

“Looking for a Way to Escape”

Psalms 71:1-8; Acts 9:17-25

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 23, 2014 – 3rd Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

I saw a billboard near the airport a few weeks back. It was during that endless cold and snow we were having. The sign read “Escape to Florida!” and had a picture of a jet in mid take-off. Other than the name of the airline that’s all it said. Apparently the advertising agency felt no more was needed. And while that message might fall flat in July, during a long Ohio winter we get it’s meaning loud and clear.

“Escape to Florida!” The dictionary says that to escape is to get free of something. This roadside message told me that I can get rid of all this snow and cold and discomfort by simply coming aboard one of their planes. In a few hours I’ll step outside and, presto, it will be clear and warm. My body will absorb the sun’s rays like a sponge and it’ll feel good, real good. Winter will be left behind and I’ll be free again to enjoy life.

When we do escape from whatever traps us we feel a sense of exhilaration. We have overcome a restriction that has boxed us in, that stifles us, that deadens us. This can be all kinds of things besides the weather. It can be to escape from a job with no future. It can be to escape from a serious health problem through early intervention, or be financially free after repayment of a loan. It can be to escape a relationship where all the love is long gone. When we experience this kind of escape it’s a good feeling.

Personal escape is so universal that we’re drawn to others who likewise struggle to flee their predicament. That surely accounts for the success of many movies and television shows. A well-crafted story holds us in suspense as we wonder about its eventual outcome.

Many a game comes down to the final inning or final play or last minute to see if a team will escape looming defeat. The players have one more chance to be free of a loss. If it’s your team that turns the score around, you feel a rush as well as the athletes.

There are also some classic escape scenes in the Bible, too. Perhaps the most dramatic is that of Moses and the Israelites in a mass escape from Egypt through the Red Sea. They had been subjugated to terrible repression. This was their one and only chance to be free. From that time to the present, no people have known pain and suffering and need for escape better than the Jews.

Jesus also had a close escape. This was from a hostile crowd in his own hometown of Nazareth. After preaching in the synagogue and angering some by what he said, a mob came together to drive him from the city and throw him off a hillside; yet, he managed to escape. Jesus took his freedom and went on to fulfill his mission and destiny.

So, too, our scripture from Acts relates the story of an escape. Saul, while on his way to Damascus to persecute early Christians, was blinded and then converted. He became aware that the Lord had chosen him to become a special messenger to both Jews and Gentiles. We pick up our reading today with Ananias’ healing of Saul and his subsequent baptism.

After he regained his strength Saul went forth with a new mission. Acts say that he “went straight to the synagogue and began to teach that Jesus was the Son of God.” Those who gathered to hear him couldn’t believe their ears. He became a preacher instead of a prosecutor. His message that day was the last thing they would have expected him to support. It’s like Bill O’Reilly going on the air and encouraging people to get the honest truth by tuning into Rachel Maddow.

The leaders of hard-line religion couldn't stand the man and his new message. So they devised a plan to kill Saul, but he became aware of it. The leaders were watching the town gates to seize him there, but instead a group of his followers got him outside the city by lowering him in a basket down the walls. It was a narrow escape, but one that caused him to redouble his efforts rather than to become discouraged.

Saul, later to be known as Paul, had many trying times. People and events kept attempting to restrict him, but he slipped out of one circumstance after another. Perhaps he took comfort in such a Psalm like that found in our Old Testament reading this morning:

- ¹ In you, O Lord, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.
- ³ Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
- ⁴ Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

Paul's life was touched by Jesus and, in turn, his life has touched countless others. In him we see a model for trust and hope that speaks to us at times we find no way out of our predicaments. The easiest thing is to give up when troubles persist. We can drink or do drugs to try to forget our problems. We can become despondent with thoughts of what might happen. We can become immobilized with fear. Or... we can pray to God for the guidance and strength we need to face our terrors.

We might do well to become acquainted with Gladys Aylward. As a young woman she was a servant in a large London home. In 1930 she felt a compelling call to become a missionary to China. Gladys had little money and limited education; still, she had great faith and determination. She travelled alone to the Orient and began her work in a rural area.

A few years later, when the Japanese invaded China, Gladys had a hundred orphans under her care. It was clear that the area where they lived was becoming a battlefield and everyone would have to flee or perish. Equipped with nothing but a whistle to call the children to her, Gladys set out on a journey that would last over a month. She was headed from her remote orphanage to the city of Sian where there was a secure refugee center.

The first leg of the journey took twelve days and ended at the banks of the Yellow River. There were no boats on this wide waterway due to the threat of air strikes. After getting this far Aylward wondered if it would be the end for her and the children. They searched for three days to find a means to get across and their food had run out. Just as hope all but vanished, a Chinese Nationalist patrol boat appeared. Thanks to the crew they were ferried across in small groups until all the children were safe on the other side.

The missionary and her children boarded a train that took them further to Sian, but then was halted when a major bridge was bombed out. So they did the only thing they could: they took to their feet. They walked and walked and walked over a treacherous mountain trail, eating berries and roots and whatever edible things they could find along the way.

Even after they made it across the range, they still had a long trip ahead of them. This raggedy band travelled from one village to another, asking for food as they went. One evening exhaustion overtook

Gladys. She was convinced that the cause was lost and they would never get to shelter. So her flowing tears, which she could no longer hide, started all the children to sobbing.

Gladys Aylward did the only thing she could do at that point. She prayed for their deliverance, and that prayer was answered through a renewal of hope and strength inside her. The children now took courage from her and they resumed their grueling journey. When they finally reached Sian and safety, Gladys was harkened that she could account for every child she had started out with. One hundred children escaped death because one woman with faith had been their means of flight.

Life is often a joy, but inevitably it will bring times of great challenge. There will be periods when we will desperately look for a way to escape. These may also be the points when we are most tempted to give up, the occasions which indeed try a person's soul.

When we are most on the verge of giving up, we ought to look to the psalmists, to Paul, to Jesus, to a missionary named Aylward, to thousands of other men and women of faith, even to the example of some close to us. The ultimate escape is not **from** reality but **to** reality. When we realize all our hope lies in God, then love overlays our fears. It gives us a place of refuge amidst the turmoil. We can face whatever challenges may assail us.

Today, should you need it, ask for the strength required to break out of your circumstances. Then trust that you will be given what you need to move ahead.