

“Let Us Run the Race with Perseverance”

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Joshua 24:11-15; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Sunday, July 27th, 2008

You eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. Did you know that? That’s what Joshua says to the nomadic Israelites as they prepare to let go of their wilderness wandering and settle down into a land with boundaries and fences and borders, a nation that they can call their own.

They are in a transition, a time of great change. They had wandered for a generation, for forty years we are told, and in that time of transition they had left much of their Egyptian slave mentality and lifestyle far, far behind. Now I don’t know of any person or people that would choose to wander around in a hostile wilderness for any length of time, but that is what it took for these children of Abraham to discover some very important things. They discovered that they had a God, and their God was much, much different from any of the gods worshiped by other people of their day. This God gave them a law and struck an agreement, or covenant, with them. That wilderness time was difficult and arduous, but there was nothing like it for forming an identity and a culture all their own. They learned who they were, and whose they were out there in that desert with the blowing sand and the sparse water.

But now all that is about to change. They have arrived at the threshold of a land where they will live in real live houses instead of tents. They will live among other peoples, instead of among wild beasts and scorching desert. They will live around wells and springs, and they will not have to search an unknown horizon for water ever again. They will raise crops and animals that will give them food and clothing, and their days of scratching around to gather food will be no more. They are at a crossroad in their history, and Joshua, their leader, knows that. He knows that it will be tempting to abandon the God that they grew to love in the desert, as they settle into a new land and a new lifestyle. So he gathers the people together, and he stages this type of showdown, in which he challenges the people to deliberately and consciously and purposefully embrace God, even through these times of change and new things.

Joshua’s words remind them that no matter what their circumstance, no matter what kind of a lifestyle they hold, life is always a gift from a loving God. When they stumbled through the unknown desert, God gave them guidance, and food, and provision. It wasn’t fancy, but it sustained them. Any riches they received in that wilderness were in wisdom and spirituality and understanding rather than in material wealth. Now they are coming into a settled land, and they are reminded that this land is not of their making, but it is “...a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.” This land, and this planet, are a gift from a gracious God.

Now, just as those early Israelites became actual citizens of a land that they did not build and develop, you and I also live in a land that we did not build. It is a gift to us, as well. It is a gift ultimately from God, and you and I also eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that we did not plant. Except for a small few of us, I don't think any of us have hewn farmfields out of old growth forests here in Whatcom County. Somebody else did that before we were born. But now, in 2008, we eat the luscious berries and fruits and vegetables and the dairy products that are bountiful around us. You get my point, I hope. Not one of us can lay claim to the good life we live, at least not 100%, because it has come together in a magnificent orchestrated work at the direction of God. As the psalmist writes, "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it..." (*Psalms 24:1*).

And just as you and I cannot take credit for the bounty of the world around us, neither can we take credit for the faith that has been given to us. We eat the fruits of the labors of many who have come before us in the history of Christianity. Somebody made sure that Bellingham would have a church over a hundred years ago. That wasn't any of us! It was probably a combined effort of several Ladies Aid Society groups on the East Coast that raised money with their sewing projects and their special fundraising dinners to raise support for the Presbyterian Church's Board of Home Missions. They probably funded the first pastors who organized and chartered the Fairhaven Presbyterian Church, and helped it get on its feet and become self-sustaining, and then watched it change and grow into St. James Presbyterian Church. Now part of the work of St. James is to return the favor, and help support new ministries as they unfold around the neighborhood and the world.

But there were a lot of people that came before those Ladies Aid groups. The writer of Hebrews goes through a rehearsal of the history of the people who brought our faith into being. These are the "great cloud of witnesses" that surround us today. These are people too numerous to name who endured hardships and ridicule in order that others might come to know God. In our day and age, the baton is passed to you and I, so that we might join this great cloud of witnesses and run faithfully our own journey of faith, in order to pass it on to others in generations yet to come. Here is this church building and this Bible and this Communion Table, placed by many hands that have passed from our sight and sound into heavenly peace. It is entrusted to us as a gift to use for our nurture and joy, and so that we might faithfully pass these things on to others in our time, to the glory of Jesus Christ.

It has been my challenge and my deep joy to run the race of faith alongside of you for the last eleven years. It has been my challenge and my deep joy to be in solo parish ministry for the last twenty-four years. When I was a small girl, I was an odd duck in many ways. I wanted to be a missionary to Egypt when I was seven, and that was quite a dream for a while. When the other neighborhood kids were playing fort and capture the flag out in the woods, well, I would join in with them most of the time. But there were other times when I would go out to the woods by myself with some Sunday School

papers, and I would play “church” in the woods. There was a pretty little opening in the woods with a group of cedar trees arranged in a manner that looked to me like a chancel area, and that was my church in the woods. Yes, very nerdy, I know, and none of the other kids wanted to join me. But I would take the two dogs, Penny and Sam, and sometimes Smokey the cat, and I would direct them as my choir, and I would sing Sunday School songs and read Scriptures and Sunday School lessons, as they would wag their tails at me in hopes that I would give them Milkbone treats.

As I grew, I wanted to go into all kinds of careers, such as cancer research, Navy pilot, public school teacher, private piano teacher, newspaper journalist, and so forth. It was hard to pinpoint where my life would go. Then I saw a chaplain on the campus of my college, who happened to be a woman. Now I did not get to know her well, but it began to dawn on me that, if she could be ordained and called to be a pastor, then perhaps I could do that, too. You can probably guess how things unfolded after that.

I have been blessed to serve as your pastor. We have walked through many of life’s milestones together. We have labored together to find how God calls us to be “the Church reformed, and ever reforming” in our time and culture today. To me, working in the parish during these challenging days is where things are popping, as this is the place where all the theology and all the Biblical pondering hits everyday life.

Theology is always done in a context, we used to say at Princeton. That means that people don’t just sit around in a grand room and think a lot about how they think God should act and be. Now, there are people who do that, and they think that is discovering God. But it isn’t. Theology that really tells us something about God comes out of a context. That means that people in Central America who have struggled to discover how God can be on the side of the poor have seen a remarkable side of God. People who came out of the Bantustans and the Apartheid of South Africa have discovered an amazing side of God, as they have uncovered how God hears their cries, but overcomes their oppressors with forgiveness and justice.

We have together sought out the movement of God in our own context, and that is always exciting. I will miss our work together. Now, in all honesty, there was always at least one day a week when I would become frustrated over silly stuff. Someone didn’t get a key they felt outrageously entitled to hold, or someone threw a fit like a toddler because they didn’t get their way in leadership, or someone had nothing better to do than to take potshots at the staff or Session.

And those are the folks who don’t get it, and probably never will. And the rest of you need to “lay aside every weight...and run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” like the writer of Hebrews says. In other words, don’t get distracted by the silly stuff that can eat up time and energy. You have a race to run, and a lot of people before you have gone through a lot and have stayed on course in order to introduce us to the living God. And, a lot more people are coming in the future, and many are alongside of

us in these days who need to know the living God. Stay on track in the race. Run the race of faith with perseverance.

The good news is that St. James has an overflowing abundance of encouragers, of folks like Barnabas. Every time the silly stuff seemed to loom so large, here would come Rook Van Halm, with his humble manner and his gentle, faith-filled power. Or Helen Oliver-Leen would call, with her bright smile glowing over the phone. Or Jenny Sue would stop by with her outrageous stories and ability to put things in perspective. Or barking Surly would drag his owner, Jan Resick, into the church, thank goodness, because that little dog seems to know when we need Jan's balanced common sense around here. Then Hurricane Jack Drury would come by, sometimes with Tornado Tony Richter in his wake, and things would get moving! Then Bill Read would come by to pick up the pieces and set things right with his great wit and his ability to just always be there in the right place at the right time. And then Carla Shafer would call, with wisdom from all of her life experiences and her gentle humor and deep faith, and did I mention wisdom? Then Carolyn would appear, always cheerful and full of energy and refusing to say "I can't!" Then Margaret Miller brings boxes for Sunday School projects and gives her loving and common sense words. And then Peter van der Veen would stop by with the wisdom of ages and his never-flagging pursuit of justice in the name of Jesus Christ. Then, on Sunday morning, Anna Stipe, full of smiles and bursting with excitement, would peek around the door of my office, along with several other children, eager to be here and so ready to learn what the great cloud of witnesses has passed along to all of us. Then there is Peg, and Jean, and Sally, and Scott, and Renee, and Bob, and so very many of you.

Oh, I'm leaving so many of you unmentioned, but I hope you hear your name among all of those I have mentioned. I could spend the rest of the day telling stories about how you have all meant so much to me. You are an amazing part of the great cloud of witnesses. Do you know that Randy told me, about a year ago, that he likes to sit in the balcony and just look out over all of you, and see you gathered together on Sunday mornings. He likes to look at each of you, and think about how you are faithful, and wonderful, and inspiring. He likes to think of the things you have said and done in our study groups together, or in our different activities. He likes to think of how you have made your good mark in this world...each one in your own way. We will miss you all, and you will never know how much you have blessed our lives. You stood by us when my mother and my father were so ill, and then when they each died. You have been positive and prayerful and encouraging through my various surgeries and other medical adventures. You have given helpful input when it was needed, and you have given encouragement and we have struggled together to discern God's call in our world today.

At the same time, God has given me an unavoidably strong pull away from this type of ministry, and I am excited to see what is next for me. However, I am also excited for you, and for St. James. God needs you to be a voice of reason in a crazy world. God needs you to be the place for people from around the county to gather together to

listen for God's guidance in a world of many competing voices. God needs you to continue to run the race of faith with perseverance, and to continue to draw inspiration from the great cloud of witnesses. You don't have time to be distracted by lesser things. You can't afford to run down a rabbit trail. Though our time together has come to a close, we are still called to be a great witness for Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus, as the Scripture says, and run that race with determination and purpose. Amen.