

# Running the Race

sermon digest

February 19, 2012

Psalm 90; 2 Timothy 4:1-8

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This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Like Miriam, let us sing with gladness, for our God triumphs over evil and oppression. Like Hannah, let us pray with grateful hearts, for the Lord our God hears our prayer. Like Jacob, let us wrestle with God, for out of such struggles new faith is born. Like Abraham, let us respond to God's calling, for in faith's journey we find our lives. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

These are the words with which we entered worship this morning. Drawn together by Peggy Haymes, they celebrate the biblical story that gives us our bearings. Like Miriam, like Hannah, like Jacob and Abraham we are called to our feet. No living room couch potato here. No sitting on the sidelines waiting to see if something passes by on the religion scene that catches our fancy. No, what we encounter here is open and honest, an enterprise that calls from us our best efforts. We find ourselves called to attention, called to be and to act. Called to stretch ourselves from the tops of our heads to the tips of our toes. Called not to an accommodating yawn of passive approval, knowing that we will, after all, have an opportunity to hear those words again. No, we find ourselves called to reach down deep within ourselves to sing with gladness, pray with fervently grateful hearts, and wrestle with God as if the contest really matters. We find ourselves called to enter faith's journey as if our lives depended on it.

And it does. Our lives depend on it. Not in the sense of the fearful theology on which so many of us grew up. Not in the sense that an angry, judgmental God is waiting for an opportunity to snuff out our very lives, but in the sense that faith's journey catches up what matters most in life. It is about what finally defines our lives and gives them direction. It is about what gives us strength in those times when the ground seems to disappear beneath our feet. It is about what compels us to get up on ordinary mornings and live lives of faithful integrity. It is about open honesty before God.

**We approach God in openness and honesty or we do not approach God at all.** In her book *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris recalls her experience of worship as a child when worship meant two things: "dressing up and singing." The singing part came naturally. The dressing up part, on the other hand, became a problem. More than just an outward thing, dressing up had inner connotations. Just as she was required to be scrubbed clean, bright and shining outwardly, she came to recognize and rebel against "the insidious notion" that in order to meet God, she first had to scrub herself clean inwardly and put on a bright and shining spiritual face. She, in other words, needed "to be a firm and even cheerful believer" before daring to "show my face in 'His' church" [in S. Balentine, *Review & Expositor*, Summer, 2003, p. 475].

Sometime later in adulthood, Norris found her way back to faith through praying the Psalms and encountering there an open, honest integrity of faith she could admire and seek to emulate. After two nine-month sojourns in a Benedictine abbey that followed the monastic tradition of reading and singing through the Psalms every three or four weeks, she saw something she had not seen as a child. She found that not only does "God behave differently in the psalms" than she had ever before imagined, but God's servants behave differently, too. Doubt, anger and "bold and incessant questioning of God" were all a part of the faith they offered God. Once she found permission to stand before the Holy One in all openness and honesty, giving voice to all that churned within her, she discovered a longing to remain in God's presence that has been with her to this day.

That's the way it is with the Psalms. Perhaps more than at any other point in scripture, the Psalms give voice to open, honest (not pretended) joy and equally, bold, crushing, excruciating doubt and anguish. You cannot—well, maybe you can, but you *should not* pray the Psalms without being fully awake, fully in touch with the pushes and pulls, the joys and the devastating experience of life. As Walter Brueggemann puts it,

Most of the Psalms can only be appropriately prayed by people who are living at the edge of their lives, sensitive to the raw hurts, the primitive passions, and the naive elations that are at the bottom of our life

[—Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 20].

The Psalms, you see, require a change of pace from our ordinary work-a-day, shuttered demeanor. I recall a trip to the bus station when I was a college student. I had just finished finals and was heading home for the holidays. I was running close on time. As I got in the taxi, I told the driver of my destination and my planned time of departure. He immediately got on the radio and told the dispatcher he was closing the cab, not picking up any other passengers and heading to the station. As I have remembered that incident over the years, it has spoken volumes about the way we tend to live our lives. We focus on the task at hand, whatever it may be, and close the doors of our hearts and lives from all distractions and get to work. That

may get the job done, but in the process, we often close our lives off from the moment. We anesthetize ourselves to all of life that surges around and within us. Joy and grief, family and friendship are put at arm's length for a more convenient time.

The Psalms, on the other hand, hit us smack dab in the middle of life. Far from the closely managed world we seek to maintain in an effort to do what we think is our best work, the Psalms, in Brueggemann's words, "move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy One." Far from merely putting on a properly scrubbed, respectable, "religious" appearance, they are in touch with the chaos that surges around and within us. Contrary to the cultural etiquette that counsels us to "go along to get along" or the brave face we seek to put on things in an effort to avoid dealing with them, the Psalms are about the frank, frightening, healing acknowledgment in the presence of God and one another that things are not as they should be. They address God by name and await a response. They do not conceal the truth about the way things are but neither do they concede that this is the whole truth and all that we should hope for. Viewed in light of the God who invites us to pray, the eternal God we know to be the full embodiment of steadfast love, the harsh realities of our personal lives and of the lives of the suffering humanity that fills this world take on an urgency that will not let us go. And so the psalmist fairly shouts in anger, in anguish, in frustration to the one and only one who can maintain some semblance of hope for newness, hope for a future.

**Our day-to-day strength to confront conflicts and frustrations in the present and our hope for the future rest in the God who is faithful.** Enter, then, the psalmist of Psalm 90. If you will notice, directly underneath the number or title of the psalm, your Bible puts the notation, "a prayer of Moses, the man of God." More than an indication of authorship, for Moses probably was not the author, ascribing the psalm to Moses is an interpretive note that we should read Psalm 90 in light of the life and context of Moses. Psalm 90 is the first psalm of Book IV in the Psalms. The preceding section, Book III, consists of numerous psalms lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem; and Psalm 89, the immediately preceding psalm, ends with the announcement that God is withdrawing from God's covenant with David. Is all, then, lost? Is all hope gone?

Book III reeks with the anguish of exile and Book IV, beginning with Psalm 90, looks back to the time of Moses, to the time when there was no land, no monarchy, no Temple; and yet, there was faith, strong, exemplary faith. The dwelling place, the place of security for Moses and the only reliable dwelling place for God's people in every generation, the opening words of Psalm 90 proclaims, is God and God alone. Despite evidences to the contrary, despite Moses' wilderness wanderings, despite the anguish of the exile, despite the fleeting nature of human life that on the surface seems little more than "toil and trouble," despite all of the conflicts and hardships that seem to bear witness to the contrary, God is faithful. God can be trusted.

"So teach us to count our days," the psalmist prays; and perhaps recalling the experience of manna in the wilderness that satisfied the people of the Exodus and sustained them for the day, the prayer continues: "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love." That, the psalmist seems to say, will be enough. In the manner of Jesus who prayed "give us this day our daily bread," faith proceeds forward one day, one step at a time. Faith is not about being scrubbed and shiny and well dressed on the inside. It is not about pretending that things are as they are not. It is not about denying our experiences of conflict and struggle. It is not about denying the soul wrenching nature of our doubts. No matter how much we may wish it otherwise, faith is not about taking one pill in the morning and knowing nothing but spiritual bliss our whole life long. Faith is about living out our faithfulness one day, one challenge at a time.

Fast forward now to the Apostle Paul some six centuries later. Sitting in a prison cell anticipating that death is coming soon, he writes to encourage his young protégé, Timothy. Reflecting back over three decades of service to Christ, he makes a confession. This life of service, he acknowledges, has not been all fun and games. It has, however, been a contest, a contest from start to finish. Picture the gladiator in the ring of Roman circuses, fighting for his life. Picture the fighter or better yet, the marathon runner. It has been a contest from beginning to end. But hear this, the word of victory:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

And that, Paul seems to say to the young Timothy, is enough.

Yesterday I was out walking my dogs when I encountered a young runner. He looked about the age of

my grandson Kye, who is also a runner, and for that reason, I greeted him warmly. I was pleased when he looked up mid-stride and flashed the warmest, happiest smile. I recognized there something of what I have seen in Kye—the look of joy that knows the exhilaration as well as the pain of running. I recognized there something of what I know in myself and have seen in my fellow travelers as well—the joy of fulfillment and anticipation in running the marathon of faith.

Guide our feet, O God, as we run this race; and thanks be to you for the quiet joy that sustains us as we go.