

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
September 12, 2021
Hebrews 12:1–2

Let us pray for an awareness of inspiration from God's Spirit.

O God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Over the last three weeks, we looked at the story of the Prodigal Son, or the story of the Father with Two Sons, or the story of the loving father. We looked at each of the three main characters in the story, the two son and the father. Pastor Mary noted last week that some theologians believed that when the Father, in love overflowing, can't contain himself and runs to meet the child he thought was lost, that some believe that that was undignified and out of character. But Pastor Mary shared that it has been noted that running is actually something not so unusual in scripture. The words of the prophet Isaiah tell us that "those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." And in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle reminds the church that we should run the race, "in such a way to get the prize." On Easter morning the disciples run to the empty tomb. Running, either literally or as a metaphor is a common theme. The brief scripture for this morning also mentions running. Listen for a word from God.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that

was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

I’ve been thinking about running lately. Not because I do it, I don’t. I prefer to ride my bike, or to take walks, particularly with the amazing trails I am rediscovering in Minnesota. No, I’ve been thinking about running lately because of a blog post someone sent me recently, in fact, more than one person has shared it with me. It’s written by a pastor and writer named Jenny Smith. I don’t know her personally, but she wrote this post in early July, and it has been making the rounds. The blog post is entitled, “The Second Marathon: A Thought for Pastors on Walking the New Normal.”ⁱ And while she specifically is addressing pastors in her article, I think it is applicable to almost anyone.

In the piece she starts by saying she believes many of us are tired. Like, on a soul level tired. Not the kind of tired that a just a couple of days off will handle. Deeper, more systemic than that. She then says, “we just ran a marathon.” And then she enumerates a lot of things we have done to continue to be the church. This is not the full list, but she includes the following:

- We closed our doors to in-person worship.
- We figured out online worship. Maybe. Kind of.
- We tried to continue as many ministries as we could sustain.
- We dreamed up new ones.
- We ached with isolation.
- We agonized over the safest way to return to in-person gatherings.
- We received grace and stunning kindness from people in our communities.

Then, she says, we opened our doors to in-person worship again. We crossed the finish line! We made it! We did a hard thing! Then... instead

of collapsing at the finish line in a heap, instead of drinking water instead of resting our aching bodies, something else happened.

An official-looking race organizer slapped another number on our back and pushed us toward another starting line that mysteriously appeared.

Wait. What? A second marathon? Right now?

She continues in her article outlining some of the forces at work about why it always feels like we are running and the pressure to do so. But then she offers some advice, and I think it is worth paying attention to.

She writes,

As the gears come to life in our faith communities, we have the opportunity to tell the truth, to slow the pace, and question everything as we enter the new normal. Yes, our second marathon has begun. Ready or not.

Problem is, our bodies are still recovering from the first marathon.

Maybe the answer is to stop running the second race. What if we looked at each other and gently nodded. Slowed our forced jog. And started walking. Together.

And then she poses this question...

What if we walked our second marathon?

Side by side. No racing. No competing with anything or anyone.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer spends the entire chapter before our reading today, talking about the ancestors of our faith. People like Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Samson, Samuel, and David. These are not people who are perfect in their faith. They are people who, like you and I, have struggles in their walk of faith, who make mistakes, who don't always make the best choices. But

many of them, also accomplished great things. Many of them have moments of faithfulness. There are other less well-known characters and named mentioned as well, and the writer highlights their faithfulness. God notices them for their faithfulness and counts them as faithful with whatever they were able to do. Even in the midst of hard things, God sees their faithfulness.

But, as one of my former colleagues pointed out to me once, God has a different way of accounting or faith. It's not the faith of the individual that matters, as much as it is the faith of the community. This great cloud of witness that surround us, both from the past and in our present.ⁱⁱ It's not so much the greatness of one individual but rather the accumulation of the saints.

So, I've been thinking about running, and more specifically, about running the second marathon, and really trying to remember that we have to pace ourselves, that we cannot really run a second marathon at full pace, that we may have to walk parts of it and the verse from Hebrews about running the race with perseverance, the phrase, "amongst the great cloud of witnesses came to my mind." And I remember my father and my colleague talking about running and how people both train for and run marathons. While in most ways, a marathon is an individual sport, there are times when you must rely on others.

There are, of course, all of the volunteers along a race, those that hand out drinks and energy bars along the way. There are those who stand along the race route cheering the marathons on and encouraging them. But there are also, in most cities where marathons held, an opportunity to train with others. These are other people who like to run, these are not the elite athletes who are vying for the best time or a top finish. These are the hundreds of other people for whom it is a big deal just to finish the marathon – all 26.2 miles – at their own pace. Many of these people

are going to be those folx at the back of the race, who will struggle a bit. In the running world, these runners are known as penguins.

In the early 2000's there was a man named John Bingham, who was a runner, and an author, and his nickname was "The Penguin," because of his own promotion of running slow, or even walking long-distance races. He preferred to stay at the back of the pack. He has written several books, one of the first of which was entitled, "No Need for Speed: A Beginner' Guide to the Joy of Running."ⁱⁱⁱ He believes that the primary goal of running isn't to finish the fastest, it's to have fun and finish. There are many runners who believed he has ruined the sport or at least lowered the bar because they believe the primary goal should be to run as fast as you can.

But penguins, those runners at the back of the pack, need one another. Many of these people run together, because they would not be able to finish if they didn't. They need the support and encouragement of others to enable them to finish the race at all.

"There is a story about a marathon runner who ran with the penguins and almost didn't make it to the finish line. A few miles from the end of the race, he slowed to a walk, slunk off to the side of the road, and was about to sit down. But then, another runner came over to him, and said, 'Hey, get up. It's not that far. You can do this. I'll stay with you. You just stay one step behind me and watch my feet. Do what they do, and we'll finish this together.'

As they ran, the tired runner could tell that the guy in front of him had some energy left, probably enough to push himself and gain some time in the last few miles. But he didn't. He stayed with the tired one, paced himself so that they could finish together."

One of my favorite television shows, one that I can watch no matter what when it is on in re-runs, is the West Wing. It's written by Aaron Sorkin, and I find it to be uplifting, and smart, and hopeful. In one particular episode, one of the characters, Josh, is having an extremely tough time after suffering through some trauma and he is afraid he may lose his job. His mentor and boss, Leo, tells him this story.

“This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out. A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, ‘Hey you. Can you help me out?’ The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

“Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up, ‘Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?’ The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

“Then a friend walks by, ‘Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?’ And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, ‘Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.’ The friend says, ‘Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out.’”

This is where we are, we are still in the midst of this race. The second marathon. And it's a bit back and forth, and some of us are tired. Some of us are ready to sit down. But we also know a few things.

One, God is still faithful. God is still with us, and even if we can only walk instead of run, even if we make some mistakes along the way, or if our attempts at being faithful are not always successful, God is still with us. God's accounting is different. God knows our hearts and will cherish and honor the attempt. God is trustworthy and faithful, our source of hope. And we can be reminded of the words of Isaiah, “those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.”

Two, people have done hard things before, and we can do them too. It's not always easy, and it isn't always clear. But we can do it. One step at a time. One mile at a time. One day at a time. We can do this hard thing. But we don't do it alone.

Which leads to, three, we don't have to do it, and we are not doing it alone. We are surrounded by this community of faith that can hold on to one another, that can pace each other, that can encourage one another, that is running this crazy race with one another. We do not have to do this alone. We have running partners. Or, better yet, we will have partners to remind us that it isn't about how fast we can make it through this. We have partners reminding us that sometimes we don't have to run at all, sometimes we may have to walk a part of this course. And that's ok.

One day, we will look back on this time, and say, "Remember when we had to run that second marathon? Wow, that was hard, but we did it, together." We may even remember the ways we were innovative and the creativity that came from this moment. We will remember the moments of sadness and grief, we will remember the times of struggle and isolation, but I'm hopeful that we will also remember the times when people were doing their best to be faithful. We will remember the times we drew closer to one another. We will remember the moments of unexpected joy and of laughter. We will look back and think, I'm so glad that we had this great cloud of faithful witnesses with whom to run this race. One day, we will cross the finish line, together.

ⁱ <https://www.jennysmithwrites.com/post/the-second-marathon-a-word-for-pastors-on-walking-the-new-normal>

ⁱⁱ <https://erikanderica.org/erica/2007/08/19/surrounded/index.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bingham_\(runner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bingham_(runner))