

Run for your Life! Philippians 3:4b-14

It was not too hot and not too cold for the Eau Claire Marathon this week. Of course, because of Covid 19, each runner this year ran their own at the time that worked best for them, but still the challenge, the medal, and the t-shirt were still the prize for each runner. Congratulations if you ran the marathon this week.

The word “marathon” comes from the historical legend of the Greek runner-messenger Pheidippides. And, around the year 490 B.C., a gigantic Persian army landed on the plain of Marathon, threatening the city of Athens that was just 25 miles away. The Athenians prepared for a huge battle that would determine the fate of their entire way of life.

But, against all odds, the vastly outnumbered Athenian army defeated the Persians in battle even when they never should have. But, the people of Athens were terrified to hear the news of a defeat. So after the battle, the famous story goes that a runner named Pheidippides was dispatched to carry the good news of the victory to the terrified residents of Athens. Pheidippides ran the entire 25 plus miles across the plain of Marathon to the city, not once stopping and running at full pace the entire time, so that when he arrived, exhausted, dehydrated, saturated in sweat and panting, Pheidippides burst into the city assembly, and with his final breath he shouted, “Rejoice! We conquered!” He

then promptly dies as is often the case in many Greek stories.

Now, thank God no one died from the Eau Claire Marathon! It is likely that those of you who ran this week prepared for that day with a lot of training. You didn’t run the marathon at the same pace the whole time. You likely took breaks, hydrated, ate, and restored your bodily fluids. Marathons are not sprints. They take time, they take endurance, and they take goals to help achieve them.

The apostle Paul is running a marathon. But, it’s one that he already has won the prize for. The prize is Christ Jesus, which was already given to him at the resurrection through his faith. What an amazing thing to be given the prize before you even run the marathon! However, Paul knows that because the prize was already given to him, that he is called to bring that message of Good News to people just as the marathon runner did to the city of Athens.

But, there are snags along the way for Paul as he speaks to the Philippians. He lives with chronic illness. He spends time in prison along the way. He has to break up vicious fights in the church and discipline church members. His life is threatened and well, we all know that Paul, when coming to the end of his marathon, even his life is given up to the work of the Gospel. His marathon is hard. And, there are periods during where he runs out of steam, where it seems he does want to quit, and where he is exasperated with the people of God but

also with God. And, yet, somehow he still manages to proclaim to the church at Philippi:

“Not that I have already obtained the resurrection from the dead or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

If one thing teaches me about the writing of the Apostle Paul is that in the metaphor of a race, our faith is not a sprint. It is a marathon. But, as with any long race, we must pace ourselves. We must rest. We must train. And, we must go it slow at the pace each of us is able. And, there will be times when we want to quit, times of doubt in our faith, times when we are pressed and stretched, and times when exhaustion sets in. We know this to be true because we saw the same in our Savior Jesus Christ. His whole life, Jesus trained for a three year marathon, one that led to the goal, our Resurrection, our redemption, our satisfaction for the forgiveness of sins. Our faith, therefore, is a long life marathon.

I have spoken with many of you during these last six months and some of you have spoken to me of the anxiety that our approaching winter brings. Are we in for another big winter of isolation? I’m just telling the truth here because it doesn’t help to gloss over the

difficulty of life. It has been hard. The changes of how and when we do things are rapidly paced, the tempers are hot in our stressful nation, and we are exhausted. I speak for myself in this as well. Being church in this world is really difficult right now.

But, our daily living and our lives of faith are both marathons, not sprints. This life of faith especially now needs pacing in order that we may press on forward to the prize. But, here is the amazing thing. God has already given us the prize without our earning it. We need only go forward, whether the footing of our faith is certain or faltering does not matter; only that it does go forward one step at a time.

For, there is hope in the promises of the Resurrection even now and especially today. And, we have a tangible sign of these promises. We have been given a gift of welcoming through Holy Baptism two new Children of God - Ada Rachel David (at 8:15) and Baylor Mae Rosentrater (10:45). Their parents are so eager to instill in their children a deep faith in the One who created them to have abundant life in a fallen world. Dear friends in Christ, pace yourselves. Pace yourselves every day in all that you do. Forgive yourselves when you feel you can’t measure up to your expectations or the expectations of others. For Christ has forgiven you. Be kind to yourself in this isolating time, for Christ is kind to you so you must be kind to yourselves. It’s just that the end goal is going to take longer because it is a marathon, not a spring. But, Christ is with you every step of the way. Amen.