

Easter III, Year A
May 4, 2014

“For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” (*Acts 2:39*)

As many of you know, I went on my annual retreat to Lake Logan this past week. As I said last Sunday, this retreat is usually good for at least one or maybe two sermons. And it was again this year, but in an unexpected way.

You see, I had another wonderful time. Four of my closest friends and clergy colleagues were together in a beautiful setting in God’s country, western North Carolina. We ate well, we prayed the Daily Office together, we hiked, we played golf, and had time to sit on the porch and read and talk and just be. So that was great.

But the source of the sermon actually happened on the trip up to Lake Logan. It actually began the weekend before the trip. As some of you know, our daughter Katherine came down that weekend in order to pick up my car as her new vehicle. She had faithfully driven her current car, a 2002 Toyota Echo that we had bought used for her, for almost eight years. It was time for a change and my four year old Ford Focus seemed like a good option (plus I could get a new car!).

There was one catch, though—the Focus is a manual transmission and Katherine had never been taught how to drive a stick (bad parenting, I know). So part of our weekend last week was for me to teach Katherine how to drive a stick. Have any of you ever tried to teach someone how to drive a stick?

We started late on Saturday afternoon. Katherine had just arrived and I had had a full day with things at church. I started out with the basics. I had actually sent Katherine a You Tube video that teaches how to drive a manual transmission. We reviewed the things you do—this is a clutch, this is the gear pattern, this is how you ease out the clutch and push down on the gas, and remember the brakes. All those needed things. But of course you never learn anything until you actually do it.

So I drove us to a large church parking lot and then I got out, said a prayer, and Katherine got behind the wheel and began her lessons. She started out like most of us do—she stalled out, she revved the engine, the car jerked as she got use to the clutch. We drove round and round in the church parking lot, so that was pretty safe. Until some church people came out and started loading a truck. They would come close to our practice area and I felt like shouting out the window, “Watch out—don’t you know you are taking your lives in your hands!”

But Katherine really did pretty well. She was tired and from the flight and I was a little tired, so we called it a day after an hour or so. The next day, after Sunday services, we went out to practice again. I think I let Katherine do too much too soon as we began and she got a bit frustrated. But we got past that and we repeated our practice from

yesterday, especially focusing on the basics—backing up, starting out in first gear, and moving through the shift pattern. We moved from the parking lot to the streets. That is the big step, isn't it? I will not lie to you—I was afraid. But Katherine really did pretty well. The main challenge for her was when she would stall out and the people behind her would honk. That was the critical time when Katherine might get flustered and then bad things could happen (they didn't, thank God).

Sunday evening, I was not sure if Katherine was ready to drive the stick or not. I gave her the option to wait until July when she will be back in town again. She decided to try Monday morning and see how it went. That seemed reasonable. So Monday, we set out. I told her not to be afraid to hit the gas as she backed up—and she did and I spilled part of my large cup of water on my lap. She drove through the neighborhood and then eased out on to the main drag and did it well (she did stall a few times, but when she hit the gas this time, I was ready with my cup).

The day went well—I think better than either of us expected. We drove almost non-stop to Lake Logan. We unpacked my stuff and got to show her around this place that is so special to me. Then we drove on to Canton where she could get on to I-40 and drive to Winston-Salem where her fiancé Cory lives. As Katherine drove away and on to that entrance ramp, I admit I was proud and terrified and sad, all at once. It reminded me of Katherine getting on the bus that first time, almost twenty years ago,

As I was waxing nostalgic—and praying—I thought back about other events in her life. Like teaching her to ride a bike and teaching her to drive. I tried to remember how I felt back then, chasing her down the street as she took off without training wheels the first time. And then as she eased out into the road in a car for the very first time as a fifteen year old. Some things were definitely the same—the anxiety, the biting of the tongue and trying to remember to be patient. But some things were different—about Katherine and about me.

I know I am much more patient now than twenty years ago. Kat and Lynn remarked on that. One reason has been my journey over the past twelve years or so. I learned that success and failure are not that important, really. And that worrying about them and feeling the need to control every outcome is definitely not the way to live or to lead. God really is in control—he does not need any assistants. That doesn't mean we don't teach skills and encourage personal responsibility; but that we do those things with a lighter touch and with more trust in God and in the person we love. That applies to learning to drive—and learning to live.

Katherine has changed too, of course. The years from fifteen to twenty-four are times of major changes. She is really growing into being her own person. She is more and more competent and mature and able to handle the stresses of life better and better. She is a young woman that Lynn and I are very proud of. But she didn't just fall out of the sky that way. Katherine—like all of us—had to grow up and go through the journey of life. That involved failures and challenges as well as great successes and natural gifts.

The verse from Acts that I read at the beginning of the sermon gives us some guidance about this. God has given us a promise that we will be in relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. That promise is offered not just to individuals who believe in God, but to families—our children receive that promise from God, too. That is why we baptize little babies like Kimber—they are able to join this community of faith because of God’s grace, not because of anything they have done or believed so far in their little lives.

That promise provides an anchor for them throughout their lives as they join us along with their families and receive the grace God offers through the church. They learn that they are loved by God and by us. They learn about our faith and they learn how to share God’s love with others. And they learn how to pray, to reconnect with that promise throughout their lives so that they have God’s Spirit to guide them in all they do.

That promise can help us who love our children—parents and priests and god parent and grandparents, and all the people involved in raising a child under the promise of God. Because of God’s promise, we don’t care less or teach less, but by God’s grace we really can worry at least a little less. We can commend our child to God and entrust her knowing that God is doing more for her than we ever can.

And we do this knowing that the danger is real. Whether she is driving a car or making choices about relationships and behaviors, there is real danger in life. Bad things can happen. Some of us have experienced that. But those things can happen whether we hover and worry or commend and pray. Our job as parents is to love, set an example, teach the basics in life—and then learn how to gradually get out of the way as we commend those precious children to God.

That is hard. It is tricky to know when to step back. That’s why we need friends and counselors and the Holy Spirit to help guide us. And when we do, they will fail—that is inevitable. That is how they learn—and how we learn, too. And as we step back, like I did as Katherine drove away and on to I-40, we will feel all those emotions of fear and pride and hope—that is real. But we can step away knowing that the promise exists for them and that God will care for them in the journey of life.

Amen.