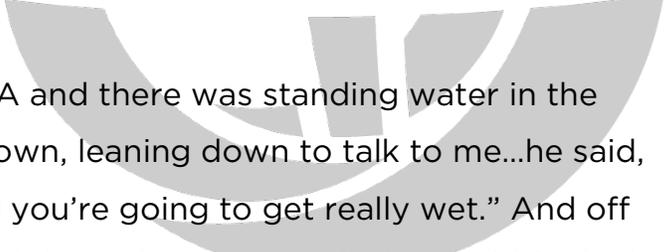


Joy Comes in Pressing on Toward the Goal
Jen Gruendler

Philippians 3:1b-16 NRSV

¹Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard. ²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — ⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised 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; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More 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 ⁹and 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. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

The earliest race I remember being a part of was when I was about 3 years old. My dad and I were running in a benefit 10K for a local nonprofit. Of course, in the early 1980s there were not jogging strollers or anything of the like—just old fashion 4 wheeled wobbly ones. So my dad and these tiny 4 wheels of the stroller pushed me the entire 10K. My dad was a pretty serious runner and knew how to pace himself in a race well.



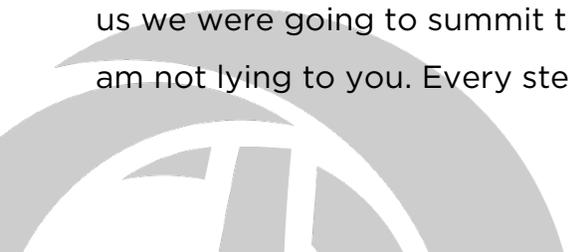
This particular day it was pouring rain in LA and there was standing water in the streets. I remember so vividly my dad slowing down, leaning down to talk to me...he said, “Jenny, it’s time to pick up our pace and roll and you’re going to get really wet.” And off we went, he picked up our pace, and we splashed through every puddle he could find. The little wheels went about as fast as they could (my dad tells me now he was really worried they were going to fall off) and I remember the feeling of pure joy-we were cruising, I knew I was totally safe, the water was cooling and super fun, and my toddler self was happy to enjoy this fun race with my dad and seeing the world fly by me super-fast as water sprayed all over me. It was just about perfect.

Sometimes that’s how the journey of life and faith feels, right? Joyful, safe, speedy, approachable-sure there were some potential safety concerns (my mom still 35 years later argues I should have had a helmet on), but the race was smooth and pretty euphoric in all the best ways.

And then there are other days, right. I was in college. I had just got back into the state of Colorado from sea level Minnesota and my friends and I decided to camp and attempt a rather large mountain hike. We camped the first night at the base of the mountain. Let’s just say I didn’t bring enough warm clothes. I really didn’t sleep a wink that night and at times thought, well, I might freeze. The next morning, we started the hike and about ½ way to summit myself and another friend were done.

Our bodies ached. We were so so tired. Our lungs hurt from the huffing and puffing and the altitude change. I remember looking at our other friends in front of us and said- “go, just go and finish without us. Please leave us here to nap.” I didn’t want to take one more step-every part of me hurt and my mind was not in the “let’s summit a mountain and live” kind of mind space. My friend and I sat down on the side of the trail, drank some water, and cried some tears of exhaustion and defeat and didn’t even feel embarrassed about it.

Thankfully, we had good friends who knew us, who told us to get our behinds off the group and to keep going, they slowed down for us, gave us a little pep talk, and told us we were going to summit together, and we did. And it was stunningly gorgeous. But I am not lying to you. Every step hurt. Every moment was hard. And I wanted to give up.





Some days the journey feels more like that, right?

We're continuing our journey with Paul through the letter to the Philippians- we remember Paul is in prison and writing to the young Jesus follower community in Philippi- we know some things in Philippi were going well and others not so much.

For everyone involved in the Church-their whole way of being and knowing God was turned inside out and upside down-for the early Jewish converts they were trying to figure out what part of being traditionally "Jewish" they needed to hold on to? Would circumcision still be a part of their cultural norms? How do we explain the law anymore? What is the end goal anyway?

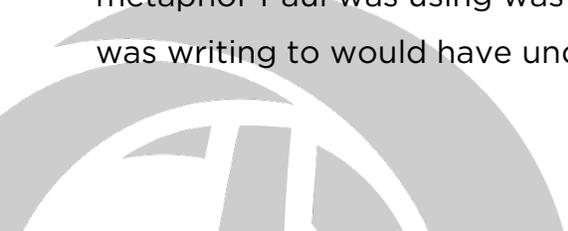
And for the new Greek converts-life was equally or even more confusing-they were navigating what was it looked like to follow One God and to live as a faithful community together with all sorts of new customs and ways of being faithful in the world and true to this community of people aligning their life on the life of this Jesus guy.

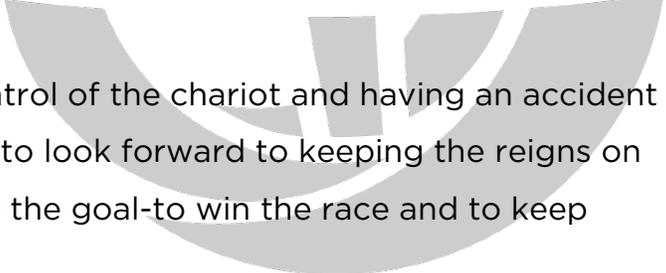
Both groups of converts were consistently weighing the reality of following this new way of love and being in the world- and the truth that by doing it -it made lead them prison or even death.

My guess, their journey, probably even Paul's journey, had a few days of feeling like I did when I was 3-pure complete and utter joy, but likely there were a lot more days that felt like my friend and I trying to summit that mountain -exhausting, a huge struggle fest, uncertain, and filled with some real authentic pain and fear.

It was this world and church Paul was writing to. It was to this group of people, who saw their faith leader in prison, who saw division in their own new church community brewing, who were experiencing persecution (or worse) because of their faith-it was to these tired and weary ones -Paul said, "press on toward the goal" ...don't look back, keep your eyes focused on what's ahead-keep your eyes on the prize.

Paul, was intentional with his words and images he used—most scholars say the metaphor Paul was using was referring to a chariot race-something the Greek world Paul was writing to would have understood- if a chariot driver would look backwards, they





would risk not just losing the race but losing control of the chariot and having an accident that would likely cause them their life. They had to look forward to keeping the reins on the chariot straight-they had to press on toward the goal-to win the race and to keep themselves safe.

The race, of course, that Paul refers to is not a physical one or any actual race at all-it's the spiritual one. It's journey of being a disciple and of following Jesus. It's the journey of knowing and trusting Christ and opening ourselves up to be known and loved by Christ. It's the race of faith.

I imagine Paul's tone in the letter to the church of Philippi being both gentle and loving but also deeply firm, passionate, and even quite a bit sharp.

A plead to his community to keep going. He seems to say, "hey, I know this is so hard, I know following Jesus will lead to suffering (not for just suffering sake), but if you're paying attention to the world the way Jesus did-if you love the world with a radical love like Jesus did-you will suffer for it-it won't be easy, it will be chalk full of hard decisions and sacrifice, but persevere, lean in, trust more-for the journey will lead to the ultimate prize of being fully known by Christ.

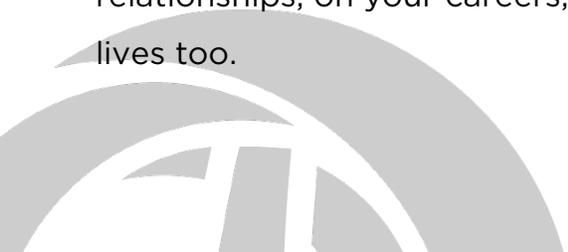
And being fully know by Jesus will lead to the abundant life in this life and next"

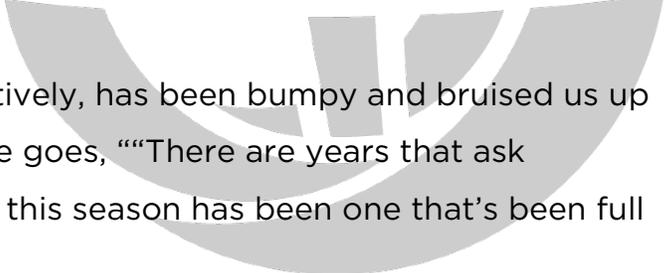
Friends, I have no idea how the journey of faith feels like now for you right now. How life feel like for you feels right now.

I do know it has been a terribly challenging season for so many. For many it's maybe felt like we have been on some sort of terrible race that you never signed up for...

...a for many this season of the race has taken all we've got...it's taken sacrifice, it's for so many of us had it's large share of grief and deep uncertainty,

it's been an exhausting and maybe even has felt like it's tested all sorts of parts of you we know for so many these months have been hard on marriages, on your family and other relationships, on your careers, health, and finances, and likely for many of us our spiritual lives too.





The race, the journey at least for us collectively, has been bumpy and bruised us up a bit. It's been a wild ride, right? Or As the quote goes, ““There are years that ask questions and years that answer.” And for many this season has been one that's been full of questions.

And we're all aware -it's still hard-it's not over yet-regardless if you're just in the pandemic exhaustion or the weariness from so much uncertainty and decision making or maybe plagued by the fatigue from care giving or riding the grief roller-coaster or just being present in the collective societal trauma from all the things we have endured- my guess is this season has had its times of deep joy, but for most it's been heavy and long and bumpy---and perhaps even your journey with Jesus has taken a beating. If you're there it's you're feeling a bit bruised and bumped up...you're not alone.

If whatever race you're on right now is feeling particularly difficult-if it's making you ask lots of questions and only giving a few answers,

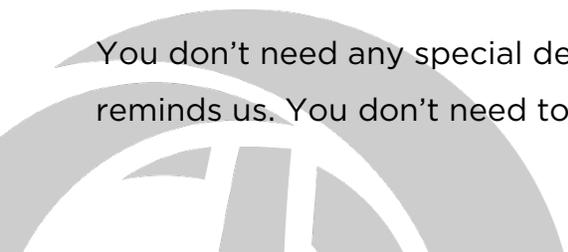
if it's feeling like trying to summit a mountain on no sleep sitting on the side of the trail in tears and you just want to say “please go on without me”-I am done...

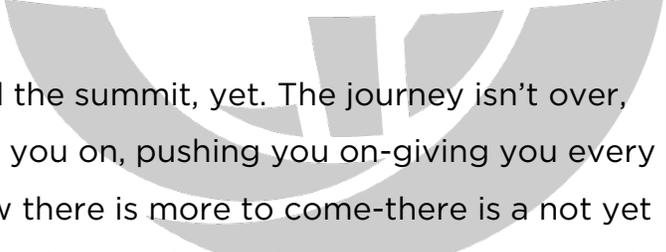
if you are there-I invite you right now to dig deeper a bit deeper into Paul's words for you and for us-

Friends, the good news the gospel of this letter Paul wrote is...Christ has made you his own. Christ has claimed you. Christ has taken hold of you and your heart. You are not alone in this race and journey-even if you're sitting on the side watching the others run by. You have the very Spirit of God in you, the endurance and power and goodness of God on your hearts.

And the grace-it is over flowing for you. Because Jesus has got you-take hold of you-not on your own doing or choice but because of his deep and abiding love for you that will find you on every mountain and in every valley and every twist and curve of this race. That's the gospel.

You don't need any special degree, or any special rite of passage or knowledge Paul reminds us. You don't need to be any form of perfect about you ...





Just a bit of faith that you haven't reached the summit, yet. The journey isn't over, yet-that Jesus is there cheering you on, carrying you on, pushing you on-giving you every bit of endurance you and trust you need to know there is more to come-there is a not yet and a tomorrow. There is more beauty to come and years that will answer questions and ultimately the the glorious "the not yet" that is promised to us...

so push forward. Trust...for one more single step... lean forward in faith step by step. Just take the next right and faithful step-

And when you do. Even if it's an isty bisty tiny step forward—were promised that will know Jesus more-and this knowing is not just a "read it in a text book type knowing...it's not a I watched the documentary on Netflix knowing... it's a type of knowing that is the most vulnerable and beautiful way of being known...

it's the way spouses deeply in love know each other.

-It's the way a parent knows their own child-every hair on their head and every facial expression and the emotion behind it --it's the way only the closest of friends and travel companions know understand each other-the sound of each other's steps, what makes a person tick and come alive.

This prize of knowing Jesus-it just the start

And this knowing...this knowing Jesus more and more each day -this prize that lies before you -before us -through it you will know the deepest joy and you have a small foretaste of yet what's still to come. Amen.

