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Don't look back

Pat Marrin | Jun. 30, 2009 NCR Today

"Don't look back." Gen 19:17

Baseball legend Satchel Paige probably didn't know he was quoting scripture when he offered this famous tip for staying young: "Don't look back, something might be gaining on you." But he lived the truth of it by outrunning and outliving the long shadow of racism in American sports. Regarded by Joe Dimaggio as the best and fastest pitcher he had ever faced, Paige was welcomed into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971.

In today's Lectionary reading from Genesis, Lot's wife failed to follow Paige's advice and was turned into a pillar of salt. Avoiding salt might have been another of Paige's tips for staying young, as anyone on blood pressure medication knows. He did warn people off red meat, which, he said, "angrys up the blood."

Health tips and baseball history aside, the story of Lot's narrow escape from Sodom and Gomorrah stands in popular biblical literacy as one of the better known warnings against sin, including a caricature of one woman's hesitation and curiosity. She looked back and was fixed in time in the form of one of nature's best preservatives, becoming a salt lick on the smoking, sulfurous plains of the Holy Land.

Lot, we recall, had bargained with his Uncle Abraham over which portion of the land to occupy. He chose the lush green Jordan valley to the east and gave Abraham the rough grazing terrain to the west. But the fertile plain had produced indolence and extravagance that led to corruption and judgment, while Abraham's hardier, more disciplined path became the crucible of God's promise for future generations of believers.

Adversity is a proven teacher. We are counseled to pray for the best path not the easiest one. Greatness lies in overcoming obstacles like prejudice and discrimination, not in being protected or given a pass. We ask God to spur us on with challenges, not preserve us in privilege. The corollary to "Don't look back" is always to go forward, to keep our eyes on the goal ahead.

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