

“Racing with Rats, Horses, and God”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Jer. 12:1-5; Hebrews 11:29-12:3

When Simon Kindleysides, a world-record-setting marathoner, registered for his first marathon in London last year, he was 34, already older than many who run the grueling 26.2-mile race. Age was the least of his problems, however. Five years earlier, a benign brain tumor had rendered him paralyzed from the waist down. Since then, he has maneuvered through his days by wheelchair. But before he developed the tumor, he had always dreamed of running a marathon, so he decided that he should not let that dream die just because his situation had changed. With the help of a battery-operated exoskeleton which enabled him to walk, Simon completed his first marathon walking, not running, one step at a time. There were many times he wanted to quit. But he was doing the walk for a cause he believed in, a brain tumor charity, and also did not want to let down the eight people who walked with him, cheering him on and changing the batteries in the exoskeleton every four miles. So, he pushed through the pain and frustration and kept on going. In the end, he finished last; but he finished triumphant.¹

Now most of us here have never run or walked a marathon and never will. But that doesn't mean that we aren't familiar with what it feels like to race in a way that tests us in the extreme. Every working parent who knows what it's like to wake up in the morning with a to-do list 20-items long, only to have the car breakdown, or a child throw-up, or a deadline shift wreak havoc on your already overly-scheduled day, knows what it's like to race. Every person who has ever battled cancer or other life-threatening disease knows what it is like to have to grit your teeth, and find the will to keep moving forward even when your body says it's had enough. And if we aren't racing from one task to another through our busy days, or running away from hurt toward the dream of health, then many, if not most of us, still spend the rest of the time, racing against each other. Our culture is fiercely competitive. The pressure to keep up with the Joneses, or to beat the other guy for the promotion, or to make it to the finish line in school with honors is real and very stressful, and why sometimes people refer to life as a rat race. According to online dictionaries, the term “rat race” refers to “a fierce or competitive way of living” when, like a rat in a maze, “it feels as if you are at the mercy of other people or other forces.”²

The prophet Jeremiah felt this way while he was serving God. Being a prophet is hard work because it's almost guaranteed that your audience won't want to hear what you have to say. The prophets in the Old Testament were charged by God to convey God's displeasure with the way people were living. You can only go around telling people, “You're doing it wrong” so many times before people get grumpy; and as we heard last week, you can only say, “God wants you to be conquered and go into exile” so many times before someone says, “Conquer this!” and dumps you in a cistern to die. Today's lesson comes long before the cistern in Jeremiah's life,

¹ “*The final finisher: The inspiring stories of last-place marathon runners,*” CNN Wire, posted Nov. 5, 2018, retrieved Aug. 13, 2019 from <https://wgno.com/2018/11/05/the-final-finisher-the-inspiring-stories-of-last-place-marathon-runners/>

² See “*Rat Race,*” The Grammarist, <https://grammarist.com/idiom/rat-race/>

however, nearer the beginning of his ministry, when he still held out some hope that the people would change their ways in response to his message. But clinging to that hope was getting harder and harder as his words fell on deaf ears; and Jeremiah was increasingly worried that the bad rats were winning the race, and going to kill him in the end. Accordingly, today's text begins with Jeremiah venting a bit to God.

One of the reasons I love Jeremiah more than all the other prophets is because of his venting. He was not a holier-than-thou, stoic mouthpiece of God who never wavered in his enthusiasm and trust. He was a regular human being called to an impossible job, who felt fear and frustration just like the rest of us, and lamented and vented as much as he praised and prophesied. In so doing, he showed us that it is OK for us to vent to God too when we are overwhelmed. Eugene Peterson captured the essence of today's lament beautifully in his *Message* translation. "Why do bad people have it so good?" Jeremiah demands. "Why do con artists make it big?" (Jer. 12:1-2 *Message* trans.). He felt as if the bad guys were getting away with murder and prospering from oppressing others; meanwhile God wasn't giving him the tiniest of breaks. We've all felt this at one time or another, and many people are feeling this a lot lately. So, after hearing his questions, our ears and eyes race ahead to find God's answer, hoping, as Jeremiah did, that God will give us some assurance that the bad guys will get what they deserve, or that God will at least explain why God allows the world to be the way it is. In other sections of the Bible, God offers such assurances. But not this one. In this one, unfortunately, God's response comes back like a slap in the face: "Jeremiah, if you're worn out in this footrace with men, what makes you think you can race against horses? Oh and P.S.: Don't trust anyone now, not even your family." Like God's less-than-sympathetic-response to Job's questioning, these words are not what we want to hear. Instead of comforting him, God told Jeremiah that things were going to get much worse before they got better. Instead of sparing him, God's only advise to Jeremiah was that he better start racing differently, or he was going to get run over.

Jeremiah never stopped lamenting, but by the time he ended up in the cistern near the end of his ministry, he had figured out how to run his own race differently; so, he did not despair while he was stuck in the mud. The secret to his staying sane and hopeful in the rat race, and to not being squashed under horses' hooves, the secret to his remaining faithful all the way to the finish line no matter what happened around him and to him, was to recognize three things:

- 1) The presence of challenges in his life did not mean the absence of God.
- 2) When he ran with God, instead just away from harm or against human competitors, he didn't actually have to be more powerful than rats or faster than horses. God was both, and was with him. So, he could even walk if he needed to and still be triumphant.
- 3) In order to run with God, he couldn't give up, notwithstanding the long odds of success, because God was persistent and has no intention of quitting before the race was over.

In the Hebrew, this last lesson in particular almost visibly leaps off the pages of the *Book of Jeremiah*, as Eugene Peterson has observed. The word "persistently" or *hashkem* in Hebrew, appears about 14 times in the whole of the Old Testament, but eleven of those times are in *Jeremiah*. Over and over God says in frustration and disbelief: "But I *persisted* in sending you

instruction... I *persisted* in warning you... I persistent in loving you although you would not listen....”³ In effect, the comfort in the *Book of Jeremiah* comes not from God saying that there will be no difficulties for the faithful, but from the knowledge that God is just as frustrated by the difficulties and challenges as we are. The assurance God gives us in the *Book of Jeremiah* is not that the race will be easy, but that those who run with God will finish it triumphantly because God is with them. God has dreamed of a world in which human beings lived faithfully and peacefully with each other and God, and is not going to stop until that dream comes true, regardless of the odds. God persisted, so Jeremiah learned to do the same. He got up every morning for 23 years to go running, not away from danger, or in competition with the bad guys, but with God. He learned to trust that God would provide him with fresh batteries when he needed them, and just kept on going.

In our New Testament lesson today, the author of *Hebrews* encourages his readers with a similar message. They were Christians living during a time when persecution was on the rise, and the delay in Jesus’ return was weakening people’s faith. “Run with perseverance the race that is set before you”, the author writes, after providing a chapter long summary of all the famous ancestors in the faith who, like Jeremiah, had done just that. As preacher/author Tom Long has observed, Hebrews 11 is a sermon that reads like it was delivered in what we would now consider to be classic African-American preaching style. Starting with the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, it builds to a crescendo with every paragraph, so that by the time you get to today’s lection, an excited call-response is implicit in the text: “And what more should I say?” “Tell it all, brother tell it all!” “O brothers and sisters, time would fail me to tell it all.” “No brother, tell it all!” “I’d have to tell about Gideon and Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets...”⁴ The text is designed to get the hearers so revved up that by the time it gets to chapter 12, they are either tying on their shoes to join the race, or surging ahead with a second wind even before the instruction to run with perseverance have been given.

The race in Hebrews isn’t a rat race, however, nor is it a horse race. Instead it is a spiritual relay race that continues from generation to generation. We all get to carry the baton for a while, and then pass it on. No one has to run the whole race, just his or her part; no one has to be first or best either, finishing faithfully is all that matters. Furthermore, when God’s spiritual runners finish their leg of the race, they don’t disappear; instead they stick around to cheer on the new runners. Like a cloud of witnesses, like the crowd in a packed arena, they cheer and encourage, doing the wave, calling out runners’ names, and pointing to the finish line where Jesus awaits with open arms. Their cheers act like new batteries for the weary, and their witness reminds us that even though the race is really an obstacle course, we can get through it with God’s help.

What a difference it makes when you feel as if you are being cheered on instead of

³ See Peterson, Eugene H., *Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 112-115.

⁴ Long, Tom, *Hebrews, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 123-24.

chased from behind! When I was in middle school, several of my friends had siblings with disabilities. So, I joined them in volunteering for the Special Olympics. Our job was to be cheerleaders and huggers. Each athlete was assigned a cheerer, so every one of the competitors could hear someone routing for him and her, and so that whenever he or she crossed the finish line, even if it was in last place, there was a warm hug and congratulations waiting. It was one of the best jobs I have ever had. If you're ever depressed, I encourage you to try it. You could see what a difference it made in the minds and hearts of the competitors to be supported in that way; and their success feels like your own.

One of the things that I love about the litany of faith heroes in Chapter 11 is that not unlike in the Special Olympics, the ones being praised are not typical heroes, they are imperfect runners at best. Gideon doubted God repeatedly. Barak wouldn't go into battle unless Deborah would go with him. Samson defeated his adversaries, but was otherwise an unsportsman-like arrogant, violent, fool. Jephthah made a horrible, impetuous promise that resulted in the death of his own daughter. David was the perpetrator in Bathsheba's "Me-too"-movement moment; and so on and so on. All of the people on the list did some very faithful things and some less than faithful things. All of the people on the list suffered challenges, setbacks, and worse; and all of them lived in times when the people felt as though the world had gone mad and the rats were carrying the day. The people in Chapter 11 are on the hero list not because they were perfect or fearless, but because they didn't quit. They put their trust in God, and ran in faith as best as they could.

All of these people, along with innumerable others, are in the cloud of witnesses which is currently cheering us on. They are witnesses in both senses of the word— in the sense that they are watching us and cheering us, and in the Christian sense that they, in their lifetimes, witnessed to the persistent love of God and to God's plan for humanity. If only we could hear and see them, then we all might finish the race faster and more faithfully! But simply knowing that they are there, knowing that they are holding out batons to us that we have to carry for our lifetimes can make a difference. We don't have to save the world. We don't have to be better and stronger and faster than others. All we have to do is the best we can to finish our leg of the race faithfully. Even if it takes a team of people to get us there, and even if we come in last in our stretch of the race, we will still be heroes to the witnesses who know all too well from their own experiences how hard the race is. And just by finishing the race, we can feel triumphant because we will have witnessed to the persistence of our God, who is determined to love us into wholeness and peace, no matter how long it takes.

There is a movie-version of a bestselling book called The Art of Racing in the Rain⁵ in theaters these days. I won't be seeing the movie because I don't knowingly go to movies in which dogs die. (That's not a spoiler; it's clear from the beginning of the book that it's coming.) I also know from reading the book the dog's death is only one of the tear-jerker moments in the story. But the protagonist in the book, a race car driver named Denny, handles the heartbreak and challenge in the story with remarkable grace. He manages to keep moving forward in hope and

⁵ Garth, Stein, The Art of Racing in the Rain (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

faith despite multiple obstacles and huge losses. His motto is “your car goes where your eyes go,” so he always “plays the long game” looking ahead to the prize he wants at the finish line, instead of focusing on the obstacles that block his way. The author of *Hebrews* advocated a similar strategy, encouraging his readers to focus on the prize of eternity with God which awaits us at the finish line. That may be helpful to you; it is to many people. But personally, I don’t want to spend my whole life looking forward to when I die. I would much prefer to focus on living now in faith. So, instead of focusing on the finish line, I envision Jesus jogging or walking along side me, like those in the team that helped Simon Kindleysides. There are plenty of biblical texts in which he assured us he is with us always; and if you set your pace to his, his persistence can inspire your own. Then the whole race becomes both less frantic and less frightening. Let us pray, therefore, as the author of *Hebrews* did: “May the Holy Spirit lift our drooping hands and strengthen our weak knees, and make straight paths for our feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (Heb. 12:12-13). Amen