

While We Run This Race

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 40: 25-31

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 12: 1-3

Gospel Reading: John 12: 20-33

The alarm on my cell phone goes off at 4:30am, but it's not really necessary, because I was already awake. I hadn't slept so well anyway, knowing I'd be getting up so early. I shut off the alarm and turn on the light in the bathroom so as not to wake Kathy. First I had to eat—I wanted to have my oatmeal and banana polished off by 5am, though a couple of times I gagged on the banana, because really I hate bananas, especially the texture. I had to eat by 5 so that my digestive system would have done its work by 8am.

After I had forced down the food, the rest of my work could be a bit more leisurely—I had laid out my stuff last night, now it was just a matter of putting it on. Glide and band-aids on the sensitive spots; sunscreen on the face, neck, arms and legs; shorts and top with the race number pinned on; socks and running shoes, with the timing chip securely attached; hat in case of rain; and storage pouch on a belt with sunglasses, 5 packets of power gel, cell phone, and a metro ticket. As I watched myself in the mirror putting sunscreen on my face, I thought of an Indian rising before dawn and putting on war paint—preparing for battle. This would be a battle too, though a battle only with myself and maybe against the heat. Then I thought, too, about the “battle” preparations in Paul's letter to the *Ephesians* (6:10-20), where we are to put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes for sharing the good news of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the word of God. I at least have the shoes, belt, and hat. The sword and shield might weigh me down a bit.

By 6am I am out the door and headed for the metro. By now I'm wearing my 50-gallon black plastic trash bag—with head and arm holes cut out. It isn't pretty, but it protects me against the 25 degree temperature. In fact, that's an ideal temperature! By the start of the race, it should be in the 30's, and I couldn't ask for anything better. My *second* biggest job will be shedding the body heat generated by running over 6 miles an hour. The biggest job will be keeping up that pace for 4 and a half hours. The colder the better. If I'm lucky, I'll be done running before the temperature reaches 60.

It's about 6:30 when I get to the outdoor holding area for runners. That's pretty early for an 8 o'clock start, but I always worry about glitches—the metro gets derailed, or I get lost, or...who knows what. Anyway, for people like me, better safe than sorry. I now have over an hour to kill. Of course there will be a few visits to the Port-o-Potty, but mostly standing around with other runners moving to stay warm and trying to feel confident. Three months of training got me here—running 4 days a week, some 30-40 miles a week. In *Hebrews* the writer says (12:1): “let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way.” I did lose some weight over the course of 3 months of training, but I would have liked to have lost some more. Lugging those extra pounds around with me will certainly “get in the way.” Well, it's too late now.

I visualize the course. I ran it last year so I'm pretty familiar with it—I imagine the good views, the hills, the places along the way where I've planned to meet up with Kathy, the finish. The writer of the letter to the *Hebrews* refers to (12:1) “the race that lies before

us.” That sounds like it’s already mapped out—the way my race will be this morning. As I think about the 26.2 miles of the marathon course, it occurs to me that my own life might have 26.2 years left to it. That would make me 80—not a bad length for a life. The difference is that I don’t know how long my life will go yet. Maybe 26 years, maybe 6, maybe 46. It makes a big difference; but it’s not anything I can plan on. To run 26 miles, you have to pace yourself. Start out too fast and you may not finish at all. But if I pace myself in my own life, maybe I’ll miss out on things—things that I put off for a later, more convenient occasion. What have I been putting off? I’ve been putting off living a life that is more engaged with the needs of the world, dealing with it by giving money instead of time. A marathon has a fixed route and a definite finish. Life is not so simple—you choose your route to some extent, and the finish is pretty much in God’s hands. Some people die, as we say, too soon. Some people feel as though they live too long. It’s a lot tougher to plan life. You can’t really visualize life.

Finally it’s time to move to the starting line. People group themselves roughly according to when they plan to finish—fastest in the front, slowest in the back—so the slow runners don’t obstruct the fast runners. I’m around the middle. I look at the faces of those around me. Men and women, older and younger, white and black, fit and fat. It’s amazing how all kinds of people run in marathons. It’s not only for athletes any more. Thousands of God’s children. Where I am—in the middle—runners are not looking to win. They are looking to finish—in whatever time they have set for themselves. There will be battles out here today, but they won’t be decided head to head. They’ll be decided in the head...and in the heart—of each one running. Can I make it? Can I meet the goal I’ve set for myself. Am I up to this test? Will I endure? Do I have what it takes? “Let us run with determination,” says the writer to the *Hebrews*. That’s what we are all thinking—let us run with determination. All God’s children.

People are bunched together, but there’s no pushing or shoving, because your own time doesn’t start until you cross the starting line. That’s why we have the timing chip—to track our own time. They give you a little plastic chip about the size of a quarter, and a plastic twisty to hold it on your shoe. The last time I used the twisty was the New York marathon. About halfway through the race another runner and I bumped into each other going into a water stop. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but when I finished, my timing chip was missing. It must have gotten dislodged from my shoe at that water stop. My official time turned out to be about 6 hours! Some slower runner apparently found the chip later and brought it in. Ever since then I’ve laced the chip into my shoe so it can’t get dislodged. When God opens the Book of Life, I want my time to be right!

The first half of a marathon is pretty easy. In fact, the biggest challenge is to keep from going too fast. My friend Bob has a stopwatch and a GPS system when he runs. At any moment he can tell exactly how far he’s gone (to the foot), exactly how long he’s been running, what his current speed is, and what his estimated finish time is at that speed. He doesn’t have any trouble. I, on the other hand, work things like that out in my head. People sometimes ask me, “What do you think about running by yourself for over 4 hours? Don’t you get bored?” Well, partly I keep myself occupied calculating all these kinds of things in my head. I also spend time monitoring my body—how are my feet feeling, especially my toes? How is my breathing? How is my heartbeat? Am I drinking enough? When do I eat my next gel pack? Do I need to go to the bathroom? Frankly, that is the worst issue to deal

with. If I have timed my eating right that morning, and if my body has cooperated, I won't have to make any bathroom stops. But sometimes I do.

Many runners have an iPod. I don't. I do sing to myself though. And marathons usually have some live or recorded music playing at various points along the way. By far the best song to hear along the route is "It's a Beautiful Day," by U2. It's a fabulous running song. But the important thing is to get into a good pace, and maintain it. Getting into a good rhythm is important in lots of situations—not just running. I wonder if you'd help me on this by tapping your feet while I run a bit here. The carpet isn't great, but we'll have to make do. Okay now, clap every fourth beat. See if you can get the pace of your breathing to match the rhythm. Sometimes I stop thinking when I'm running and just meditate. This is a natural way to do that. If you want to run in place with me, please feel free to get up and do that—or not.

As I said, I sometimes sing to myself. I'll sing a line, and then ask all the women and children to join me in repeating that line, then all the men will join us in repeating it again, and then we'll all sing the last line together. Don't worry—you'll know this:

Guide my feet, while I run this race....

'Cuz I don't want to run this race in vain.

But now, this isn't just *my* race, it's a race we are all in, so let's change the words a little this time:

Guide my feet, while **we** run this race...

'Cuz **we** don't want to run this race in vain.

Hold my hand...

Stand by me...

I'm your child...

Guide my feet...

'Cuz **we** don't want to run this race in vain.

You're thinking we must be finished by now. But you're wrong. We're at 20 miles. We've been running now about 3:20. We're about halfway there. Not in distance or time, but in expenditure. Whatever you want to call it—emotional, spiritual, energy expenditure. Whatever you've put out so far, you're gonna have to put out that much again. Now it gets interesting. Your training got you this far, but something else is gonna have to get you home. Something you can't really train for. Some people call this the "wall" or "hitting the wall", but I haven't experienced it like a wall. It's just like a slow leak. You realize you are running out...running low....

In the New York City Marathon, I experienced this part as a tingling on the top of my head and the ends of my fingers. That's bad. It means your blood is not getting enough oxygen to all the parts of your body. It happens if it is too hot—already in the 70's—or if you've been running too fast. You can't keep going like that. You have to adjust.

Life can get like that. You know you can't maintain. Maybe life is like that for you now. If not you, probably someone you know. While Kathy and I don't have financial worries, we have worries. My job produces a lot of stress; Kathy worries about her calling. These various kinds of things weigh on you. They are hard to escape; interfere with your sleep; tighten your neck. After my divorce, 18 years ago, I took up running, precisely to deal with that kind of stress. When I was on the Montgomery County School Board, some 8 years ago, I took up *long-distance* running! Some times you have to make a change. Usually your body tells you this—if you can listen.

But if I'm lucky, and my pace has been ok, I just need to maintain. The problem is that I'm running out. Here comes a water stop. It's not really a *stop*—but a place to grab a cup of water or Powerade. You drink it while you are running, or walking. Walking feels good now—a lot better than running. Maybe I should just walk for awhile....

But that's a thought you can't afford to have. You can't ask yourself whether you should walk. It's too tempting, because the answer will be Yes. My only hope is to block out the question. To focus on something else.

My model runner is Emil Zatopek—a runner from Czechoslovakia. He ran in the 1952 Olympics and won the Gold Medals in the 5K, 10K and the marathon. That is a feat that has never been equaled. When he ran, the Czech fans would chant "Za-to-pek, Za-to-pek". I sometimes chant that mantra to myself: Za-to-pek, Za-to-pek. You have to move to another realm. Different people do this different ways. I would describe it as sinking into my body. I become my body. I no longer have a separate mind thinking about my body. I have to stop thinking. I just am my body.

The writer of *Hebrews* puts it by saying (12:2): "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus." Or, as the spiritual puts it: "Woke up this morning with my mind, Stayed on Jesus." Of course, we're not just waking up. In fact we've been up now for about 8 hours, and running for 4 hours. So let's sing it as:

Running this race with my mind, stayed on Jesus...

Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah.

Stayed on Jesus. Stayed on Jesus. However you do it—fixing on Jesus, or some mantra, or on sheer nothingness—this is the point at which spirituality truly begins. Now you have to stop monitoring your body—for fear of what you'll discover! Now you have to stop asking yourself questions—for fear of what you'll answer. Now you just go. You just go. You just go.

This altered state of mind can be a problem. In one race in Lynchburg where I was quite familiar with the course, I knew there was a long uphill climb near the end of the race, and I told Kathy I'd like her to stand at a certain point along the hill, because having her there to cheer and encourage me would really help. After the race I asked her why she hadn't been there. She had, but I hadn't noticed! In another race, when my friend Bob finished before I did, he came back and ran with me the last few hundred yards of the race. But I didn't realize that until I saw the picture of me at the finish with Bob right next to me. I thought he only joined me *after* I crossed the line! Really, it can be scary. And, believe me, Kathy didn't appreciate me not noticing her after she followed all my directions! Sometimes people say: "Let go and let God." You have to let go. But when you really do that, you lose other things—like your peripheral attention.

Now you become stripped down. You have no defenses left—they have all been expended. You are drained, and all emotions come to the surface. I am not an emotional person, generally. Or maybe I don't let my emotions show. In any case, I no longer have what it takes to keep my emotions inside. Reason is gone and emotions are left. Defenses are gone and you are exposed. Your spirit expands—and you overflow with love, or is it anger? Uncontrolled, undefined emotion runs through you. Emotion draws you onward. You fix on a telephone pole—and emotion draws you toward it. Love for a bit of God's creation, or perhaps anger that it still separates you from the finish. Love pulls you, anger propels you. You fix on Jesus—and emotion draws you forward—love of Jesus, or perhaps anger for not bringing this to an end. The barrier between you and God has fallen, the

barrier between you and the world has fallen. You dissolve into something larger. Just what some mystics tell us.

At this point—maybe a mile from the end—it is impossible to say what happens. Isaiah puts it like this (40:31): “those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles: they will run and not get weary.” Clearly Isaiah had never run a marathon. No one runs without getting weary. But...but, we *can continue* to run. We can even rise on wings like eagles. There is a magnetism near the end of a race. For one thing, many more people stand near the finish. The writer to the *Hebrews* puts it this way (12:1): “We have this large crowd of witnesses around us.” This makes so much difference. When you are running low...running on empty, think on those witnesses, those who have gone before, those waiting for us at the finish. I have made it a habit to speed up for the last few hundred yards of a race. It seems impossible, but it happens. I also encourage the crowd to cheer, by raising my arms (like eagle wings)—no easy feat at that point. And the sheer fact of speeding up and passing runners gets a reaction too. And then you are there...and you can stop. This is when there is no difference between crying and rejoicing—they both happen at once.

I think all runners will agree that the best part of running is stopping. Runners are like people who beat their head against the wall—it feels so good when you stop! Amazing but true. *Hebrews* sums it all up (12:1-2): “Let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of god’s throne.”

Friends, we are all running a race. Not always a literal one as I have described. But a race nonetheless. Not a race against others, but a race for our better selves. It is not all marked out in advance, and we don’t even know how long it will be. But we do know that it will require endurance. Endurance beyond what we can imagine. But we *can* endure. Not by means that are familiar to us. But by means that are *available* to us. There is no explaining them—they are the objects of faith. Faith that is known by a great cloud of witnesses. Witnesses who have endured before us. Witnesses who bear us up. Not only witnesses who are dead and gone on before us, but witnesses who are with us here and now. This is the church—the true church. The cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. The community who enables us to endure what life presents, the community who bears us home, and brings us peace. With this community—enveloped by this cloud of witnesses—we run this race. And we won’t run this race in vain. Amen.

James C. Klagge
Asbury United Methodist Church
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