This is the first Sunday of Lent. Here’s a story:

In 207 B.C., a Chinese rebel, Xiang Yu, fought a decisive battle against the troops of the Qin Dynasty. It was a peasant rebellion, the first of its kind, and Yu, although of noble birth, joined them as a deputy commander-in-chief.

As the decisive battle loomed, it became apparent that the battle would be fought near the Zhang River in northern China. The head commander, Song Yi, refused to attack, because he was afraid his peasant soldiers would not be able to prevail against the well-trained Qin soldiers.

A standoff ensued that lasted 46 days. The weather had turned bad, and the peasants began to complain. Xiang decided that it was time to act. He killed Song and took control of the army. He led the army across the Zhang River, and then he issued a most startling and unusual command to his peasant troops:

“Po fu chen zhou.” (Sounds like: Poe fu shun joe)

Translated it means: Smash your cooking pots, and burn your boats. The meaning was clear. “We now have no means to retreat. There is no way to survive and eat again unless the enemy is defeated. We are now committed. This is the path we’ve chosen.”

Yu and his peasant army were victorious, and that victory led to the ultimate collapse of the Qin Dynasty.

So — when we face the journey before us, when we come up against our foe — moral, spiritual or otherwise, perhaps Xiang Yu’s advice — along with the Word of God — is helpful. Paul said, “Give no occasion for the flesh.”

“Smash your cooking pots and burn your bridges.” Retreat to our former life must be removed as an option.

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: O God, as we enter this period of Lent, may I be willing to endure whatever sacrifice you may call me to make for your sake. Amen.