

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

### **“Racing Through Life”**

A year ago this Sunday we loaded two cars with the essential items we didn't want United Van Lines to move for us and headed to Fort Wayne. This time around, it was a one-way trip. Our essential belongings consisted of our dog Mercy, clothes and toiletries to get us through the next few days, some fragile items I didn't want United to move, random junk we should have had United move, and Henry's saltwater fish tank which United refused to move. Henry's tank also included all the stuff he needed to get the tank set up here: saltwater from the old tank (yes, we moved water), fish, snails, and a pump to keep things circulating and alive. We were quite the site. It was a long day and I remember it was really hot when we got here, like St. Louis hot. But we all survived, even the fish.

Knowing I would need both the mental time and physical time to say goodbye, I took the month of May off. Somehow I thought that meant I would have time to relax, when in reality we spent the month racing around and wrapping up 18 years of life in St. Louis. Moving, saying goodbye, letting one realtor go and hiring a new one; replacing carpet in the old house at the new realtor's suggestion, and painting, painting, and more painting (I started joking to Terry that the guys at the paint store were my boyfriends – I'm going to see my boyfriends at Reineke, I'd joke!). IN May we got one kid graduated; opened a lake home in NH, sent kids off to NH and then TX. We hosted a farewell party and attended one—the list of things we did went on and on. Is it any wonder I was a nut, I remarked to Terry the other day as we were reminiscing. All of us had our moments, our moments of laughter but also our breakdowns along the way. I learned the true meaning of bittersweet. I laugh at myself now thinking that last May was somehow going to be calm. The truth is, it was hard. But I trusted God was leading us forward and through it. I'm very thankful today to not be where I was a year ago. Thanks for helping to make our transition a good one.

Trusting God to lead us forward and to help us endure difficulties is the name of the game in our Hebrews reading, in which the writer introduces a brand new

idea, the idea that faith is the courage to endure. The writer is trying to stiffen the spines of the little band of Christians struggling with hostility, ridicule, and shame. The people are down and out; they're having trouble holding onto hope because Jesus didn't return immediately like he'd promised he would. They're having a hard time following God because they're not sure where God is leading them.

So the writer tries to buoy their confidence by reminding them of all their ancestors who also doubted where God was leading them. Remember Moses and the people doubting if they'd ever get out of Egypt and away from Pharaoh's grip? They passed through the Red Sea by faith, the writer reminds them. Remember how no one thought the walls of Jericho would ever fall? They did, the writer says. Remember Rahab and Gideon, Barak and Samson, and a host of other ancestors who thought the end was near, that they'd never survive their hardship? By faith they did, the writer tells them.

But hearing that doesn't make it easy to endure. To use an analogy appropriate for today, when your car gets a flat or the muffler falls off, it's hard to keep trucking down the road at optimum speed.

Fifty years, Mario Andretti won the Indy 500. The year before that, he came in last. In fact, after his spectacular rookie year in 1965, he was plagued by just about every misfortune a driver could experience at the speedway.

Before winning in 1969, the car Andretti favored crashed just 2 days before the Indy 500 time trial. This meant his team had to use another car, the Hawk, which was only entered into the race so the team could have more garage space. The car tended to overheat, so they were doubtful it would make it to the finish line. During the race, Andretti himself had doubts that it would finish. And even after winning and looking at the gearbox and ball bearings, which were totally dried out, Andretti said he didn't think it would have made it one more lap.

Sometimes, you need to have faith.

Someone once said, "Faith is not intended for the times in life when dreams are achieved or when plans move along just as you intended. Faith is for the in-between times, the waiting times, the yearning-for-something times that last a lot longer than the successes and victories in our lives."

The truth is, faith often *starts in the dark*, with a word or command and not much more than that, and it *continues in the dark*, as decisions are made and the outcome still remains unclear.

Because faith is movement, not a clear line from A to Z. Faith is a confident wandering that clings to God's mercy and goodness, even when things look bleak. Faith is an up and down movement where sometimes things go smoothly and sometimes the road is bumpy.

This is the type of faith that characterized our Biblical ancestors. They are people who confidently wandered, who followed God even though the speedway was circuitous and they didn't see God's promises come to full fruition. Take Abraham and Sarah, for example – mentioned at the beginning of Hebrews chapter 11. They followed God's call to a foreign land and trusted God's promise to give them land and descendants more numerous than the stars, even though they had far surpassed childbearing age. Moses faithfully led the Israelites out of Egypt, wandering through the wilderness and desert for 40 years, but he never set one foot in the Promised Land.

The people mentioned today had faith even though their promises were unfulfilled. They had faith in the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. Sometimes it took a lot of discipline for them to have faith, because there was resistance from within and without. They also struggled and got tired because sometimes having faith is a battle. Sometimes we hit real lows and things aren't so easy.

But people of faith do not give up. They keep persevering. They keep running the race, as Hebrews' writer says.

Many years ago, on the first day of school, our oldest son Henry, who is a cross country runner, came home after practice grinning from ear to ear. "I ran a 6 minute mile," He exclaimed. For those of you who don't know, that's a big deal for a cross country runner. And it was an even bigger deal that the coach acknowledged his great run in front of the entire team, all 54 boys.

The next day after school he came home and exclaimed, "Coach told me to run with the guys trying out for varsity!" That was a really big deal for a sophomore runner.

The next day, he came home but this time, wasn't grinning from ear to ear. "How was practice?" I asked. "Not so good," he said. Hard. Tough. Hot. Tired.

Did he give up, not return to practice on the 4<sup>th</sup> day? No, he didn't. He went. And I think he had another hard day.

And he went the day after that, and the day after that. Because that's what distance runners do.

Friends, I know not all of us here are distance runners. Lord knows I'm not. But we are all people of faith. And our journeys are not measured in sprints, but in long distances. There will be good times, and there will be bad times.

In the face of job losses, relationship problems, financial hardships, and debilitating illnesses it's hard to have faith. But faith is about finding a way through hard times, times when you want something very, very badly and you can't seem to get it.

Faith is about the way people continue to function when they can't find a job or a person to spend their life with;

It's about parents who maintain hope when their errant children can't seem to get on track, and it is about couples who want children and can't get pregnant; or couples who face incredible obstacles but gut them out together.

Faith is about how to live when answers do not come, because faith is not an answer we have to find. Faith is a way of living; it is a mature understanding that sometimes the answers we want are not there when we want them. And it's about seeing beyond what is right in front of us, our daily problems, to see what God is doing in our midst, what God has done throughout the ages, and the future joy God has in store.

What seems like a 1000 years ago, back when I was in high school, my sister and I shared a car. I think I've mentioned this car in a previous sermon. It was a 1979 Chevy Citation; it got us to school and back, but I wouldn't trust it to do more than that.

One day my sister and I were out cruising around, only to arrive home and discover that the muffler had fallen off the car – unbeknownst to us. But my Dad knew, and after 5 kids and Lord knows how many beater cars, he'd had enough. I remember he came out the back door and demanded to know where the muffler

was. Well, we didn't know. We didn't even know the muffler had fallen off the car! (Probably because we had the radio turned up too loudly.) And with that, my Dad hopped in the back seat and demanded we retrace our steps to find the muffler.

MY sister and I were silent as we drove around, retracing our steps. In part because we were probably mortified that my Dad would make us do that, but also because we'd made a pit stop at the "brew through", which are drive throughs attached to gas stations where you can get soda, cigarettes, and beer. We were both silently thinking the same thing, of course. What if the muffler fell off in the brew through?! If Dad was this mad, imagine how much worse it would get!

Well, the muffler god was on our side, because we lost the muffler long before we ever got to the brew-through. "There it is," My Dad pointed. "Annie, get out and get it." And I did, and we went home, never needing to fess up to the brew-through.

Friends, sometimes the muffler falls off the proverbial car; sometimes we need to go back and retrace our steps; sometimes, worse things happen, like the transmission goes out. But the good news is, Jesus is always one lap ahead of us, cheering us on, and waving us toward the finish line to the checkered flag.

Amen.

*Lord, thank you so much for your faithfulness to us in the difficult times. Help each of us to run with perseverance the race that you set before us and to finish that race well with your help. Help us to keep the faith and the teaching that you have entrusted to us and pass it on faithfully to those in the next generation who can teach others also. We know you will be with us to the end. We know that your grace is sufficient. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

Sources:

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Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, commentary for Hebrews 11:29-12:3