

“Running the Race that is Set before Us”
Offered at Three Bridges by Pastor Joy Kulvicki
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Genesis 6: 1-6

Hebrews 11: 1-3

Hebrews 12: 1-2

I am sitting outside on a lovely, peaceful morning. The world is just beginning to awaken. Soon there will be lots of noise- mowers, a garbage truck, school buses though school ends soon and even an occasional helicopter overhead as we have a training school nearby. But for now, it is tranquil and peaceful with only the sound of songbirds. In the beauty and quiet of the garden, I can listen best for the voice of God, where the Holy Spirit awakens and teaches me, where I am ready to listen.

I am wondering if you have that open space, that peaceful quiet place where you can hear God...where you can listen?

A key part of the spiritual life of a Christian believer is listening and that is where we begin in reflecting upon running the race that is set before us.

The world is a very noisy place...filled with cacophony...harsh, discordant dissonance and conflicting, hyperactivity. If you question that, just turn

on the news! So it is not a stretch to believe that these are the worst of times.

But that is truly not so! In his 2011 book Steven Pinker's "Better Angels of Our Nature" he goes back in history to prove that the world is far less violent, and fewer people die violently than ever before in the history of human kind. On the medical side, the Bill Gates Foundation says the mortality death rate for children worldwide has dropped 50% since 1990. The foundation works to provide the medications needed to eradicate some diseases and greatly reduce others.

Our 24-7 news cycle keeps us aware of what is happening world wide minute by minute and thus our perspectives become overloaded and skewed unless we work at looking at the world through God's eyes, through the spiritual lens of hope and faith. Thus more than ever we need to quiet ourselves to hear the still, small voice of God helping us to focus on our mission, our race, what God calls us out as believers to do.

The Christian life is like a marathon race. This morning as we reflect upon the spiritual race that is set before us as believers, let us learn from the strongest of runners what they do to prepare to run an arduous 26.2 miles.

First let us look at some background and context for the Epistle or letter to the Hebrews:

The letter to the Hebrews, one of the most beautifully written and powerfully argued of New Testament Scriptures, was written sometime before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem which was 70 AD, and was probably written from Rome. Although the King James version writes that it is Paul's letter, today scholars find that unlikely. We do not know much of the author. Origen is believed to have said, "who wrote Hebrews in truth, God only knows."

Similarly we do not know much of the congregation to whom it is addressed. What we do know is that this congregation has been struggling. A New Testament scholar, Dr. Thomas Long who was my preaching professor at Seminary said this and I quote....

"This congregation is exhausted They are tired-tired of serving the world, tired of worship. tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus...the threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere". This letter is written to discouraged believers to encourage them, to help them to re-focus and renew their faith and their spirits.

I trust that you are not exhausted or tired of being a believer, but I do think there is much we can learn and grow from these encouragements and teachings in the letter to the Hebrews. We believe that Scripture becomes Living Word, coming alive in our spirits by the power of the Holy Spirit so let us listen for the growth and support we receive from the empowering words of Hebrews:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. The author calls forth giants of the faith to teach us by example what the faith walk looks like. Abraham was a man of deep faith and commitment when God called upon him to leave Haran, his home and place of comfort. God promised Abraham and Sarah, that though old, they would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed and trusted God. Abraham and his family stepped out in faith knowing that he was being sent on a mission. He trusted though he did not fully understand the mission, he trusted that God would lead and guide him, he put his life and his family’s life in the hands of the Lord and stepped out into the unknown.

And lest anyone might consider they are too old to be called out by God to a mission, Abram was 75 when God called him out and 90 when he received his second call.

The patriarch Abraham is what faith looks like....it is the assurance that God will teach us, grow us, guide us and show us the way. It is that first step that is ours to make....it is ours to listen and be guided by what we hear.

As the primary model of faithfulness, Abraham is among the cloud of witnesses who surround us-the ones who lived before us whose lives model trust and where we can also see their struggles, how human they were and what it took to live out their faith in God.

The knowledge and understanding of God's love for us comes first from Jesus, the pioneer, the one who showed us how to be faithful and then by the people present in our lives who witness to God's love in their living and then the cloud of witnesses who came before us whose lives bear witness to God's love. Henri Nouwen teaches us that these witnesses tell us that we are loved in an unconditional way, they model God's grace, God's forgiveness and God's empowerment. The cloud of witnesses is not a jury with God as the judge, assessing your life. No, the cloud of witnesses is an encouragement, support and in the race motif, a cheering section.

God is the patient father, as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who waits for us to see where we have failed and then to turn away from

these encumbrances, from the sin which clings so closely...to turn around and return to our heavenly father.

That brings us to laying aside every encumbrance and sin which clings so closely so that we can run the race that is set before us.. Falling short of the hope that God has for each of us, doing things which we know displease God and not doing the things which we know God would have us do, the traditional word for that is SIN. Sin is a burden, a heavy weight on our spirit, it is the 50 pound gorilla on our back. This burden makes running very difficult. It is God's amazing grace, the offering of wiping the slate clean, freeing us from our burden and beginning anew that gives us the freedom to run, yes even to feel as though we are flying.

I had this experience in a powerful way when God helped me to forgive my stepfather whom I had hated with adolescent fervor. As the Holy Spirit moved through me giving me the grace and the ability to forgive...as my friend prayed over me...I experienced a lightness of floating, a freedom and a joy so intense it changed my life forever. It truly was a new beginning for me.

Without the freeing power of grace, there is no freedom; we become an accumulation or archive of

our past, the 50 pound gorilla gets heavier. God's gracious invitation is to start fresh, to begin anew. Grace has us know we are loved, we are understood and we are given a second chance and truly an innumerable number of chances by our heavenly father to begin again. Accepting and believing in God's grace through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is how we step up to the starting gate unencumbered to run the race that God calls us out to do.

Marathon runners first commit to the race and then begin rigorous practice and training for months which includes both individual exercise for strengthening, running, working with a trainer, strategizing and preparing psychologically and then also working with a community of runners for support and fellowship. If you have not trained extensively, you will not complete the race...it is that rigorous and demanding.

For the Christian believer, preparation begins with listening, then freeing oneself of the burden and asking God to help you begin to understand what your mission is....what is uniquely yours to do. In running a spiritual race, you need to know what lane you're in... where you are heading. You need to strengthen your faith so you are ready to take the risk, the stepping out into the dark, the leap of faith.

I know this to be true in my own life and in the lives of many faithful people and certainly in the Scriptural witness that the stepping out part is ours to do and then God honors our effort, God leads and brings assurance, God empowers us to have the strength so that we are able to persevere....to keep at it, to go through the obstacles and challenges which are part of any race, spiritual or physical.

The marathon race is not a fast sprint where the goal is being first. The goal of most marathoners is to complete the race, not to be the winner. And so it is with the spiritual race...it is to complete our race, it is to be persistent, it is to be faithful looking to Christ Jesus, the pioneer of our faith.

Lest we think that the cloud of witnesses surrounding us is only made up of the giants of the faith and our departed loved ones who taught us and showed us the Christian life, I would like to suggest that you and I become the cloud of witnesses to each other and to our children. The song "Cloud of Witnesses" by Mark Schultz has been in my ear for weeks. It says that as we are faithful in our Christian walk, we become part of the cloud of witnesses to those around us. Our witness to our beliefs is how we live. The great Christian thinker Henri Nouwen said it this way: "What we live is more important than what we say, because the faithful

way of living always leads to the faith filled way of speaking. For example, when we forgive our neighbors from our hearts, our hearts speak forgiving words with our spirits present to God. Our actions and then our words speak volumes”.

As a preacher, I especially like what Mother Teresa said, “Be the sermon, and use as few words as you can! When we lead with words often they do not connect with our spirit. When the spirit speaks within us, it speaks in truth.”

So my friends, step up to the starting gate, LISTEN!, ask God what your continuing mission is to be- what is yours to do and then step out- take a risk and this is for you whether you're 9 or 90, God invites you to be on a mission....God promises to lead and guide you, Jesus promises to walk with you and to provide light and hope on the Way and the cloud of witnesses promises to encourage, inspire and cheer you on. And remember you are both learner and teacher...our children and grandchildren, all the children gathered in at Three Bridges, all of the children with whom we come in contact, look up to us to help them grow in the faith. It is both humbling and energizing.... thanks be to God