

**TRUTHS TO LIVE BY III: TURNING OBSTACLES INTO OPPORTUNITY**  
**ISAIAH 43:18-25; MARK 2:2-12**  
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The scene was the Village Vanguard last August – a sixty year old Manhattan jazz club – not as old, I might add, as Buffalo’s Colored Musicians’ Lounge, the oldest ongoing jazz club in America, nevertheless the Vanguard, an institution of American jazz, last August.

Packed house. A small group was playing. The leader was Charles McPherson a saxophonist. On trumpet was Wynton Marsalis renowned jazz/classical artist, composer, historian. Marsalis was not the main attraction that night. He was dodging the limelight playing his part supportively sideman style in the shadows.

Well into the set the group launched into a romantic tune from the 1930s, “I Don’t Stand A Ghost Of A Chance With You” featuring unaccompanied trumpet. Marsalis stepped to center stage. Played beautifully – nearly talking the words through the notes. Then at the climax of the number, final phrase, each note lingering sensuously in the air, someone’s cell phone went off, blaring a rapid, electronic singsong melody. A wave of giggles rippled across the room. People started picking up their drinks. The moment was gone, the performance – unraveled.

The magic was ruined but Marsalis wasn’t finished. He paused...motionless for only a beat, his eyebrows arched in surprise and resignation. The cell phone offender scooted into the hall. The chatter in the room grew louder.

Then foot tapping, brow furrowed in concentration, Marsalis started playing the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Repeating it, then improvising not uncomplicated variations on the tune. The room grew still again.

In a few minutes working through key changes, throttling down to ballad tempo he ended up exactly where he had left off to finish the piece. The crowd knew Marsalis redeemed not only himself but them too. A thundering ovation followed. Kitchen staff appeared asking, “what did we miss?”<sup>i</sup>

We are talking these weeks before Lent about truths that last in times of need; today: turning obstacles into opportunities. The Scripture lessons today are well suited for persons or churches or cities that seek to transform obstacles into opportunities.

Isaiah reminding the people that God is always ready to do a new thing. That God’s deep longing and purpose is to bring each and every one of us and all of us together back to the Promised Land. To the place of restoration and wholeness. God doesn’t create obstacles, life does that. God helps us help ourselves through the obstacles we face.

Mark’s paralytic friends lower him into a house filled with more sick than a doctor’s waiting room in flu season. These enterprising pals, thinking outside the box, turn their obstacle into an opportunity. Mark says, “when Jesus saw *their* faith, he said ‘son your sins are forgiven.’” Those friends did what the mother of two autistic children advises when you and I face obstacles: work like it all depends on you, pray like it all depends on God.

But most of us don't like obstacles. Have you ever talked to someone who said, "my kids never gave me any trouble" or "my spouse and I never argue or fight" or "I've really been lucky in life...able to get and do most everything I wanted"?

We live in a world that doesn't like the facing of obstacles. Our consumer society projects a Hallmark greeting card image for life: pretty, perfect, clean.

For some strange reason our society has decided that outcomes achieved with little effort are worthy of awe. The ideal parent always knows what to do. The ideal spouse always supportive, thoughtful, pro-active. The ideal career: a steady, even rapid, succession of promotions and responsibility.

So when we encounter obstacles to our marriage and family, church, or career we think, "This isn't how it's supposed to go!" "This isn't good." And the result is that the prospect of failure – not achieving our dream whatever that may be – the prospect of failure looms like a cloud on our horizon.

We distance ourselves from failure by avoiding or denying any obstacles that might lead to it. I'll never forget a colleague who told me that he never undertakes any task or project or battle that he is not sure of winning.

You can see where this kind of approach leads: safe, carefully controlled, would-be lives. The word failure is excised from our speech. To fail is to be less than we are meant to be, morally deficient, worthy of shame.

Much of our culture is consumed constructing obstacle-free, failure-proof lives. We shroud our cars with airbags, balance our portfolios, shield our skies with missiles. These are not bad things in and of themselves but they do not prevent life from intervening. We crash cars and make bad investments. People die in war.

The attempt to prevent failure has led, in schools, to grade inflation. Peter Gomes says this suggests that more people are getting higher grades not because they are smarter than their predecessors but because the present culture will not allow their teachers to give out failing grades, nor will it permit students to accept them.

One Cambridge University professor laments, "if Cambridge were a hospital, no one would die anymore; the corpse would simply be 'declared to have deserved life.' Yet, if we cannot measure failure, he says, we can not measure success, nor, perhaps even attain it."<sup>ii</sup> Prophetic words.

The hard truth is life is neither obstacle-free or failure-proof. Indeed, the experience of facing obstacles and dealing with failure is inseparable from personal and institutional change and growth. It is integral to achieving our unique potential and personal destiny.

Rather than preventing us from being what we are meant to be obstacles and failure shape us into what we are called to become. Dr. Judah Folkman, leading cancer researcher says "I learn more from my failures than my successes."<sup>iii</sup>

Any system, academic or economic or political, any system that does not allow for obstacles and failure is incomplete. Any religious system that does not account for the theological equivalent namely, sin and evil, is incomplete. William James said the dark side of life represents much of reality. It may be the one thing, the only thing that opens our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.

Let me borrow another page from James. In his *Varieties of Religious Experience* he says religion is nearly always the experience of what he called “the twice-born person.” The “once-born” person is the person of the stiff upper lip, one who always sees the glass half full; life based on self-help remedies and boot-strap fortitude.

But religious faith and practice, says James, is the experience of the twice-born, the second birth, the new creation. What looks like disaster and dead end turns out in the life of faith to be the start of the pathway to new life.<sup>iv</sup>

At the very heart of our faith is the understanding that God did not intend life to be lived with machine-like perfection, mistake free. God’s mercy is premised on the reality that human beings make mistakes, have ah-ha moments of self-awareness, discover inspiration and courage to grow, discern God’s calling for their lives and seek deep change.

This is precisely what distinguishes followers of Jesus from those of the latest self-help guru – as sound as his or her principles may be.

A moment ago I mentioned unique potential and personal destiny. At the core of our Reformed faith is the trust that God has a purpose, not some vague hope, but a specific purpose for each one of us and for all of us, the church, together.

That is what I mean by our unique potential and personal destiny. It’s not just what I think would be a good plan for my life, as if I am in total control of everything. Rather it is the trust that God wills for me and for you and for this congregation the best possible life we could imagine.

And the only way to get there is through obstacles and failure. One mother told me when she realized her son was diagnosed at age two with a severe delayed growth disorder she was paralyzed. But then two things happened. She reached out to her friends and colleagues – persons with whom she had not really shared in any profound way. And she learned the power of prayer. Today, having written a book about parenting, her son having made progress that has befuddled doctors, she is a strong advocate for parents of special needs children. Unique potential. Personal destiny.<sup>v</sup>

My experience has been the same. When I have allowed myself to face obstacles again and again it has led to change, renewal and growth. The “F” I got on my first mid-term in college. Moments in my marriage and parenting when, through some turn of events, I realized unequivocally that I did not have all the answers, perhaps didn’t, at the time, have any answers.

It was only sitting in the rubble of some previously, dearly held image of myself that I agreed to accept personal failure and face the considerable obstacle of trying to find my way without the old map – flawed as it was.

That “F” taught me how to learn for the first time, not just memorize. What marriage has taught me is the value of humility, honesty, and vulnerability.

What I have discovered as a parent is that I cannot control my children and have to let them go all the while holding on to God’s dream for me. Pursuing personal growth as a husband and father.

Professionally, I have found surrendering my ego to God’s purpose for my life always leads to personal fulfillment and more effective ministry.

On this wonderful day when we receive new members, it gives me great joy to extend the invitation to a deep partnership together.

That with members old and new Westminster is a place where together we can help each other face our obstacles, learn from our failures and live into God's purpose for us.

Like Wynton Marsalis we can make inspiring music out of our lives. A way of living that doesn't give up when the performance unravels. But hangs in there using the very stuff that drives our fears and frustration to make melodies of healing and hope.

I love that revelation of Adam that he shares with Eve one night when the sky above was splashed with stars and there was the scent of new growth in the spring air, the muted lowing of the herds came faintly from the pastures below. Every muscle in the man's body ached from the labors of the day. Suddenly, Adam turned to his wife.

Eve, God was wrong! This is what we were meant for. To till the ground and raise our grain. To hunt and fish for meat, to work all day in the hot sun and feel the sweat drying on our bodies in the cool of the evening. To try something and fail and try it again and fail. And keep on trying until it works. To struggle to understand things which fill us with fear. To feel hunger and thirst and pain – and hope!

This is better than Eden, Eve. This is what we were meant for. God was wrong, Eve. God was wrong!"

And, the story ends somewhere so far away that the human mind cannot even imagine the distance and so near that the breath of Adam's speaking was hot against God's hand, and God heard the words of defiance flung by the man into the deep well of space.

And hearing, God smiled.<sup>vi</sup> Amen.

#### Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> David Hadju, "Wynton's Blues," The Atlantic Monthly, March 2003, 44.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter J. Gomes, The Good Life: Truths That Last In Times OF Need (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) 77.

<sup>iii</sup> Gomes, 89.

<sup>iv</sup> Gomes, 75.

<sup>v</sup> Laurie Gauld tells this story in her and her husband's book The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have: Finding the Right Balance Between Character and Achievement for Your Child (New York: Scribner, 2002) 48. I have heard her and her husband Malcolm, President of the Hyde Schools tell about their personal struggles with obstacles in raising their children. Our son Douglas is a student at the Hyde School, founded in 1962 to find the right balance between character and achievement.

<sup>vi</sup> William Muehl, Why Preach? Why Listen? (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 38. This book is the collection of Bill Muehl's Beecher Lectures on preaching at Yale Divinity School. Bill was my preaching professor and friend.