

Getting Turned Around

1st Sunday in Lent, Year B – 1 Peter 3:18-22

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 22, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Back in the waning days of the Cold War, I was stationed in Baumholder, West Germany, commanding a forward medical treatment company in support of the 8th Infantry Division. With the Iron Curtain still very much dominating the mind-set of those of us on the frontier of democracy's defense, we trained hard – and a *lot*. Much of our training was done in our own facilities or in the limited area around Baumholder, but for the heavy-duty stuff, and to provide forward support for the training exercises of the Infantry guys, we had to pack up all our stuff and move lock, stock and (in my case) mobile exam and operating rooms, to the other side of the country, to the much larger training areas in Grafenwöhr and Hohenfels.

Running convoys of military vehicles from one end of the country down Germany's vaunted autobahns, was a very complicated mission all on its own, and doing it within the constraints of legendary German bureaucratic constraints was enough to drive my boss, LTC Fast Eddie Helton, right up the wall. His supply company (Alpha) and his maintenance company (Bravo) were so inept at keeping control of their vehicles during such maneuvers that they had actually *lost* whole semi-trucks along the way – *lost* them – for *days*. And the headquarters company? Oh, they usually found excuses not to actually obey *any* of the German convoy timetables, kind of *moseying* across the country one at a time, checking out the sights.

By contrast, Charlie Company (that was me) had convoy procedures just about down to an *art*. My first exercise with the Battalion was just two weeks after my arrival and, seeing the Colonel's poorly-disguised frustration with my brother commanders, I offered to use Charlie Company to try to achieve at least *some* of the unit's schedule stops. We did exactly that, and from then on, became the lead element in every convoy. You know me, I could tell you the story of that first morning move, or I could tell you about how we prepared to be that proficient, or I could even confess why some of my drivers learned to trade places while traveling 45 miles per hour down the Autobahn – and why. But with the Great Litany and all, we need to keep this moving, so let me just say that it got to where I could put one of my *lieutenants* in charge of our convoys and do something more productive with my *own* time.

So it was that on one trip back from one such training exercise east of Nuremberg, the commander of Alpha Company decided he would give responsibility for leading *his* unit's convoy home to *his* lieutenant, a young officer that I will *call* Lt. *Smith* in order to insure his anonymity. Let's just say that Lt. Smith did not have the same *leadership* skills as Lieutenants Salguiero or Copeland. I suppose his first problem was taking a left out the gate of Hohenfels Training Range, instead of the right indicated on his convoy plan – with nearly three dozen 5-ton and “deuce-and-a-half” trucks following his every move. The second problem was probably that his commander didn't *notice* the problem until the convoy was turning east on the E-50 Autobahn. “Alpha 3, Alpha 3!” I heard on the radio, recognizing my comrade's frantic voice, “This is Alpha 6! Check your map!” “Roger, Alpha 6,” came the reply, with an apparent calm that might have just been cluelessness, as his signal – *and* his convoy – faded away at 45 miles per hour toward the Communist east. Lt. Smith's errant convoy (and here is why I changed his name) was finally stopped a mile and a half from the Czechoslovakian border when a *helicopter* landed on the road in front of them, blocking them – with *guns* pointed – from creating an international incident.

Lent is meant to be a journey, a journey toward the joy of the Resurrection, of course, but also a journey of self-examination and repentance. In our reading this morning, Peter reminds us that through our Baptism, we are saved through Christ's Resurrection just as surely as humankind was saved from destruction in the days of Noah. As sinners washed in the waters of Baptism, and in the precious Blood of

Jesus, we *know* our destination. If you have any doubt about that, we need to talk. But along the way, on the journey, and especially on this journey through Lent, we have to make sure we are moving in the right direction. If you were driving from here to Pittsburg and stopped in St. Louis for directions, those directions wouldn't do you any good at all – if you didn't *turn around*. Likewise, all the self-examination in the world is not going to do our Lenten journey any good, if we don't recognize where we have gone the wrong way. And all of the confession that comes with that recognition, will be mere cluelessness if we do not then stop what we are doing, re-pent, that is, *turn around*, and go the way we were *meant* to go, the way we were *created* to go, the way we were *saved* to go.

This Lent, let us all work on our convoy procedures. Let's remember that we are *not* in this alone, that the trail *has* been blazed, that there *is* a plan, that the toll has already been *paid*, and that we are all already on our way *home*.

We sure don't want to wait for the helicopters.