

“It’s a Marathon, Not a Sprint”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Katie Owen Aumann on August 18, 2019

At Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA

There was a time when I fancied myself a runner. To be clear, I was not fast. I was not going to win any race. But I decided in one of those “new year’s resolutions” moments that I was going to run a half marathon. I got a friend to sign up with me and once we’d sunk our \$100 in race registration fees and I’d bought my fancy new running shoes and requisite water bottle with a handle for running and the arm band for my iPhone, I was in it.

Then I realized that you don’t just wake up one day and run a half marathon. I started downloading training schedules and realized that this was actually going to be a lot of work. I started out strong, sticking to the schedule, pushing through the hard moments. But as the weeks ticked on, the runs got harder. Work and other commitments picked up, and my fervor waned. Mile 5 was my nemesis for several weeks, and I remember wondering, “if mile 5 is bad, how in the world am I going to get to 13.1?” I learned about a fun run in town that was a 0.131 mile race that ended at the pub with a cold beer and for a moment I thought, “I’m doing this wrong.” THAT is the race I should’ve signed up for.

Training continued, often begrudgingly. I kept waiting for the week where I’d feel the “runners high” as they called it. I’m still not sure what that feels like. I wanted this to be my “spiritual discipline,” a time to reflect, a practice that would connect my feet with my faith and make me thankful each time I ran that God had given me this body and this life and I would finish my run filled with gratitude and hope. None of that really came true. Most days I came home, breathing hard, questioning again the wisdom of signing up for this race and wondering whether I really cared about that \$100 race fee after all. I contemplated quitting after nearly every long run.

And I wonder sometimes if church can be a bit like that. We train and we train. We sign up for things, we pledge our hard-earned money, and we make our resolution that we’re going to dive deeper into our relationship with God and take our prayer life more seriously. And we start strong. We come each week, put on our church clothes and focus on the sermons. But life happens around us and suddenly we find that we’re going through the motions. Some Sunday mornings we lay in bed thinking, “do I have to go to church this week? Maybe I’ll just sleep in.” Some weeks we say the Lord’s prayer focused on every word and other weeks we just say it because it’s the next thing in the bulletin. But we do it, week in and week out, as the practice of our faith, as the commitment we made, but, as the youth would say, “the struggle is real.”

And such was the case for the early church in today’s scripture passage. Hebrews is itself a sermon to a church that had been zealous and energized and faithful, but after time as hardships arose, was losing its steam. There was an abundance of cultural adversity around them. Where there was once a sense of respect that came from being Christian, it was clear that now their conviction about Jesus was a cause for a loss of status. Where once their church membership had mattered in their local business biography, now they thought

twice before listing that they belonged to a church at all. “Seemingly having grown weary of the Christian life and perhaps worn by external pressures put upon the community, some were struggling with their faith and others were neglecting to show up at all. After previously enduring hardship and showing great love for one another, the community had become, over time, less confident, less enthusiastic, and less cohesive.”¹ And the preacher of Hebrews was wondering, what do we do when it feels like all the energy has been sucked out of the balloon?²

I wonder too, if it’s not just the struggle of fulfilling the commitment to our own Christian community, but if we’re just exhausted and overwhelmed by the world. Karl Barth is remembered for saying, “the preacher is to prepare a sermon with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”³ And aside from the fact that both of those things are now on my phone, I’ll be honest that reading the newspaper, or any news outlet, is emotionally exhausting. I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t write the prayers of the people until Sunday morning because I never know what tragedy I’m going to need to incorporate or address. And I know you feel this fatigue too. Whether it is your own personal story—of cancer, of dementia, of grief, of financial strain, of job loss, of marital conflict—or the world’s stories—of gun violence, of white supremacy, of racism, of economic volatility, hardship and strife are real. My parents and I do not share a lot of the same political convictions these days, but last week when they were visiting, on this we could agree: the world is full of struggle and sadness and terror and one bad news story after another. It feels acutely stressful, I believe, to take in the full weight of the world.

And yet hardship and suffering are not new. This is not the first time in history when striving to follow Christ and seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly has been met with external judgment. God never promised that, this side of the new heaven, there would not be struggle. Our own Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ knew that struggle and suffering acutely. God promised that we would never be alone and that the struggle would not be the end of the story. But oh, it feels hard sometimes.

So the question seems to be: what do we do when we get discouraged?

By the world?

By church?

By our own people?

By God?

The preacher of Hebrews points us to the challenge and the opportunity of faith. Faith, the preacher says, is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. And that faith seems to point us forward, to look *ahead* at the promises of God, at what God

¹ Mary Foskett (NT Professor at Wake Forest), Working Preacher, “Commentary on Hebrews 11,” 2019. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4153

² *Creating* Guidebook for Covenant Bible Study, pp 64-69.

³ Karl Barth paraphrase. <http://barth.ptsem.edu/about-cbs/faq>

is yet to do, to consider where God will yet show up on the road before us, as the race bends around the turn down a path that we cannot yet see.

But before we can look ahead, knowing we need a boost of confidence, the preacher of Hebrews digs deep into the scriptures, looks *back*, and calls the roll on all the scriptural greats who have gone before us...

By faith Noah became an heir to righteousness,
By faith Abraham dared to go,
 received the promise of children and the blessing of a future,
By faith Moses stood up to Pharaoh,
By faith the Israelites were delivered from Egypt,
By faith the walls of Jericho fell,
By faith Rahab was protected,
And on and on,
 through characters we know well and characters you'd have to look up
By faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises,
 shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the
 sword, won strength out of weakness...

As if to say, do you remember?

Do you remember God's faithfulness?

Do you remember all that God has done in times like these?

Do you remember God's steadfastness amidst the hardships that transpired?

Do you remember God's promises that have endured from generation to generation?

And perhaps it is good for us to do that as well...

By faith Dr. Crawford sought to found a church of 30 members in 1874 that would become Covenant Presbyterian

By faith Rev. Mack came to Atlanta with no home and a tiny congregation to restart a church that met in the YMCA

By faith, Covenant members provided interfaith resources to the armed forces during World War I, far before interfaith work was lauded, and moved touted as "one of the finest pieces of work being done by any church in Atlanta."

By faith, in 1926 Covenant members built this building "far out of town, away beyond the creek"

By faith, Dr. Turner authored the Atlanta Minister's Manifesto and welcomed African American members, dividing the church over its commitment to racial justice

By faith, Covenant has welcomed refugee families, hosted kindergarten for immigrant children, provided refuge for our Jewish neighbors after the Temple bombing, opened doors to the homeless as founders of Buckhead Christian Ministries, and so much more.

A few weeks ago, Sue Colussy alerted us that this fall marks the 40th anniversary of hosting the Kho family as part of refugee resettlement efforts during the Vietnam boat lift. When Covenant members met their family and welcomed them to the US, they had little to their name and no idea what their future would hold. Now their children are graduates of MIT, Georgia Tech, and UVA. One has a thriving business. By faith, God used this community to welcome the stranger.

This past week, Charlotte Cook handed me a set of files from the Presbyterian Women. Amidst the minutes of prayer meetings and educational gatherings, documenting carefully the budget of \$463 that would be submitted for audit, the purpose of the women's groups was denoted: to "celebrate our faith in God, our strength, our giving, and our growing." By faith, God worked through the women of this church to provide care and support to many in and among this church family.

I know that I am not the foremost scholar of Covenant's history, but I have been here long enough to know that this is just the surface of the richness of the stories of God's manifold work that has transpired here by faith.

What strikes me amidst these lists of the faithful is the reminder that through those times of deep faith, there was also deep strife and hardship as well.

God delivered the Israelites from slavery into freedom,

which means that the people knew the pain and cost of bondage.

God protected the Israelite army in Jericho, but not without the loss of many lives.

God brought the Israelites back to Jerusalem

but not without generations of exile and loss that caused them to lament

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

God sent his son Jesus to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives,

recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free,

which meant that in the first century just as today,

people of faith were seeking to address poverty, incarceration,

health care crises and oppression.

Jesus was crucified alongside criminals, died at the hands of the state

for preaching that good news.

And the Hebrews saw around them that as much as their hearts were

stirred by their faith, their friends were being persecuted, jailed, & judged.

Behind the names of those biblical heroes that we celebrate and exalt are years of labor, of hard work, of pain, of hardship, and yes, of suffering by those who also were faithful, by those who also strapped on their shoes and ran the race and yet go unnamed. Hebrews and we cannot hide or deny the realities of the trials and suffering around us. As Hebrews says, "many, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." In the cosmic picture of Jesus' redemption of the world, their suffering was not meaningless. Because in each and every one of these accounts of faith, we are reminded of God's ultimate promise of healing out of pain,

reconciliation out of harm,

hope out of despair,

life out of death.

Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the one who knew suffering in his own body and spirit, points us always to the promise that suffering and death do not get the final word. But amidst our remembering the triumphs of faith and the truth of these promises, the realities of suffering cannot be denied or forgotten either.

Schoschana Ovitz knew this suffering well. She had been held in Auschwitz during the Holocaust and witnessed her mother be selected for death by Dr. Josef Mengele. After surviving the Holocaust, she met her husband Don who had lost his wife and four daughters in the genocide. She is one who lived despite Hitler's efforts to eradicate the Jewish people. And this year, she celebrated her 104th birthday and she had one request: for all of her descendants to come together at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. And gather they did. Holding a young boy's hand, she sat in her wheelchair to be photographed with 400 of her descendants from all over the globe. Her family was able to surround her with the richness of life from generation to generation, just as God promised. In that picture was hope and promise that grew out of such gruesome suffering. And yet, I have no doubt that Schoschana asked to gather at the Western Wall on purpose. That holy site provided the space to remember *by faith* all of those who have gone before, who knew suffering all too well, who have finished their race, who are known and loved and claimed by God, who are also part of that great cloud of witnesses that give us all the strength to persevere.⁴

So perhaps in moments of discouragement, when the world around us feels bleak, when hope is hard to find, when we wonder about the future, we are given the ability to look back, to call the roll, to be surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that we too will have the strength to strap on our running shoes and run the next leg of the race. For this is a marathon, not a sprint. It is not without struggle along the way that must be named and claimed. And yet, we hold onto faith that just as God has provided a way through strife and challenge and discouragement and doubt in the past, God will yet provide a way.

I made it to race day, after all that training. And what I remember most as I lined up in the "not-so-fast" section was the feeling of connection with all the runners around me. I had mostly trained alone, thinking that this was an exercise that was about me. But here I stood in the crowd with people who had also been on a journey to get to this day. I didn't know their stories. I didn't know their hardships. I didn't know if they hated mile 5 as much as I did. I could tell from some of their t-shirts and outfits that some were running to celebrate triumph over disease and trial, some were running to remember and honor loved ones whose race was over, some were running for their very lives. Some of us were simply running. Regardless of what brought us to that place, this great cloud of witnesses—present in body and in spirit—provided the strength to make it 13.1 miles to the finish line.

And so it is with faith. May we dare to endure the struggle, reminded that God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, has always and will always provide a way. Amen.

⁴ <https://nypost.com/2019/08/07/holocaust-survivor-celebrates-104th-birthday-surrounded-by-400-descendants/>