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Lent 4B
Peace, Seattle
March 18, 2012
Ephesians 2:1-10

NO MATTER WHAT

In 1971, during the summer after my 7th grade year, my family went on a grand tour of the Western United States.

In the space of three weeks our family of ten logged over 5,000 miles, traveling west from our home in southern Minnesota on a great circle route that took us through fifteen states in a converted school bus—an odyssey that became a watershed experience for our family.

After that trip, everything that happened in our family of origin, every memory, every story, was either **BBT** or **ABT**—Before the Bus Trip, or After the Bus Trip. Along the way, there were many opportunities for adventure, new experiences, and episodes of stupidity as well.

It wasn't until early afternoon the day of our departure that the BUS—at last—was packed and ready. So sometime after 2:00 we clambered aboard and headed out of town, only to discover a few miles down the road that the noxious smell that was slowly filling the cabin and making us nauseous, was an exhaust leak. We opened all the windows, and prayed we wouldn't all die of asphyxiation.

By the time we reached Worthington, 116 miles down the road, Dad decided to call it quits. We'd have to look into that leak in the morning at the local garage. So we spent our first night camped out in the parking lot of a Lutheran Church in town.

The next morning, we found a little gas station with a garage and mechanic (they still had those back then). The bus was too tall to fit through the garage opening all the way, so Dad parked it with just the front nose sticking in.

While we kids hung out, the mechanic grabbed his tools and disappeared on his dolly underneath the bus to try to figure out where the leak was coming from. Finally, after a long while, he was ready to test the patch he'd worked on. From under the bus, he asked his teenaged assistant to have Dad start the bus.

But it so happened that my father was not in the bus. I'm not sure where he was at that moment, but it was OK, because, you see, I'd sat near him the whole afternoon of day one, watching him as he drove. I'd seen him turn the key and press the button to start the ignition; why I knew all about the bus! Heck, if the bus needed to be started, I could start it up…I would start it up.

Slipping into the driver's seat, I placed my hands on the steering wheel, put my foot on the accelerator, turned the key, pushed the ignition button, and the bus started immediately! And that's when the chaos began.

You see, while watching my father, I'd learned about the accelerator, but I hadn't managed to learn about the clutch. When I pushed on the accelerator with the bus in gear, it lurched forward, taking on a life of its own!

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The mechanic, still on his dolly underneath, shot out from under the bus just as the roof of the bus made contact with the top of the garage.

Meanwhile, my brother Mikal, age 8, who'd been standing on the front bumper looking in at the engine, jumped off as the bus lunged forward, and found himself pinned against the ice machine behind him.

Mercifully, the bus quickly stalled. And then came the commotion.
- Mikal shrieking,
- the mechanic cursing,
- my sisters scolding,
- and I went running out the back of the bus, and started tearing down the street, tears streaming.

I knew that my life, as I'd known it, was over, finished. I was toast!
A couple blocks further, out of breath but still full of dread, I slowed to a walk.
And that's when my brother Peter caught up with me.

ERIK he said, YOU GOTTA COME BACK! DAD WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!
TALK TO ME! I thought, HE'S GOING TO KILL ME!

I kept walking around the block, knowing that I was only postponing the inevitable.

But by the time I made it back around to the station, things had quieted down.
- Mikal had been scared plenty good, but his legs were none the worse for wear.
- The mechanic had managed to avoid cardiac arrest.
- There was some minor damage to the bus—and to the gas station garage…
  But nothing that couldn't be fixed.
- And to my surprise, my father saw no need to add further punishment to what I had already inflicted upon myself. I would live to see another day.

When Moses led his people out of slavery and through the Red Sea, they entered the wilderness, and spent 40 years—a whole generation—journeying together and learning what it meant to live in community under the covenant and within the boundaries that the Lord had established.

40 years in this "wilderness school" learning to live as a free people; 40 years learning to trust God.

They had their share of drama. And more than once Moses—and even God himself—were that close (finger and thumb) to throwing in the towel.

Our first lesson this morning recalls the fifth and final episode of their "complaining."
> **WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT US OUT OF EGYPT TO DIE?**
> **THERE'S NO FOOD, THERE'S NO WATER, AND THE STUFF WE'VE HAD TO EAT IS MISERABLE SLOP!**

The fact of the matter is, Israel never did learn the lesson about trusting God, fully.
And neither have we.

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That's one of the reasons we come here to worship each week.
Running from our worst fears, we are coaxed by the promise of food and forgiveness into admitting that we don't have this community thing, this trust thing, all figured out—even all these years later.

And even though that's the hard truth about us, God keeps meeting us here; because God just won't give up on us.

Oh, God may get tired of the complaining, he may become weary from our episodes of stupidity, our thinking we could handle things better on our own, our hard-heartedness and our judgmental ways.

God may shake his head at the stubbornness and how we seem to prefer remaining locked in prisons of our own making rather than enjoy the freedom of abundant life with him.
But God won't walk away…no matter what.

Writing to the people of Ephesus, Paul puts it this way (I'm using Eugene Peterson's translation):

> It wasn't so long ago that you-all were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you low to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, God embraced us. God took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ.
>
> God did all this on his own, with no help from us! ...Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish!...
> He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do,[1] [work that's much more than a good deed—it's a way of life.]

As good as dead, without future, without hope, we were making a bee-line for disaster when God met us head on in Jesus. And Jesus turned the whole dead-end thing completely around.

He sums it all up in our gospel reading:

> FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, SO THAT EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM MAY NOT PERISH BUT MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.
>
> INDEED, GOD DID NOT SEND THE SON INTO THE WORLD TO CONDEMN THE WORLD, BUT IN ORDER THAT THE WORLD MIGHT BE SAVED THROUGH HIM.

The Creator of the universe could have righted his relationship with us through any number of means, in any number of ways. But God chose to take on human flesh, becoming one with us even to the point of death, so that we might come to know and experience his abundant life.

This is God's prayer, this is God's yearning for you, for me, and for all.

Let us pray:
Merciful God, your love for us and your acceptance of us is beyond our knowing; and yet, in the life, death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus, it becomes crystal clear. Help us to receive it, to trust it, and to live it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

[1] Ephesians 2:1-10, edited, from: *The Message*, Eugene H. Peterson. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) Pp. 475-476.