

"Stuck, Stalled, or Broken Down"

Psalm 81:1-10; Philippians 3:12-21

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

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One way to think of life is in terms of a road. When we're young we may not see very far ahead, but the road we can see looks inviting to us; and, as far as we can tell, it stretches on and on and on. There's a lot of exciting places to visit and countless things to do. Life is an adventure when you're young and it's mostly ahead, with only a little behind.

Well if we continue this analogy of travel then, perhaps, we might be compared best to cars. Again when we're young we're like shiny, new automobiles fresh from the factory. There's not a nick or ding to mar us. Being brand new we're still a bit untried. All the kinks and quirks in our systems may not have been worked out yet. We have to get some further tuning.

In the beginning we go forward in fits and starts. As youngsters we often run ourselves to the point where we overheat and simply have to stop for a while until we cool down. Getting older, we have a better idea of how to drive this car which we call **us**. We learn how to even out our movements in order to keep us humming down the road. We get the feel of our vehicle and begin to discover what it's capable of and just how much it can be pushed.

Well, the problem with the road of life that we travel is that it's not so much like a superhighway, wide and fine with all the curves banked at just the right angles, but more like one you'd find in some rural area.

US 21 was the predecessor to Interstate 77 in West Virginia. Now they didn't do away with the old route, but built the new road parallel to it. If you get out a map you'll see this north-south freeway looking comparatively straight as it goes from Parkersburg, through Charleston, past Beckley, and on to Bluefield. US 21, on the other hand, looks like a snake. It more closely follows the contour of the land.

One year we got off the freeway for a while and took the older road. Well, it twisted and turned and went up and down. I couldn't get to full speed very often because there was always another curve looming up just ahead. Also, you quickly discover you share the space with a lot of slow traffic. Sometimes you can pass, but other times you just have to have patience and be willing to adjust your speed to theirs. While old "21" certainly has many disadvantages, it's definitely is the more scenic way to go.

Well, if life can be compared to a road it more closely resembles the two-lane variety than a freeway. Life reminds us of a backroad full of crossings and school zones, hills and valleys. Usually you can't see very far ahead and you never really know what is around the next curve. It might hide something good or present a danger. Yet there's bound to be some great scenery to enjoy as you go along, if you take the opportunity to look.

Now it seems that one of the challenges steering this conveyance I call **myself** is that I don't achieve a very consistent speed. Often my progress depends on the terrain. Some days are

like long, steep hills which are a struggle to get up. Other days I'm able to coast more, moving easily and even picking up some real speed. Unfortunately, life seems to be a lot more uphill than going down, or is that just what we tend to remember more?

One thing you notice, as you travel along life's highways, is that occasionally you see other drivers broken down alongside the road. They're not moving anywhere and maybe haven't for some time. Then, too, maybe there will be a car that has skidded out of control and now is stuck in a ditch. Sometimes you also come up behind an auto that's stalled right there in the moving lane. The starter is being keyed, but nothing's happening.

It's clear that we're not in a position to laugh at these unfortunate fellow travelers because we've been there ourselves! We've all been stalled, stuck, or broken down at times.

Driving imitates life and vice versa. We can be stalled on an actual road or experience that same feeling in the course of our lives. Some days, no matter how hard we try, we can't seem to move from the place where we are to where we want to go. We notice others whizzing by and wonder what went wrong with us. We were getting along so well and then—all of a sudden—nothing. No power, or very little.

Perhaps you've known some people who appear permanently stalled in life. They never can seem to make any significant progress from where they once got stopped. Losses can do that: loss of a job, loss of a loved one, loss of health, loss of hope. Everyone has some of these times, but most folks eventually get started again with continued effort or help from others. Sadly, some are never really able to get restarted.

When we're in one of our temporary stalls it's very important not to stay there any longer than we have to. Often, though, we end up being our own worst enemy. Sometimes we'd even rather feel sorry for ourselves—all broken down, resigned to fate—than get out and fix the problem or call for help. After a while others may get tired of going around us and so push us off to the side, and there we sit.

Paul, in our text for today, offers some thoughts on when we get in a spiritual stall. In his letter to the Philippians the apostle talks about his desire to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrected spirit. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached my goal," he writes, "yet I press on that I may come to have Jesus and his power as my own. And this is how I do it. I don't look backward but keep my eyes focused on what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal and the prize there which is God's higher calling to an eternal home. "

This imagery describes how a competitive race was run in those days. Whatever the prize, it was put in a conspicuous place at the very point where the race was to end. This way, when the contestants saw the prize awaiting the victor, they were roused to strain every muscle to the utmost to get to the finish line. It helped them forget everything else and focus solely on their objective.

Paul tells us that, for him, life held out no greater reward than to be at one with Christ and to look forward to eternal life in God's kingdom. He disciplined himself not to be distracted as he strove toward this end, and then commends us to follow in his example.

Now if you're like me, the desire to go forward in faith is a sincere one, but often it's not so easy to do. The goal and its reward may be out there in the distance before us, but our determination can get sidetracked by so many things. Sometimes I get slowed, or even stalled out, on my pathway. I wonder if that's ever happened to you? How do we get moving again?

Recently someone told me she had a feeling of being pulled back into worship again, but it had been so long that she didn't even know how to act on that urge. She didn't know what to do first, but then she did speak to me. So I shared this little story with her.

A farmer in bygone days had a young son who had often watched him feed the horses. The boy asked to do this chore, but the father kept answering "no" because he was still so young. One winter evening the man decided that the time had come for his son to take on this responsibility. When given the chance, however, the boy backed away saying that he was afraid of the dark.

So the father stepped out onto the back porch with the boy, lit a lantern, gave it to him, and asked how far he could see if he held up the light. "I can see halfway down the path," said the boy.

So the father told his son to carry the lantern halfway down the path. When the boy reached that point, the father asked how far the boy could see now. He called back to the man that he could make out the gate. The father then urged the boy to walk to that point and, when he was there, inquired how far he could see then. "I can see the barn," replied the lad. The father encouraged the boy to go to the barn and open the door.

The boy shouted back that he was finally at the outbuilding and could see the animals. "Good," said this wise father, "now feed the horses and return to me. I'll be waiting to give you a hug when you complete your chore."

Now when we get bogged down on the road of life we would be well to remember that God, our heavenly parent, bids us on to meet our greater goals. God guides and encourages us, trusting that we have inside what it will take. We're not necessarily expected to go all the way at one time, but to make one step then another then another until we approach our destination. And when we do the hard things that are required, God will encircle us in love and say, "Well done."

Arnold Toynbee said that "Christianity is a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor." Perhaps we could add today that faith is a trip and not a parking lot. In life, we must learn to restart when we have stopped. We must get out of the rut and get back on the road. When we need this kind of inner assistance, we're reminded that the Spirit has the full capacity to get moving again.

So, in summary today: if your Ford or Mazda quits on you, call AAA. If your soul is sluggish or on the fritz, then it's time to put it to prayer! And be assured you don't even need GPS, for God always knows exactly where we are.