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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *The Tour de Life*

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MARCH 31, 2019

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### **A voice of one calling:**

“In the wilderness prepare  
the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup>And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah 40:3-5 (NIV)

### **An Unparalleled Ride**

The Tour de France is the pinnacle of challenge and aspiration for professional cyclists. What the World Series is to baseball, the World Cup to soccer, and the four Majors to golf and tennis, that’s what the “Tour” means to those who devote themselves to pedaling bikes for a career. For those of you who are not cycling fans, here’s an overview of it.

The Tour was begun 116 years ago, and has been held throughout the month of July ever since (except for interruptions caused by the First and Second World Wars). It is not only the longest and most grueling of all annual cycling races, but is generally considered to be the most difficult athletic championship to win in the world—across

all sports. It will last 23 days this year. By comparison, the Masters is just four days, a World Series can go up to seven games but no longer, and Wimbledon lasts two weeks. The first two days of this year's Tour are in Belgium, and then there are three weeks of near-continual action throughout France (with only two rest days). Competing in the Tour is unimaginably exhausting and demanding. Already-lean riders lose 10-20 pounds during the course of it. Dehydration is a constant danger.

The weather is variable and unpredictable: riders have competed in broiling heat and bitter cold, in rain and even snow. The terrain consists of everything imaginable: long stretches of smooth, flat roads through the beautiful French countryside are coupled with jarring rides through city streets with ancient cobblestones (imagine the impact on your joints of steering a light-framed, skinny-tire racing bike over those uneven surfaces at full speed). This year seven stages are classified as "flat," five as "hilly" (up and down through rolling countryside), and seven are "mountain stages" in the Pyrenees range in the southwest of France and the Alps in the southeast. These typically involve grueling long climbs alternated with death-defying steep descents. One of the common routes is up a notorious Alpine mountain called the "Alpe d'Huez," which is 8.6 miles long at an average grade of 8%, ending at a ski resort at the top that is nearly 7,000 feet above sea level (the thin oxygen causes the athletes' lungs to burn). That climb involves 21 treacherous hairpin turns.

### **A Metaphor for Life**

Though the winners are named individually, the Tour de France is actually a team sport. No one can successfully complete the course without a great deal of help from others. This year there will be 20 separate teams of 8 riders each.

The job of teammates is to help and encourage each other along the miles, while taking turns as the point rider to cut through the wind and create a draft for those behind them. And beyond the other riders, there is an entire crew of specialists: team doctors and chefs, bike

mechanics, and drivers of the chase cars (which are equipped with spare bicycle parts—in the event of a flat tire or crash—as well as water bottles and food to hand their riders during the hours each day they spend in the saddle).

Whether you are a cycling fan or not, today I want you to think with me about the lessons we can learn from the Tour de France. I am convinced that, more than any other athletic competition on earth, the July bike race is the closest metaphor we have for life. Think of these similarities:

- Life for most of us goes on for a very long time.
- Life brings to us every kind of weather: periods when the sun shines and all is prosperous and happy, and periods when the clouds of struggle and suffering burst open upon us.
- Life requires us to traverse all kinds of different terrain: steep uphill climbs of great difficulty that exhaust us, and downhill glides of success that bring their own temptations and dangers.
- Life is both a solitary journey and a team effort. We cannot make it without the support of others (and in a moment we'll address that need in more detail).

Ultimately, we come to the end of the road. In both the bike race and the journey through life, if we don't crash out prematurely (an early injury in the former or an early death in the latter), we will reach the finish line with our bodies fully spent and nothing left to give.

## **Our Team**

Who do we need on our team to make it through the Tour de Life? Just as with the cyclists, we need a team of **helpers** and we need a team of **fellow-travelers**. The helpers come in a wide range of specialties. This morning we are giving special attention and recognition to those who are present in our community to be there in times of great need. The First Responders are there, quickly on the scene, when we have a car crash ... when we fall and injure ourselves ...

when a fire breaks out or a boat takes on water ... when a potential heart attack or stroke causes us to lose consciousness ... when a break-in or burglary is committed in our home or place of worship ... when a lunatic with a gun starts to shoot ... when a storm blows through or a power outage causes the traffic lights to go dark ... and in a hundred other scenarios. Like the chase cars following the tour who are only there when needed, our Community Servants are there for us. And we can easily forget about them until we need them urgently.

There are other types of helpers we need to make it through the entire course of life. We need doctors and nurses and dentists to care for us in the non-emergency moments. We need teachers to equip us for our careers. We need pastors and Sunday school teachers to help us learn God's Word. We need mentors to be role models and help us grow into our callings. We need specialists from time to time in law, real estate, accounting and investments, car repair and home repair, food preparation and service. We need people in our government to make and enforce our laws and provide for our basic services. We need our military to protect our nation. We need pilots to fly us to our destinations safely. We are all interdependent. Nobody but the solitary hermits and the "mountain men" of the old West can pretend to be self-sufficient—and even they were dependent on parents and others in their childhoods.

In addition to the helpers on our team, we all need fellow-travelers. Nobody can function well without relationships. We need family and friends. They encourage us, they pray for and with us, and they bring us joy and security. The church is another circle of relationships we all need. We are part of a large team of fellow-travelers. If all we needed for our spiritual life and growth was to get facts, we could hold church over the internet or could mail everyone a book to read each Sunday to inform you of truth. But we were created to need "truth with skin on it." We need others to show us the way and to encourage us and lift us when we fall and to cheer us on. You don't get the same results from a TV or computer screen. That's one of the discoveries made by churches which, a decade ago, thought a

sea-change in the culture would allow for complete fellowship to be achieved electronically. But it doesn't quite work. We were created for human face-to-face contact.

### **Life as a Journey**

The concept of life as a very long journey is certainly not a new one. Hundreds of years ago one of the early classics of Christian literature was written, entitled *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was the first novel published in English, and it had a profound impact. But it's not an easy book for us to read today, as language and society have changed so much. Even the modern versions are challenging, not to mention the original (which was written just a few decades after Shakespeare's death, and thus brings with it all the inherent difficulties we have in understanding literature from that time). But what has continued to be relevant today is the image in *Pilgrim's Progress* of life as an extended journey of faith. Just like the Tour de France, the main character of the old novel (named "Christian") has to travel through cities and open country, encountering lots of helpers and lots of dangers and challenges. He faced steep mountains to climb and treacherous descents. He had some successes and failures, times when he got it right and times when he crashed.

In one stretch of the book, Christian finds that his path forward requires him to ascend a very imposing obstacle called the "Hill of Difficulty." Once he finally managed to make it to the top, he enjoyed a time of great refreshment in a majestic home called the "Palace Beautiful," where he was renewed and encouraged and equipped. Resuming his journey, he had to go down a steep and twisting switchback, with dangers on every side. At the bottom he descended into the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" (the name taken from the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm). But in that dark valley, where he could barely see a step in front of him, he realized that an invisible Presence was traveling alongside of him and protecting him. It's not hard to attach personal experiences you and I have to those of Christian's journey.

Our scripture text for today is from the dramatic words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. They were first spoken to a group of people who were beaten down by a really hard portion of their journey through life. They were desperately needing a word of hope. Isaiah sends out the trumpet blast of hope in verse 3: "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" There is, Bible scholars tell us, a double-meaning to this promise of God's coming. It was literally taken and used in the New Testament to be a direct prophecy of the work of John the Baptist in his role of preparing people for the imminent arrival of the Messiah—God Himself come in the flesh to save His people. But that would not happen for some six centuries after Isaiah spoke. In the immediate context, its other meaning is that when the people of God are weary and worn, exhausted from their journey through life, their Lord will come to them. When we are in the "wilderness" or "desert" God will meet us there. He's like the chase car that comes to a rider in the Tour de France, bringing a spare tire or a bottle of water or an energy bar to sustain them.

In verse 5 Isaiah assures us that God will appear, and His glory will be revealed, and we will know it. But just before those words we encounter verse 4: "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." This is the verse that speaks most clearly to those of us who are on the journey through life. No matter what the terrain (whether the deep dark valley of the shadow of death, or the steep climb of the hill of difficulty), those experiences will be leveled and we will be able to travel through them.

Here's the question confronting careful students of the Scriptures: Is the action in verse 4 to be accomplished by **us** or by **God**? Is it up to you and me to do all the work of filling in the valleys, lowering the mountains, and smoothing out the bumps in life? Is it entirely **our** responsibility? Is God waiting until we get our acts together and get the hard work done before He comes to us? Or is it **God** who will do the hard work in order to enable us to make it through life's journey?

## **Our Helper and Companion**

I believe the answer is the latter. I believe it is the Lord who is with us throughout our long journey of life. I believe that He is the One who, if we will just turn to Him and trust in Him, can help us climb the steep hills of difficulty and descend the steep valleys of shadow as if they were more level. We can certainly try to make it through life all by ourselves and in our own power and resources alone. Many try. It's very hard. But there is a better way.

The Gospel (or Good News) of Christ, in its simplest and most basic form, is that God has come to us to do what we can't do for ourselves. He is both our chase car to bring us the help we need when we need it, and our invisible companion traveling the "Tour de Life" right beside us. ■

