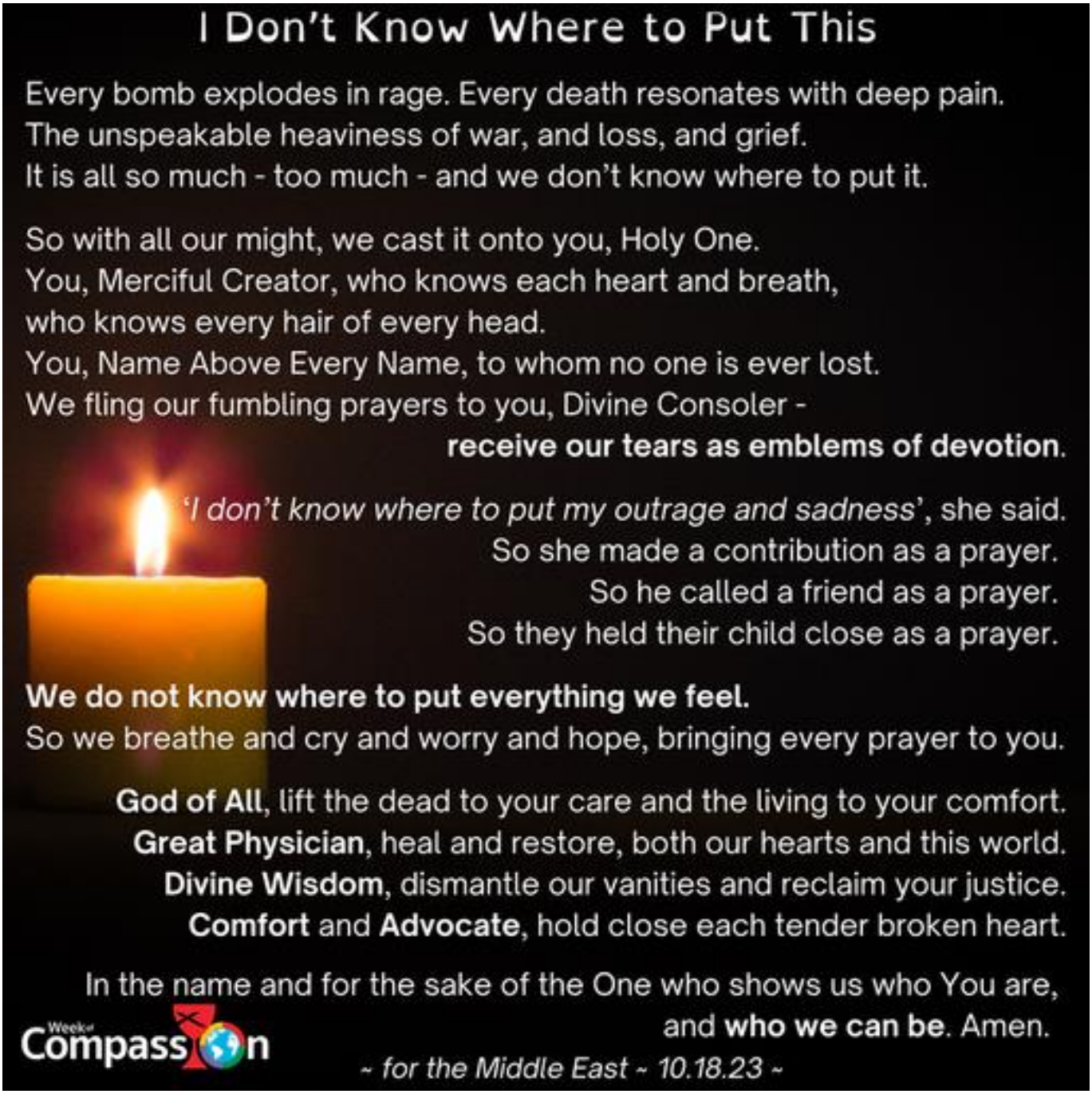
And the one who said, ***"the gate is narrow and the road is hard,"*** also said, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."***

Pastoral Prayer

In your bulletin you'll find a "Partial Guide for Prayer for the Victims in the Aftermath of Hamas and Hezbollah Terrorist Atrocities." A lot of thought has gone into this document; not only from me, but also from other sources. In particular, I'm grateful for my friend and colleage, Jason Rolen, who is my sister's pastor at Believers Baptist Church in Emory, Texas. His comments to his congregation last Sunday were the stimulus for my own list.

In particular, note on the bottom of the second page the notes from our Week of Compassion.

- Bethany's cousin, a teacher in Atlanta, GA, shared that a third grader in his school died in a house fire on Friday morning.
- Myrna's sister, Gail, had surgery on Friday, and is doing well. She still is facing a battle against returning cancer.



Invitation to the Table

The world is broken. Homo sapiens—I dare not even use the word, humanity, because so much of what represents homo sapiens is sub-human—homo sapiens plays a dangerous game that threatens life as we know it.

Of course, it's not the whole species. It's a tiny, miniscule fraction of the species that toys with annihilation. And they swagger and flaunt their bravado. Maybe the only mistake God made in creation was testosterone.

On the other hand, it does take—courage—to stand against entrenched injustice, to speak truth to power, to confront the cowardice of terrorism, knowing it will lead to a cross. It does take—courage—for one whose aggressive testosterone is throbbing to accept—indeed to proactively embrace—the equally courageous but nurturing influence of estrogen—to embrace the balance within God's whole creation.

The crosses we are called to bear take many forms and expressions, and maybe the most important need today is for a mass crucifixion of human arrogance. But the prototype is represented at this table. It will be humility, that is crucified—by arrogance.

And yet, in the foolishness of God, which is wiser than the wisdom of homo sapiens, the promise is that humility will be raised to bring new life. This table represents the hope, not only of homo sapiens, but of all creation.