

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 2022
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Finish the Race?

12 years ago, before I injured my left knee, I ran several miles every day.

At one point, a group of friends invited me to run the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington DC.

I wasn't 100% certain. Could I finish a race that covers 26.2 miles?

But, the day of the race was beautiful. For the first few miles, I felt strong. I could finish this race!

The racecourse took us around the major monuments of our Nation's Capital. But somewhere near the Lincoln Memorial, my legs began to cramp. My confidence waivered.

At one point, there was so much pain in my feet - I believed that they were bleeding! I took off my socks and shoes. No blood. Just pain.

Someone suggested that I should just walk for a while. So I did.

As I walked, the racecourse took us across a bridge over the Potomac River, leading from Washington to Arlington in Northern Virginia. And, off to the right, I could see the Iwo Jima Memorial. And my heart was refreshed!

Because, I knew that the marathon ended at the Iwo Jima memorial. The finish line was right there. All I had to do was cross this bridge, turn right, and ... I'd cross the finish line.

I started to run again!

But... when I got to the end of the bridge, all of runners had to turn LEFT... away from the finish line. We had to run several miles through downtown Arlington. I thought that the course was going to take me right over there... where the finish line was.

But the race took us in a direction I wasn't expecting.

What do you do when you think you've reached the goal, but you haven't?

What do you do when you're exhausted, and you realize that the race of life is taking you in a surprising direction?

In our passage from the Second Letter to Timothy, we hear from a man who is running his race. And he has learned, over and over again, that God often takes us in a direction we couldn't have imagined!

20 centuries ago, there was a zealous young Jewish man named Saul, from Tarsus.

From an early age, he was taught that God had a plan for him. God had made promises – not only to him, but to the whole people of Israel.

God had promised to lead the people of Israel. To be with them. And God had promised to send them a savior.

What God asked, in return, was that the people of Israel - like Saul - should serve the living God, pray, learn the Torah, feed the widows, and be zealous for God's temple in Jerusalem.

Saul loved God. So, naturally, Saul loved the temple and the land and the people and the law.

And because he loved all that, he came to understand that a certain rabbi named Jesus, and the people who followed Jesus' teachings, were dangerous.

“Dangerous” because, Jesus seemed to be asking people to change too much, to leave behind so many of the things that helped to identify the people of Israel as God's people. Jesus didn't seem to respect the Law, or the sabbath, or the temple.

So, over time, Saul discerned how he could serve God. Saul decided that he must resist this group of “Jesus people.” He could resist the changes they were trying to make in the Jewish way of life. He became zealous in searching for these Jesus people, arresting them, bringing them to justice.

And then, one day, Saul's world fell apart. The direction of his life was completely changed.

Saul had an encounter on the road. And this zealous, faithful man tried to wrap his brain around a truth he could not at first comprehend. God WAS indeed being faithful to his promises. God WAS fulfilling everything that the prophets of Israel had foretold. God WAS saving his people.

And all of this was happening... in the person of Jesus. That preacher. Who had died. And was risen.

Saul encountered the Living Christ on the road.

And in that moment, Saul – whose name gets change to Paul - begins the process of conversion. Over time, Paul understands that the living Christ was leading Paul away from many of the things he was certain of. God was leading him somewhere new.

When he met the Living Christ, Paul started a journey of rediscovery – Yes, God was still God, but God was asking Paul to serve him and love him in ways that Paul could not have expected. God was still God, but there were new things to learn. New ways of loving, living and serving.

Paul was willing and able to do all this, because he had met the Living Christ. Through the grace of that encounter, the grace that filled Paul with love, Paul was able to fall in love with Christ.

And from that point on, Paul could not stop talking about the Christ, whom he loved.

When we encounter Paul in today's passage, his life has already taken so many unexpected turns. The young man, who had been so zealous for the Torah and the Temple, had now spent years travelling all over the known world, proclaiming to Jews and Gentiles alike, that nothing can separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus.

He boldly urged the earliest Christians – including the apostles themselves – to see that God wants all people – not just a small, chosen set of people – to hear the wondrous news of Christ, who was crucified, and is now risen.

Paul has undertaken missionary journeys, and Timothy, to whom he writes, has been a companion and coworker.

Paul has faced rejection, resistance, hatred. He has been imprisoned, mistreated – all because he dared to speak of Jesus... the very Jesus whose memory he had wanted to erase!

And here, in the Second Letter to Timothy, Paul senses that the direction of his life is now headed to Rome... where his legal trial will take place. Rome, where he will experience martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel.

Paul senses what's coming, so he says, "I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

When we first hear these magnificent words, we might think – isn't that wonderful!?! Paul set a goal for his life. He chose a direction. He worked hard. And now he can look back and say, "I did what I always thought I should do."

But if we read more of Paul's writings, we realize – when St. Paul was a young man, he could never have imagined that he would face imprisonment for his faith in Christ! He could never have imagined that he would die in Rome to give glory to Christ who was crucified.

In other words – this race which Paul speaks about is a race which took him in wildly unexpected directions. Young Saul thought he knew what the goal was, and where the reward would be found. A more experienced Paul declares that he has run the race.

But never forget – from the moment of his conversion, Paul never knew where Christ would take him next, how Christ would lead him next, what Christ would do through him next.

Paul could only confidently approach the finish line of his life because he had learned to trust the One whom he loved. He loved Christ - so wherever Christ was, that was home for Paul. And whatever surprising new thing Christ asked Paul to do, Paul knew he could do it, because Paul knew that it was Christ who was alive and working in him.

Back at the Marine Corps marathon, after the course surprisingly turned away from the finish line, I gave up. I sat down on the sidewalk.

And then... a group of older, African American men with grey hair came jogging

by.

As they jogged by, they were singing -

I have fought the fight!

I have run the race!

I have kept the faith!

And their singing forced me to get up. I jogged behind them, trying to sing along with them. “I have fought the fight. I have run the race!”

Then, I knew – I can’t give up just because the course took an unexpected turn.

And I knew that I was not running alone. For those miles, I was a member of a grey-haired congregation of men, whose example kept urging me toward the finish line.

As we sang Saint Paul’s Words, “I have fought the fight. I have run the race,” I was reminded that Saint Paul offers awesome encouragement to every Christian – trust where God wants to take you, rejoice in the Lord’s surprises. Keep your eyes fixed on Christ, who embraces us in love when we cross the finish line.

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