

“WHY THE SALMON SWIM UPSTREAM . . .”

Text: “. . . but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind,
and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on
toward the goal for the prize of the upward call in
Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

Philippians 3:13-14

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Through the years, every time that I have had the chance to watch the salmon swimming upstream, struggling with all their might to get back to the place where they were born, I have been captivated and have gone away amazed. They give their all so the next generation can come to the fore. Curiously, I have often thought that it would be a dandy topic to preach about, but I have routinely set it aside. (By the time we are finished today, you might wish that I had put it aside this time, too.) The topic has flopped around in my "Sermons for Someday" pail for so long, that the original reminder note is yellowed and dog-eared and a little bit soggy, another poignant reminder of how old I have become. By the way, many other potential sermons hang out there too; some of them possibly quite good, which by my negative selection will probably never be written or preached. I think it was William Faulkner who chided that most of us die with our music still in us. We do.

In the August 2009 issue of Church Executive Magazine I found an article titled, "Pastors aren't stupid, they just can't see their own mistakes." (Page 32) Well, you have to decide for yourself whether the first part is true; but I can vouch that ministers often fail to see their own mistakes, a problem while shared with many other occupations, is still not very reassuring. The author, Pastor Geoff Surrat, tells how he has often missed the opportunities of the moment. He shared a marvelous illustration, likening the choices preachers make to his interest in NASCAR Racing, a frequent past-time of mine own as well. My wife is always completely mystified that I can sit there all Sunday afternoon and watch the cars go round and round and around the track. It does seem a bit silly doesn't it? But then women don't understand a man's fascination with cars and speed and colorful jackets.

Anyway, Surrat wrote that he had been lucky enough to watch some races from down on pit-row. "It sure is an exciting place to be," he says, "but, it is not a very good place to watch the race. You are too close to the action to see the whole picture." Sometimes, pastors are too, and they miss some opportunities to evaluate the larger picture. For example, I am frequently puzzled by the response I get to various sermons - one way or the other. I clipped a cartoon once where the Senior Pastor and his assistant were in his study following an apparently rousing sermon. Six huge offering trays, overflowing with 10, 20 and 50 dollar bills were piled high on his desk. The caption read: "Jimmy, let's go over that manuscript again, I must have said something that got their attention!"

This sermon took root long ago on Royal Deeside up near Braemar: the Dee being one of two enchanting rivers in the NE of Scotland. The Dee and The Don flow down out of the Cairngorm Mountains in the Highlands and empty into the North Sea in Aberdeenshire. When we lived in St. Andrews, we often went up to the Bridge of Don to visit John and Annie Mowatt. At the time John was Superintendent of Police in the NE of Scotland. Annie was a transplanted American housewife from Brooklyn who never learned the Scots accent. They were wonderful to us. John gave me my first kilt. They took us to Balmoral Castle and the Highland Games at Bramaer, and we sat across from the Queen with them in the little Crathie Church on Deeside.

One afternoon we went up one of the tributaries to the Dee (that's the River, not our Dee Smart) when the salmon were running upstream, combating torrential spring current to get back to the quiet waters of home. I watched them leaping, driven back, catapulting themselves up again over five or six-foot rushing waterfalls,

which were as large to them as Niagara Falls would seem to us.

But, like neophyte pole-vaulters, they kept propelling themselves into the center of the swift current, seldom succeeding, but never giving up. More recent artificial lock-like steps make it easier in some larger streams, but such are shunned in the back-woods of Scotland. The salmon are on their own, as they have been for a million years. It makes you wonder why, why do they do it, why such Herculean effort? Salmon differ by how adventuresome they are. Some go as far away from home as a thousand miles. Some linger much closer to home. The Chinook and Sockeye Salmon wander 900 miles away from central Idaho and then find their way back, climbing 7000 feet in the process. It seems to me it be much easier to munch away on the shrimp and crustaceans down in the ocean estuaries, and let some other fishies worry about the future of the species.

From birth on it's a struggle. Little one-inch-long "fry" emerge from the roe in their native gravel. The first year of life is so precarious that out of two million eggs maybe twenty thousand tops make it to the sea. On their journey, (are you listening?) a "leader" salmon acts as a guide. He goes ahead, just like Joshua and Caleb in the book of Numbers, to survey the lay of the land and evaluate the obstacles they will encounter on their travels. The leader salmon selects the best route, a hatchery equivalent of an ancient GPS, and comes back to guide the others on their journey. (Honest!) And everybody, every single one of the salmon, like migrating geese following their leader in formation, everyone listens to the lead salmon! They do what he says. Would that preachers had it so.

Once they make it to the ocean, they face a whole new set of obstacles: new food to find, new predators to avoid, new oxygen to breathe. Not too many return, but almost exactly half of those who make it back up the stream are males, the other half females. That is amazing in itself; it still takes two to tango.

Ichthyologists surmise that the pattern was established back in the Pleistocene Era, a million years ago. The migrating salmon are descended from the huge freshwater family of Salmonid. When the Ice Age inched its centuries-long journey southward, covering the greater part of the Northern Hemisphere, the salmon, as every other living thing, were shoved down from the quiet streams and ponds and eddies and out into the basins of the salt-water seas.

As the ice later retreated, fish had to choose fresh water or salt. The salmon chose both. They became "anadromous" to use the proper word. Born in the quiet fresh waters of a mountain stream, they make their way to the blustery sea. But, while the large estuaries and ocean deep are fun to be in, they are not fit places to breed the fragile young. So like the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, the salmon began their yearly relocation in reverse. Born in quiet ponds, they take on the Mad Hatters of the world, then come back safely home at the end of the day. Sounds like a good idea to me.

Their migration instinct is a marvel. No one really knows how it began or what prompts it to endure. Scientists speculate that temperature differences, electromagnetic impulses, chemical variations, or internal compasses, are used - topped by a genetically pre-conditioned olfactory power. No one knows how they do it, but everybody knows they do. They never give up.

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Now you non fisher-folk out there must be wondering where on earth the Gospel is in all this. I hear somebody murmuring that he did not come to Worship to listen to a lecture on migrating salmon. So you can

I. First, let me begin with the obvious: Life, for many, is an uphill battle. Most all of us are born in a peaceful, loving quiet place. Family and friends surround us. Churches and schools and teachers are congenial. From those homes we go out into the world and becoming vulnerable. We have to fend and forge for ourselves in the unpredictable currents. We got bumped along, dodging where we can, colliding when we had to, uphill, downhill, sideways. You win some; you lose some. "Life is a losing proposition," Will Rogers said, "not one of us comes out of it alive." But it is worth it anyway. But it is a struggle for many.

I was talking with a member of Sharon Church the other day, one who has had more than her full share of trials and tribulations. It would be unfair to mention the details here. I was chatting with her about this sermon topic. I asked her if she knew why the salmon swim upstream. After a minute she said: "Because they have to. Even though they do not know it, they were made for that purpose; they were made to fulfill it." Even when they do not know it! She went on to say that is why she has kept on moving forward, and has never given up. She keeps swimming upstream. Why? Because there is a purpose for her to fulfill too, even when we do not know what that purpose is. Never give up, just never give up, keep on trying, never give up! It is why we all are here.

Think of the people you know who have had huge disappointments. The odds against them would finish most of us off for good. I think for example of a young man who used to work for me. He was a little fellow a dwarf, a midget. His mother and father died when he was young. Someone called and asked me to go see him. I did. We became friends. I gave him a job at the church I was serving. One day I asked him what it was like to be small. "Oh, I manage," he said, "but every morning when I wake up and can't see myself in the mirror, I have to make a decision whether to go or not. And, I keep asking myself what difference would it make whether I was here or not?" I told him he meant a lot to me." He smiled and said "Yes, I know. It's a struggle, but you are alive. Let's get moving!" He did.

Then, I think of a young woman whose husband walked out on her to cavort with some sweet young cookie down at the office. He stole what little money they had, took their car, even the family dog. The rent was due, and the light bill, and the telephone, all. With three little children she was in shock - she never saw it coming. She was tempted to throw it all in, but she leaned on her family and friends and she went to her pastor. She got two jobs, her church helped her and she set out to swim upstream. Thank God she made it. Oh there were days, but she made it. But you should see how wonderfully it all turned out for her and her children.

And I think of those who were shortchanged from the start. A "special child" I know for example. His parents tried to manage things at home, but it all got so troublesome and dangerous, that they had to commit him to a facility. That was so sad they cried for months. But once a week ever after they drove thirty miles down to visit him in the institution where he lingered on for 27 years. Talk about swimming upstream: he usually didn't even know that they were there. It would have been simple to skip a week here or there and take a breather. But they wouldn't. They struggled up against the current and made it. No regrets, thank you.

And I think of one of our dearest friends who died last year. Decades ago she married a nice young man in Indiana. They had a child named Zana, a cute little girl. But nuts, the doctor told them one day it was cancer and within a couple of years Zana was gone. Then, darn it all, it was so hard on her husband that he ran off to Colorado and she was alone. What a burden; that was when I met her.

Losing a child to death is the toughest road of all. In fact I read a few weeks ago about the couple over in England who took the ashes of their little boy, who died without warning, and they climbed up above Beachy Head in East Sussex and leapt off the cliff together, holding hands and the little urn. I don't want to make them look bad; I understand their grief.

When I read it, I thought of Suzie and how she turned her head to the wind and braved the wild rushing currents of grief and despondency and propelled herself up over the mountainous falls, and aye. We were all thrilled when she married again to a wonderful guy, but then -drats- he died too. Yet, she made it; I don't know how.

Last Friday Morning on WBT I listened to an interview with Jake Delhomme, the Carolina Panthers quarterback. As you know he stumbled miserably in the playoff game last season last year and the team lost. Nobody knows what happened, but Jake fully admitted that he was the cause of the loss. Al Gardner asked him whether he still thought about that debacle, eight months later. "Sure," he said, "I think about it all the time; you never forget something like that. But, you can't dwell on it, or it will drive you crazy. You have to put it in the past and keep on going. We have a new season to play. I have to concentrate on that. But the memory of it will linger forever, like a scar on your forehead which never goes away." Like a scar which never goes away. You keep on going, but you travel forever more with a scar from what happened.

And, I think also less dramatically, of those who never get what they want out of life. They have to settle for something less. Somehow it doesn't work out the way they thought it would. It might have been their own fault. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But it doesn't matter. Some wanted to have children or to get married or to get a good job or to have a happy family. Now they are getting to or past the point where they realize it probably will never happen. Life is full of disappointments. They could pack it all up and run; but praise God; they stay in the stream and struggle on.

I could go on all day. I could list one hundred examples and you could add a hundred more where life is an uphill battle. Maybe it's illness, maybe it's a not-so-good marriage; maybe it's an ill-suited job; maybe it's a child whose problems never go away; maybe it is an addiction, maybe it was an untimely death, maybe it was a ridiculous accident. But they make it. They struggle on.

II. Then second notice that while it is an uphill journey all the way (are you listening?) it is uphill to a destination. I mean the Salmon are not fighting their way upstream. They have a destination. But translate it out of salmon jargon to Gospel words. There is a destination which God has set for you and me. Our lives are given for a purpose; we come on stage when the Lord has need of us. Life is not aimless, not like dice thrown down on the floor of the universe (that's Einstein's.) You and I were not made to paddle around in the side eddies. We were not made to gorge ourselves on the shrimp in the river estuaries. We were made to take on the rapids and to struggle against the current and to do something with our lives.

And, here is the clue: on your own you will never get there. You need Christ to lead you. Locked into your destination and the purposes of God, you can do it. "This one thing I do" . . . "But I did not do it on my own. If it were not for the Lord Jesus Christ, I never would have made it at all!" Sure, it is an uphill battle, but there is a destination, and there is a God and Guide to take you there each step of the way.

III. But, third: Younger people especially, please listen. It's an uphill battle - to a destination, and to get

there, you have to put everything you are into it. You need to pick a goal; set it as high as you can; then work with everything you have to get there! That's why the salmon swim upstream. Something is calling out of the depth of their being and yours and mine, asking who is willing to pay the price. And the cost is sometimes great, indeed. Jesus paid with his whole life. Our cost is total surrender. I don't know how many of you are willing to take it at that price, but that's the price it is.

Some of you are young. God bless you. Some are not so young, God bless you too. Some are married and struggling with young children. Some are paying college tuitions and big mortgages. Some are out of work. Some are desperate about how to pay their bills. Some are consumed caring for loved ones, 24/7, 52 weeks a year. Some are tackling serious illness. Some are at war within themselves, fighting personal demons too great to bear. Others are quieter now, enjoying the fruits of a well-lived life, taking it easy, or trying to. Some have peeked up over the top of the mountain, and have come back smiling. Wherever, whenever, it is a full-time job just to get there

IV. Fourth, and last, from everything I have learned in a half century of ministry, I assure you as we close that Christ will see you through - to Victory. I repeat: the journey is worth it. It is going somewhere grand. You can trust the one who made it all and gave you life, or you can't trust anything at all. Even master theologian Karl Barth said that in the last analysis it is still a child-like faith that counts. Our times and the times of those we love are in his hands

The day comes when the salmon loses his lifelong mastery of the stream, and it is over. I don't know if he peeks up over his tail fins to look back on all that was and might have been. But I do know he knows that the journey was worth it, with all of its trials and tribulations. Paul writes that the time of his departure has come. But he adds (we are in II Timothy now,) "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but to all who have loved his appearing." The "All" includes you and me!! "They alone are great, who by a life heroic conquer fate!"

I first heard this closing little poem when I was in college. It will never win The Poem of the Year Award from the Royal Society. I heard it first in college and I have never forgotten its simple message:

"Isn't it strange that Princes and Kings?
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings
And common people like you and me
Are builders for eternity?"

To each is given a bag of tools
A shapeless mass and a Book of Rules
And each must make, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block or a stepping stone."

One thing is sure; the Lord wants you to be a stepping stone. He knows you will have to struggle; he promises not to leave you; and he wants you to survive and succeed. Christ lived and died and rose again so that we can live our lives and accomplish God's purposes, for now and for evermore. Amen.