

## **April 27: Witnesses to Hope (Hebrews 11:1-2, 39-12:3) – Pastor Heather McDaniel**

Welcome to the last message of our April miniseries called “Looking for Light.” This month, we’ve been taking a closer look at passages that point us towards hope, which is something that we all need right now, no matter who we or where we are in life.

Before we get started, let’s pray together.

*Jesus, we need your endurance, and your faithfulness, and your hope in our own journeys. Please renew us this morning, and give us strength to take the next steps towards you on the race marked out for us. Amen.*

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I used to be a sprinter.

I discovered pretty early in life that I was fast, and throughout junior high and high school, I ran the 100 and 200 meter dashes on the track team. I was good, and I reveled in the explosive few seconds of just giving it my all.

Sprinting 100 yards is pretty simple. The track is straight and flat and cleared of any obstacles, and you can see directly to the finish line – there’s no question about whether or not you’ll make it there. You don’t have to worry about how to ration your energy so that you have something saved for the end. You just go flat out, as hard as you can, the entire way, and then either bask in the glory of victory or the disappointment of not being the fastest. The whole thing is over in seconds, and you don’t even feel tired or out of breath until you’ve stopped.

I hated having to run longer distances – not only was I not naturally good at it, but long-distance running involved enduring pain and discomfort during the run, and I wasn’t really into that.

Which is why I surprised myself, about eight years ago, by accepting my friend’s invitation to run a half marathon with her in Tanzania, to raise money for Compassion International. When I said yes, I had never run more than three miles in a row before, and I wasn’t in the habit of jogging. And some of

my first training runs were so rough that it was hard to believe that I would ever be able to make it 13.1 miles.

But, to my honest amazement, as I continued to go out and run, I was able to add on distance, little by little, and increase my stamina, until I was covering distances I never thought I'd manage. And although there were periods of euphoria and deep enjoyment, when the wind was at my back or I was flying downhill or running next to Liberty Bay and glorying in its beauty, there were just as many times when it was just plain hard – when my lungs burned, my muscles ached, I got stitches in my side, my knee acted up, my feet lost circulation, I felt nauseous, or I just plain battled fatigue and tedium.

On the day of the half marathon itself in Tanzania, I faced a course I was completely unfamiliar with. I couldn't see to the end, and the race set out before me wasn't flat or straight. My path went up, and down, and up again, sometimes paved road and sometimes a footpath, through towns and fields and trees and thick mud. And in the middle of that thick mud, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through the race, when I was beginning to envision the finish line, I stepped on a thorn – a big, long thorn that came off a thorn tree and was hiding in the mud for me. It went straight through the thick rubber on the sole of my shoe and pierced my heel, and I screamed in sudden pain.

For the next half hour or so, I balanced in the mud with my filthy, sock-clad, wounded foot resting on a small rock, while my friend and I tried to dig the thorn out of my shoe. We were rescued by another racer who stopped to help and succeeded in prying it out, and although our progress from there didn't win us any speed awards, we kept going. When I finally limped across the finish line, I didn't even make an effort to remember what my time was – I had arrived, and that was more than enough. I got the same medal as all the other finishers, and I was welcomed into the same grand celebration of feast and band and dancing and cheering.

My friends, as much as I loved sprinting, and the thrill of going fast and straight and having everything over with in seconds, my experience of training for and running a half marathon is a lot closer to what it's like to run the race of faith along the way of Jesus. It's a course that's accessible to all, and doesn't require that we be naturally fast or talented or virtuous – we're all invited to run. It's filled with moments of great joy, and a grand celebration at the end – but there are also moments, and sometimes whole seasons, when it's just

plain hard. In fact, the Greek word for “race” in our Scripture passage today (when we’re called to run the “*race* set before us”) is *agon*, from which we get the English word “agony” – a pretty accurate description of how long-distance running can feel. There are times when we are so bone-deep weary that we wonder if there’s anything worthwhile about staying the course – because it sure doesn’t feel like winning. All of us who spend any significant amount of time running the path of Jesus will reach a point where we are in desperate need of endurance and the hope needed to take the next step forward.

That was the situation of the faith community who received the letter we call Hebrews, which we read from this morning. There’s a lot of mystery surrounding this letter. We don’t know for sure who wrote it, or when, or who it was written for. But there are clues in the letter that help us piece some things together. It’s written in sophisticated Greek, to a community outside of Palestine who had been following Jesus for quite some time. It’s clear that they were beginning to face opposition to their faith: public harassment, social rejection and exclusion, confiscation of their property, economic suffering, and even imprisonment. The intense physical persecution that happened under Nero hadn’t begun yet, but it was on the horizon. The high hopes this community had when they first made the choice to follow Jesus – of his imminent return, and a glorious future with him – weren’t coming to fruition. Instead, it felt like things were getting worse, and they were beginning to wonder if it was worthwhile to stay the course, or if they should give into community pressure and abandon Jesus’ countercultural way. In fact, some of them were already doing that.

Hebrews is a letter of hope to this embattled and weary community, an extended pep-talk urging them on to perseverance on the race of faith marked out for them. The author uses Jewish history and Scriptures to emphasize how far superior Jesus, and the life that he offers, is to anything else in the past, the present, or the future – so why would anyone choose to turn away and lose out? Because of Jesus, we can lean, with all our weight, into God’s promises, living our lives in full dependence on the reality of a bright future we can’t yet see.

I believe that Hebrew’s message of hope and perseverance is one that we need to hear right now, because so many of us are weary and discouraged, and see the world around us getting worse. And it is so hard to follow the way of Jesus when it doesn’t seem to be working, and when powerful systems push back

against us and seem to be winning. It's hard to love and bless those who oppose us; to work for peace and justice when evil and hatred seem so entrenched; to trust God when our souls have been stripped bare and when those we love continue to suffer; to give the little we have and believe it makes a difference.

In chapter 11 of Hebrews, the author pulls us back to see the big picture, reminding us that faith is only possible if we can look beyond the present moment and lean into an unseen future. In other words, faith cannot be defined without hope – faith is living with “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). And then, to flesh out exactly what this looks like, the author of Hebrews dives into the past, reminding us of real people throughout history who lived out hope-based faith in action. We didn't have time to read all of Hebrews 11 this morning, but if you read it on your own, you'll notice two things that characterize these heroes of the faith. First, none of them received the promises they hoped for. They lived and sometimes sacrificed their lives in pursuit of those promises, but they all died before they were realized – 11:13 says they “only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.” Second, none of them were perfect, and none of them reached perfection in their lives on earth. In other words, all of these people who were commended for their faith – all of them died unfulfilled, still looking to the future they staked their lives on. However, their vision of future promises shaped the way that they walked in the present, and their hope-shaped lives not only flesh out what faithfulness looks like for us, but also helped build the framework for those promises to be fully realized through Jesus.

In 1968, just a month before he was assassinated, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon titled “Unfulfilled Hopes” in Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he confessed that, “Life is a continual story of shattered dreams.” That sounds like a downer of a sermon, but it wasn't – it was a call to perseverance and trust in God from a man who realized that he would never, in his life on earth, see the fulfillment of his dream of justice and freedom for all, or live into all his ideals for himself – but was committed to staying the course, pursuing what he called “infinite hope,” even in the midst of “finite disappointment.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://chicagocrusader.com/in-his-own-words-unfulfilled-dreams/> and <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-x-shattered-dreams>

How do we do that, though – how do we keep our eyes on hope and continue to move forward when weariness and apathy and despair threaten? In the first three verses of chapter 12, which comes directly after the long list of faithful witnesses, the author of Hebrews gives us three powerful sources of strength for the race we’re called to run. Listen: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Our first source of strength for the journey is the “great cloud of witnesses” that surround us, the faithful followers of God who have finished the race ahead of us.

Here's one of the strongest memories from my half-marathon experience. When I did my training, it was mostly alone, and it was a grind – long, tedious runs, where every minute seemed to drag on and on. But on race days, everything was different. There were spectators lining my course, and all of them cheered for me as I ran by! It didn’t matter if they knew me, or how fast I was going, or where I was in the pack – they clapped and hooted and waved posters, and it made such a difference – each time I passed a group of people cheering, I would get a tangible boost of energy that carried me along.

The great cloud of witnesses that went before us aren’t just witnesses *of* faith, encouraging us by the way their lives speak of hope. They are also witnesses *to* our own faith journeys. The way that the Greek is written in this verse suggests an enormous coliseum, bursting with spectators, members of God’s kingdom who surround the runners on all sides, cheering and encouraging them and actively participating in the race.

We are not alone on our journey, even when we feel that way. We are a part of a massive community of fellow pilgrims, both those who walk with us now, and those who finished their journey on earth and are waiting for us to come join them in the celebration, cheering us on and holding hope for us when our own wavers. I believe that the author of Hebrews invites us to imagine this heavenly cheering section surrounding us, and I want to invite you to think about your own cloud of witnesses. Who encourages you as you run your own race of faith? You could add the people in Hebrews 11 – like Abraham, and Rahab, and Sarah and Moses – or you could add your own – people who have

gone before you, whose lives spoke of hope and faith that inspires you. Take a few seconds and think about who is in your cheering section, and picture them clapping for you, with pure joy in their faces.

The second source of strength for our journey isn't something we receive – it's something we let go of. When my kids were small, they joined a local track club, and during their practices, they were given these tiny parachutes to wear on their backs. They would run a short distance with the parachutes dragging in the air behind them, creating a lot of wind resistance and acting like a heavy load; then, still running, they got to pull a cord that quickly released the parachutes, and they would suddenly burst into speed, free and fast – they loved it. The verse in Hebrews has a similar sense of decisive release – “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”. In ancient Greece, athletes would literally remove all of their clothing and run naked, so there were no robes catching at their ankles. We are challenged to identify what weighs us down and holds us back from freedom.

For the next three weeks, we'll be reviewing our soul care series from the past year and reflecting on what we learned and how we changed, and that might be a good opportunity to think about what's still weighing us down on our journey. Perhaps we're weighed down because of lingering trauma or resentment we carry because of what's happened to us, or by our own habits or addictions. Perhaps we're tripped up by something that's not bad in itself, but has become a weight for us – like social media consumption. Whatever it is that's weighing you down, it's worth it to take the steps you need to be free.

The most important source of strength for our faith journey, though, is the one who makes that journey possible in the first place – Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. We are only able to stay on the course of faith set out before us, and to follow it to the end, because Jesus went before us and cleared the way. “For the joy set before him,” the author of Hebrews writes, “he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Jesus ran the path we run, through every obstacle we might face, and he cleared the way; he endured discouragement and weariness and opposition and injustice and shame and suffering, and he knows the pain of the thorns that pierce us along the way. And because Jesus obeyed and endured to the

bitter end and beyond – and because he took his divine love and life through every part of this human journey, even death – his faithfulness becomes available to us, and his endurance can become ours, his love is there to fill us, no matter where we are. Because Jesus finished the race once and for all, we will also finish – nothing can prevent us from following in his footsteps.

And even though we can't see the whole race marked out for us, and even we don't know that awaits us around the next bend, we can know, with absolute clarity and confidence, that Jesus stands at the finish line; that he has already done everything needed for us to join him there and hear him say "well done"; and as long as we keep our eyes fixed on him, and then choose to take the next step forward towards him, in hope and obedience and faith, we will arrive, and we will become the full, free, healed people we were created to be.

But our journey isn't just about getting to the finish line. As we run this race of faith, as we lean into hope and choose the way of Jesus even when it doesn't look like we're winning or making progress, we, too, become witnesses of hope. Our own lives speak of the faithfulness of God, and become a testimony that helps others find strength on their own journeys. And I believe that even though we won't see the fulfillment of all we're hoping for in our life here, when we take our place in the great cloud of witnesses and look back, we will see that our efforts of faith were not in vain – that we got to participate in bringing about the very realities we were hoping for, of justice and peace and healing for all creation. And we will join in the celebration.

May this vision, this assurance of what we hope for, give you strength for your own journey ahead, so that you don't lose heart. Amen.