

So, Keep Going – Hebrews 11:29-34, 12:1-2

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This has always been one of the most inspirational texts in Scripture. And that's largely because of the many examples placed before us of people who had great faith and did great things because of it: people like Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, and the prophets. "They," says the writer of Hebrews, "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire...and were made strong out of weakness."

Their examples make a case for keeping faith, a faith that could lead to big things.

The problem we have with this text (if we have a problem with it) is that it may play a role in our telling ourselves, "Well, we could never do that! We could never do what these people did, or Moses did in leading the Israelites out of bondage or what Abraham did in leaving everything behind to move his family where God told them to go. They, too, did these things because they had a similar faith.

We can't live up to that standard, we think. And it's largely because we have this feeling of unworthiness. And that usually comes from our past mistakes or what we believe are lapses in our faith journeys—moments when we don't feel as though we've measured up.

Do I need to ask all of us to recall the moments when we weren't at our best for God? The times when we stumbled, felt our yearning for God waning, or doubted that God even existed.

We wouldn't need much time for recall; it seems the distant times are always on the tips of our tongues.

Here's a bit of hopeful news, however. At the beginning of this text, the writer of Hebrews speaks of how, by faith, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (11:29). This particular act of faith might be a surprising one, because, back in chapters 3 and 4, the author depicts the generation who left Egypt with Moses rather negatively (they were never able to enter their time of eternal rest because of their unbelief). There in those chapters, they are faithless and disobedient (3:19; 4:11); but here, in chapter 11, they act "by faith."

This dynamic portrayal of the wilderness generation illustrates the fact that the bar for the author of Hebrews is not perfection. In Hebrews 11, the ancestors are commended for singular acts that demonstrate their trust in God — despite their muddled pasts.

It's so encouraging to us — our pasts are certainly muddled too. Yet, like the Hebrews, we're still capable of acts of faith that reflect the trust we place in God today. No matter our yesterdays, today is still another opportunity to be faithful.

If nothing else, the writer's words tell us to keep going. We haven't been disqualified from the race. Instead, the writer says, keep running the race that is before us. We're still eligible — always eligible — for the promised victory that God provides.

Verse 12 contains this famous line the writer includes to encourage perseverance: "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Every preacher who's preached a career's worth of sermons seizes upon that line and is beckoned every time he or she

preaches it to include a story about the diligence, the endurance, the commitment of a runner to get to the finish line.

Sometimes it's a famous runner like Olympian Wilma Rudolph back in the mid-20th century. Sometimes it's Jesse Owens, who like Rudolph a black athlete, endured and became a champion despite the bitterness and obstacles of racism in the 1930s.

Sometimes the running illustration from the preacher comes from a lesser-known athlete like Dave Wottle, who was an American middle-distance athlete in the early 1970s. At some point in his running career, he started wearing a white cap during his races. He first wore the cap to manage his long hair, keeping it out of his face during training and competitions. Over time, the cap became a distinctive part of his identity, and he continued to wear it for good luck throughout his career. And distinguished it was, including a come-from-behind finish in the 800-meter race to take the gold in the 1972 Munich Olympics. His performance is celebrated as one of the greatest comebacks in athletic history.

Perseverance.

Others relate better to perseverance stories that deal with battling illness, like the story of Rachel Oxborn, a Hodgkins Lymphoma survivor, who wrote that:

"Many times during and after treatment I couldn't help but think "Stupid cancer, you almost took my life. You took my hair. I still feel like crap sometimes, probably from all of the chemicals I've been exposed to. You made me vulnerable. [You] could come back again. Forever I will have to get scans and be reminded that I had you in the first place. This is why I have chosen to forgive cancer, because harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping your enemy will die. It does no good to hold onto

bitterness, to have a grudge weighing you down. Cancer is sad, it is grueling and terrifying, but it has been a phenomenal teacher that I have loved to hate and then learned to accept. So cancer, I forgive you."

For her, forgiving cancer was that survivor's unique way of persevering.

For others of us, though, who haven't run a race on a track in years or decades and can't relate to it as much, or for those of us who haven't had to endure illness, neither of those examples of perseverance really applies.

Instead, maybe it's the words of the late Rev. John Buchanan, a Presbyterian pastor, who once in a sermon referred to the movie "Grand Canyon," a story of ordinary people being saved by ordinary things like "kindness, consideration, honesty, loyalty," things that are "as a matter of fact, not simple at all, but always miracles."

Buchanan then quotes Karl Rahner, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, who said, "To keep on through dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride (Meditations on Hope and Love, 22).

Buchanan continued on about the ordinariness of the gospel: "that's where it is for most of us, slugging it out day by day, trying to make ends meet, and to be as good as we can at what we do, and to use what we have responsibly, trying to be honest and kind and just."

He then finished his sermon with one more quote from Rahner: "When we are true to our conscience...God's kingdom comes to us just where we are, living quite ordinarily, carrying on

patiently." -With thanks to John M. Buchanan,"The Ordinariness of the Christian Life," 19 January 1992, Chicago, Illinois).

"God's kingdom comes to us just where we are, living quite ordinarily, carrying on patiently." That's an illustration of perseverance we ALL can relate to, as hard as it is.

No matter the situation, all of us who are in this race have two things going for us. First, according to the Hebrew writer, we have a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.

We run the race of perseverance not by ourselves but by those who come alongside and get us through, who keep us from stumbling, who when we teeter prop us back up and keep us going. This happens in a whole host of ways—prayers, words of encouragement, their personal stories who serve as inspiration. We know them and they love us and they keep us going. They keep us up as we go through tough times and they keep us going in the journey of faith.

And, second, leading the way in this race, says the writer of Hebrews, is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith—Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the one who goes before us, like a pioneer or trailblazer, and that work enables or generates our faith. He also perfects our faith, ensuring that it reaches maturity. Jesus suffered and died because of his trust in God. "For the sake of the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2).

Our bad track record of failure or intermittent lapses of faith doesn't cancel us out from still running this race. Like the Hebrews themselves who first stumbled badly but then pulled it together to cross the Red Sea, we can still pull it together and trust that God will lead us. We remember that great cloud of witnesses

surrounding us and inspiring us, and we see Christ out ahead of us leading the way. Because of all of this, we can make it on this journey of faith.

So, we keep going. In our own individual journeys, but also as a church family. We keep going—in the face of sometimes daunting odds for flourishing or even survival. We keep going for the sake of the kingdom of God, for the sake of God's church—not our church, but God's church.

Let's keep going. Let's run with perseverance the race we're still in.