It’s a good idea never to build a house of thought on a preposition. Nouns are designed for laying the foundation, framing the structure and attaching the roof. Verbs do the work of setting the nouns in place. Prepositions? Well, they just tell the verbs where to put the nouns.

I’m going to violate my own grammar rules today and construct a sermon on the preposition TO. We started a three-sermon stewardship series last week with the word START. *Start to Finish* is our theme. We got started a week ago and we’ll finish next week, but in between the start and the finish is a space taken by the little word *to*. It might as well be an em dash as a word.

And that reminds me of the poem people often read at memorial services. *The Dash*, it’s titled. As in the dash on a tombstone that separates date of birth from date of death, the start of a person’s life from the finish of it. The thrust of the poem is this: the real measure of our life isn’t taken in how we start or finish—not just the first day or the last, but in how we live all the days in between. As the poem puts it: *For it matters not, how much we own, the cars... the house... the cash. What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.* ¹

So today, I want to drill down beneath the symbolism of the dash and the signaling of the preposition *to* to the substance of life when things get hard and the challenge great. Since prepositions give directions, I want us to think about how we regain our bearings when we’ve lost our way, about how we persevere when we lose sight of the finish line. I want us to consider where hope comes from when our hunger outruns our food.

This is where the Israelites found themselves in our story from Exodus today. Last week we saw them make a start for

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freedom. They had been slaves in Egypt. Moses told them God would fight for them against Pharaoh. But they had to go forward. They couldn’t stay where they were. They couldn’t go back.

We learned that faith is always progressive because God is always calling us to a new future. Even Christians of a conservative bent have to bend their necks forward. What conservatives can teach progressives is that the past is never dead, as Faulkner put it, it’s not even past. That is to say, the past stays with us, we carry it within us. And it’s best to carry our fears and failures lightly and our memories of God’s faithfulness firmly. Nonetheless, faith forges forward, or it isn’t faith. It doesn’t stand still. It learns. It grows. It changes.

The children of Israel are hungry. All of them at once. They have reached that stage of life we all get to literally or figuratively when the pantry is empty and the stomach growls. They believe they have come to the end. The body can only live for about 21 days without food.

I know this, because my wife and mother-in-law have been watching one of those TV survival shows. Kim’s made me watch an episode or two. The show is called Naked and Afraid. After learning that the title was a tease, I was out, don’t you know?! It’s a riff off the Adam and Eve story, where it says in Genesis that the man and the woman were naked, but they were not afraid. Well, in this case, they take a man and woman out into a jungle or swamp, make them take their clothes off so that they’re like the first couple in the Garden of Eden, and then they follow them to see if they can find food and survive for three weeks in the wild. It’s not pretty, and it’s definitely not sexy! Just saying.

The Israelites were in the wild. The wilderness, to be precise. They were wandering there, on their way to the Promised Land. Should have been about a two-week trip. Took them forty years. Mostly because they struggled to find their moral compass more than their magnetic one. They were in basic training spiritually. They had to learn how to live without masters. They had to learn self-mastery—which included mastering their appetites, trusting God to provide for them, and depending upon one
another rather than competing with one another.

This brings us to the quail and manna. The people are hungry. There is no food. So, God provides quail in the evening and manna in the morning for them to eat. We know what quail are. Some of you enjoy hunting them with dogs and guns. Not sure how they hunted quail back then without shotguns, but let’s just go with it. The manna was another thing. A layer of dew is the best description we get. No one really knows what it was. Even they didn’t. Which is why they called it manna, meaning What is it?

The point of the story is that God provides what we need when we need it. We don’t always know how or where it comes from. But ultimately, we’re supposed to take it as a gift from God with thanksgiving.

The Bible sometimes gives us miracle stories like these to demonstrate how God can deliver for us in the most extreme circumstances. We shouldn’t imagine though that miracles are only God stepping in when things are beyond human managing. Most of the time, God provides for our needs by inspiring those who have more than they need to share with those who have less. In the wilderness, no one had anything. God had to prove the worst case in order that we would never think any problem would be too great in comparison.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is telling the church at Corinth that they must give to help feed the church in Jerusalem. The mother church was enduring a famine. The Corinthians had an abundance of manna to share. They had made a start in collecting an offering, but for some reason they hadn’t finished it.

We don’t know why they hadn’t continued to give, but we know human nature because we know ourselves. I think balance and consistency are two reasons.

Paul says that it’s right for those who have more to give more in order that those who have less will have more. Sometimes those of us who give generously get tired of carrying the weight of giving in the church and we want others to step up. So, we hold back or give less, thinking we have done more than our part. It’s someone else’s turn. I get that. We all need to do our part. But here’s the thing: we only
know our part. We can only answer for our part. God will judge others, but we have to look to what we have and simply be responsible for doing with our resources what we can. My duty is not changed by the extent of your duty. And my privilege in giving is not impacted by the level of your privilege.

We don't have a progressive tithing code in the church like we have a progressive tax table in the country. A tithe is a tithe is a tithe. It's ten percent of $30,000, $300,000 or $3,000,000. And if we all give according to what we have, as Paul says, not according to what we don't have, there will be a fair balance.

Think of the church like a teeter-totter or seesaw, whatever you call it. The goal is to balance it on the fulcrum so that neither those who have much have so much that they throw off those who have little. Those with much who give much lighten their load so that they can relate to those who have less. And in that way, they get to be part of the thrill of the balancing act of the church where we're all in it together.

The other thing that happens is we get tired and lose enthusiasm. Maybe other things get in the way. The ox is in the ditch and we have to pull him out before we can do anything else. Of course, here's the thing: there's always an ox in a ditch, it seems. The car breaks down. The roof leaks. The oven needs repairing. It's always something. Which is why giving has to be a commitment to consistency.

A few weeks ago, I completed a year-long exercise routine. Every single day for 365 days without missing, I did sit-ups, pushups and squats. I don't usually brag on myself about things in sermons, because, well, I usually don't have things to brag about. But I am excited about this achievement. It's not that I became a physical fitness expert or got into the shape of my life. As my doctor reminds me, you can never outrun your fork. But I did something every day without fail and it made a difference.

What I learned is that every day is the same in that we all have the same days to do with what we will between the dash. But things happen that make us think we don’t. Some days are harder than others. And doing the same thing every day gets boring. Which is why I played games with myself about how
many I would do each month, along with how I would do them, that sort of thing.

Look, giving consistently can be challenging and it can be boring. But what I can tell you is that the benefits to you and the church are tremendous as you build your giving muscles.

God works miracles for us mostly through us. For and through: there’s two more prepositions to go along with to. As in Start TO Finish. So, what do you say? Will you get TO it, please? Amen.