

Running the Race to the End

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 25, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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, looking 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. (Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV)

A few years ago, one of Lisa's cousins surprised and amazed us, together with the rest of the extended family. He's only a little younger than we are, and at the time was in about as good a shape as I am now. I'm sure there's backstory that I don't know, but seemingly out of the blue, he announced that in a year and a half he would enter, run, and complete the Boston Marathon!

He immediately changed his diet, starting exercising, and crucially, started *running*. Jogging went from not being a part of his life at all to being a *daily* activity, filled with gradually more ambitious goals for distance and endurance. I have yet to hear from him a full explanation of what possessed him to make this commitment, but commit he did, and we enjoyed following his progress on a Facebook group page he set up, complete with regular updates and photos.

And within months, he was running 5K's, and months after that, half-marathons (that's 13 miles, folks!). Finally, the big day came. And he did it! He didn't *win* the race ... he didn't get a feature story in the *Boston Globe* or get offered free tickets to Fenway Park. But he finished. He kept his word.

When he started, no one – including him – knew what it would take and what the journey would be like or what sacrifices would have to be made. And Lord knows, it wasn't easy, but he set out in faith and saw the race to the end.

Last Sunday, we set out on our Lenten journey with a meditation on “fasting and feasting” – the idea that during Lent we *do* give up certain things, certain old patterns or practices, but not for the sake of self-denial itself, but so that we may “feast” on other things, better things ... such as patience, compassion, and forgiveness ... that we may more faithfully run the race that is set before us.

But as sensible and even appealing as that may sound, anyone who has ever tried this knows that making this spiritual journey with intention and diligence is not easy. It involves sacrifice ... it means unlearning things some things. In a sense, it even means, as Jesus puts it, “losing” our lives as we presently understand them ... denying ourselves and our own demands on life, that we might find a home and a life beyond anything we have yet known.

This truth is all over the pages of scripture. This journey is a trek through what can feel like a wilderness: It's Abraham hearing God's call in his old age and setting out towards a home he had never seen. It's Moses and the Israelites leaving Egypt behind and wandering through a desert for 40 years. As we read last Sunday, it's Jesus at the very dawn of his public ministry being tempted by Satan for 40 days in the middle of nowhere. All these scriptures lift up examples of what such a journey looks like ... of what *faith* looks like.

As we are told in that wonderful eleventh chapter of Hebrews, faith is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It is *trust* in the face of uncertainty. The scripture tells us that when Abraham stepped out the door he didn't know where he was going or how his story was going to play out. He could not have imagined what awaited him on the other side of that obedience ... what adventures would be had ... what a destiny into which he would live! But his faith impelled him to *trust* God with that destiny, and he never looked back.

And as it was with Abraham, so it is with all those who are then named in the part of the scripture text I passed over ... Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Rahab the prostitute, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, King David and Samuel, and all the prophets. Each in their own time stepped out in trust into the unknown. None knew where they were going or what "there" would look like. None knew how their own personal story would play out. Some would go – by ordinary standards – very, very well ... conquering kingdoms, administering justice, knowing victory and success. But others would be tortured, suffer mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment – even death. Still others would go about persecuted, destitute, wandering the face of the earth.

And as it was for these, so it would be later for a band of fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee who would be called to take up their own crosses and follow. And as it was for them, so it is with us.

We are gathered here today because each of us is on a journey – a journey of a life lived in the light of faith – that has claimed us, and yet, we can't see where our roads will lead us. We are here today because we are on a journey *together* as a community of faith, having covenanted to stand with and for one another – but we venture forward not knowing what the future will hold. Often, we don't see how our part matters or what difference any of our efforts and struggles will make. And we don't grasp our place in the Big Picture, if there is one.

That's the scary part, isn't it? Not *knowing* ... not being in charge ... not being in control of your own life's story. We would always love to know where we are, and what things truly mean, and where we're headed, and how best to move forward. But such clarity is neither the promise nor the hope of the gospel.

In one of my favorite scenes in the movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, the hobbit Frodo is more or less carrying the weight of the world around his neck, and even with the support of his faithful companion Samwise, he struggles with the temptation to just give up –

Frodo: *I can't do this, Sam.*

Samwise: *I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo; the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end ... because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was, when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.*

Frodo: *What are we holding on to, Sam?*

Samwise: *That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for.*

Perhaps you have never borne a Ring of Power to the fires of Mount Doom, but I know you do know something of the weight of the world ... the pangs of uncertainty and waiting ... the sting of loss ... the many things we see all the time that we don't understand, such as the tragic events of this past week over on campus, with the deaths of students Laken Riley and Wyatt Banks. We may question – even God – how to keep going. In all these things, what *is* it that we hold on to? Or as the runner Eric Liddell in “Chariots of Fire” poignantly asks, “Where does the power come from, to see the race to the end?”

One of the first things that *Frodo* learns on the journey is that while he alone would have to bear the burden of the Ring and its peculiar darkness, he would not have to make this journey alone. Sam nearly drowns himself trying to catch up with an escaping Frodo, who had determined that the task was too dangerous to risk anyone's life other than his own. Frodo – trying to get away – has to stop and save his friend, and he pulls him into his boat. “It is no good trying to escape you,” Frodo is finally forced to concede. “But I'm glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together.”

We *are* meant to go together. We do not have to make this journey alone. As the young Willie Wonka discovers as he and his rag-tag group of friends struggle long to build his world-famous chocolate factory, “It's not the chocolate, it's the people you share it with.” We share our lives, and our joys and our burdens with one another, and we would learn to trust. Nobody pretends that it's easy. But as we go on together – as we serve together, as we break bread together, as we learn and grow together – we find that we slowly move beyond the narrow confines of our own self-concern and that we are being rooted in a story and a promise so much bigger than ourselves.

No doubt, there are many times along the way that we meet with disappointments, learn hard lessons, endure pain and even tragedy, and like Frodo, we may wonder if we have the strength to go on. But even in these times, there is so much more than we can see.

Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, those fishermen by the sea ... all were human and struggled and doubted, but in the end all of them trusted that they were part of something more. And so, they lived with hope. This is what their stories would teach us. And at the end of their journeys, they could say, with the Apostle Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

And so may we, cheered on by that great Cloud of Witnesses – may we run with perseverance the race that is set before us, to the glory of God! Amen.