

Living On Purpose In the Wilderness
Philippians 1: 21-30

These are challenging times. There are so many distractions, so many choices. I was in grade six when my family got our first TV. There were only two channels to pick from, today I have over 300 possibilities. Going to school in fall I had a choice between a box of 8, 24, or 36 crayons for school supplies. I had some sense of growing up when I was allowed to get the box of 36.

When I was a kid we would go to Milwaukee to share family occasions with aunts, uncles and the few cousins I had. The big treat was having Chinese food that was ordered over the phone and then brought home. Now I have over 3 dozen dining choices within 3-4 blocks, plus all the possibilities on-line or in the yellow pages. The more choices existing create stress in making decisions.

Along with the many choices are all the distractions of today's tsunami of electronic communications. Bowing your head no longer means you are in prayer.

The more transportation choices there are, the more rules to follow. Do bicycles or pedestrians have the right of way on sidewalks? For those of who drive, what are the specifics of "distracted driving?" Can you take a sip of coffee when your car is stopped at a light?

We have legal rules that protect the identity of young people under the legal age of responsibility—even when they commit violent crimes. When I hear about kids 12-13-14 swarming people at 2:00 a.m. I wonder what are their parents' rules for their kids' safety and security.

Edmonton Metro is a regional population of about 1.2 million people. I invite you to think this morning that we are living in a "wilderness." Generally, when I hear wilderness I think about the Rocky Mountains and Banff and Jasper National Parks, or the close-at-hand Elk Island Park. A natural "wilderness" is one where nature rules: forests, rivers, lakes and streams, and wild animals, birds and other creatures. There are few freeways, no shopping malls, and little urban development.

You need a compass, or a guide to find your way in the natural wilderness...and...I believe it is increasingly evident that those of us living in urban wildernesses like Edmonton Metro, also need compasses, values and a sense of purpose so we do not lose our way.

There was an interesting news item in the past few weeks as school is starting—there is a significant unexpected increase in the enrollment of students in the Separate School System. The Separate System, Roman Catholic, advertises, “Education With Values.” I think it is increasingly difficult for parents to instill values in children in the urban wilderness. In my day there were beer parties in high school, but drugs came into awareness in schools later on.

It’s tough to live authentically today. But let’s not feel sorry for ourselves. It was tough too in the 1st century, especially in the decade of 60-70 AD. The Roman Empire began to escalate its persecution of the early Christians. Why? Because they threatened to replace the Roman Empire with a new reality, the Realm of God. In the Roman Empire, proper etiquette required people to greet each other saying, “Caesar is Lord.” Christians risked being arrested if they said, “Jesus is Lord.”

Paul, a Roman citizen of Jewish heritage, wrote his letter to the Christians in Phillipi from prison in Rome. Paul knew that his life was on the line because he would not bow down and submit his loyalty to Caesar. Paul had committed his life to a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ.

The power of this transforming relationship gave Paul the courage to speak out, to preach boldly, to risk his life for the new reality that Jesus had revealed. Often danger makes people timid, but in Paul’s case it made him bold.

His letter to the Philippians expressed his thanks for sharing the good news of Jesus with them. He sums his faith in his difficult circumstance in this way, Imprisonment had some unexpected benefits for Paul, it gave him opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with people who had not known it before.

Paul writes, “I will continue to rejoice. Christ will be exalted now as always in his body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying will be my gain.” Wow, there’s an unexpected message. Paul is saying that as long as he lives he’ll experience Christ and when he dies he will be with Christ and God eternally. Paul might die at the hands of the Romans, and he probably did, but he was okay with it.

Did Paul have a death wish? No way, but his faith was that either in life or death, he would be close to Jesus. There are increasing numbers of people where a dance with death is popular. Extreme sports, people training for marathons and triathlons, are one example, but at the next

level are people like Bruce Allentuck, who is determined to inflict the maximum amount of punishment on his body and mind.

Bruce signed up for the 2011 Death Race which takes place in Vermont. The competition and conditions are so brutal that entrants to the race have to sign a 3-word waiver. The waiver says, "You may die." You don't have to sign it in blood, but you do need to sign it.

This kind of risk does not make entrants timid, Instead it makes them bold and brave. Bruce prepared by completing seven marathons, four ultra-marathons, three Ironman Triathalons, a Chesapeake Bay swim and 36 other triathlons. He simply said, "For me, it's the next thing."

What's the "next thing" for the apostle Paul? He's straddling the line between life and death. If he lives he'll continue to engage in fruitful labor—using his spiritual gifts in serving others. But if he dies, he'll depart and be with Christ." He seems to be leaning toward life as he rejoices in the faith of the Philippians boasting about their joy in their new life in Jesus. Paul pushes himself to the edge because he wants to see what he is capable of , striving for the sake of the good news, the gospel of Jesus.

Have we lost this passion in the church today? So often we turn away from risk and focus on what is comfortable, familiar to us and to the people we want to attract. The Vermont Death Race involves incredible commitment, and preparation and training from participants, and so does the race of Christian faith.

In the confusion of today's "wilderness" there are so many distractions, so many choices it is difficult to focus on our purpose and where to direct our passion.

3 things for us to consider this September in the "urban wilderness" of Edmonton. (1) Are you living your life in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. As C.S. Lewis wrote in one of his books, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

We are a downtown Church, all the challenges of the inner-city are close at hand. Are we living our community life in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ?

(2) Are we standing strong in a unity of Spirit? As individuals we are limited in what we can do, limited in how much faith and courage we have, but if we can unite in one Spirit of life and service, we could be a powerful force in renewing the heart of Edmonton.

(3) Know that it is also a privilege to share in Christ's suffering. Change, transformation, is not easy. It takes blood, sweat and tears. During my decade of ministry here at McDougall I observe that most of our "suffering" is mostly internal—trying to get along with each others' personalities. We suffer because others are not like us.

That isn't gospel, that's not good news, that's simply dysfunctional behavior. In those "good old days" when McDougall had 1000 in worship Sunday morning and Sunday evening, and 600 children in the Sunday School, the society was in harmony with religious institutions.

That is not the case today. People are skeptical about Churches, they are distracted and find their hours filled up with other priorities—some of them meaningful and some just activities to fill space and time.

The great tragedy of life not that people die for their beliefs. The tragedy is that people come to the end of life, without ever finding anything to live or die for.

The Death Race waiver says, "You may die." Isn't that too soft a statement. The truth is , we will die.

But what will we do before then?