

# *Running*

**Isaiah 43:16-21    Philippians 3:8-14    John 12:1-8**  
**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church**  
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Walking, standing, turning, returning, running, singing – these are the basics of our journey during this season of Lent.

We walk toward the fulfillment of God's vision for creation. We stand on the firm foundation of God's love. We turn away from the ways of the world and toward the correct path. We return to God continually to experience grace and receive assurance. We run as disciplined athletes toward the goal before us. In dark times we sing because the light never goes out.

These basic movements, to this point, have suggested contemplative Lenten disciplines. In a world that moves its attention so quickly to the headline of the day, where we rush from one venue to another to accomplish our long by inconsequential to-do lists, walking and standing suggest a slower pace. In a world where we are often caught off guard and find ourselves reacting to the unexpected, the turning of which we speak is a deliberate, proactive movement toward God rather than a knee-jerk reaction to the world. In a world where we are grasping for things because we are afraid there is not enough, our returning is coming home to grace, where God's hands hold before us the gift of abundant life with the offer, here, take what you need. So do not be frantic as the world is frantic, but with deliberateness walk with God, stand on the promises, turn toward truth and righteousness, return to God's love.

But now our Lenten journey invites us to run. Today's metaphor is a bit more strenuous. Certainly there are people who run almost as a form of meditation. The methodical, disciplined jogger can enter a peaceful state of mind, breathing deeply and moving smoothly. This may indeed be what the Apostle Paul has in mind when he compares the Christian life to that of a disciplined athlete, focused on the goal, body and mind working together, intent, undistracted ... "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ... press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

But though today's other scripture lessons do not specifically use the running metaphor, they are clearly about pressing on toward the goal, and they suggest a more excited kind of running, perhaps even a recklessness in the pursuit of God's love.

There was a foretaste of this kind of running image in the scripture Lynette opened up for us last week. When the prodigal son returns, the father sees him still far off, and runs to greet him. This little detail is striking. Running is something that children do, not parents. We would expect the lost child to run when home comes into view again. The wronged parent sits and waits for the wayward one to dutifully confess his or her sins. But this father sees his son far off and does not wait for him to return home. He runs to meet him on the road, rushing to begin the joyful reunion.

What might we see on the horizon that would excite us enough to forget what lies behind, focus on the vision before us, and run toward it?

Our reading from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah begins: "Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick..."

Allow me to paraphrase this passage: "God is talking to us," says Isaiah. "You have heard the stories about this God. This is the God of the Exodus, the God who led Moses and the people out of slavery in Egypt. You remember that story, don't you? Pharaoh's army was buried in the sea.

But now hear this! As impressive as the Exodus was, as awesome as the parting of the sea and the defeat of the Egyptian army was, what is happening to us is more impressive. God is doing a new thing! God is doing a now thing! So don't sit around dreaming about those old stories. Pay attention to your own story which is unfolding in the present. *Your* time of slavery is ending. God is making a pathway for you."

A few centuries later an early Christian teacher by the name of John Chrysostom was giving some new Christians their Baptismal instructions. He told them:

"You did not see the Pharaoh and his armies drowned, but you did see the drowning of the devil and his armies. Our ancestors passed through the sea; you have passed through the sea of death. They were delivered from the Egyptians; you are set free from the demon... In their day the children of Israel were unable to see the face of Moses transfigured, although he was their fellow slave and kinsman. But you *have* seen the face of Christ in his glory."

I believe that Isaiah words and John Chrysostom's words are eternally true. They are saying that God is just as involved in the present as in the past; and furthermore, the present is more important than the past.

Of course, some pretty incredible things happened in the past. God delivered people from slavery. The exiles returned to Jerusalem. Slavery ended. Women gained the right to vote. The wall was torn down in Berlin. Apartheid came to an end in South Africa. God touched your life in some transformational way. Something happened years ago at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church that was empowering and inspirational. The hand of God has been sweeping across history, and sometimes even touching our own lives. But the hand of God is ever constant in our midst, moving like a wave that cannot be resisted, in big events and in small. So listen to Isaiah's words. Don't dream about the old stories, but pay attention to the story which is unfolding in the present. God is doing a new thing. God is doing a now thing. The old is passing away, and God's reign is moving forward. Are we aware of the opportunity we have now to be a part of what God is doing in our world?

What new thing ... what God thing ... what new God thing appears on the horizon that excites us so – that we forget what lies behind, that we drop the inconsequential routines of our daily details, and run toward the vision?

Jesus had a friend named Mary who lived in Bethany with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus. This was not a rich family. But Mary had in her possession a valuable treasure, a pound of pure nard, an ointment which we are told was worth 300 denarii. To the working people of Jesus' day, that represented ten months' wages.

Put yourself in the scene. Jesus has come to Bethany again. Mary and Martha are hosting him. They have prepared a supper for him. Lazarus is there sitting at the table with them - Lazarus, their beloved brother who died, but Jesus brought him back to life again. Mary takes the valuable ointment and kneels down before Jesus. She breaks the neck of the bottle and begins to anoint Jesus' feet.

Judas is outraged. There goes three hundred denarii! If she wants to give it away, why doesn't she sell the bottle and donate the silver to the cause? She's pouring it on his feet today, and tomorrow it will be gone. Even though the scripture tells us that Judas had ulterior motives, his objection makes a lot of sense to practical minded people. But what Judas is failing to see, what Mary seems to intuitively know, is that God is doing a new thing in Jesus. And this new thing has everything to do with proclaiming good news to the poor.

There is no disputing the fact that the followers of Jesus are on the side of poor people. It is the poor who come in droves to see Jesus. By and large it is the poor whom he heals, feeds, and teaches. The disciples know who their power base is. It is not the Roman army. It is not the King or the Governor. It is not the established religious leaders who serve at the behest of Herod and Pilate. Though a few individuals from within the ranks of the upper classes recognize Jesus

as a special man of God, they are exceptions to the rule. When Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is at hand, it is those who feel disenfranchised in the kingdoms of Caesar and Herod who receive that word with hope. They desperately want a new order to replace the present one. Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy that good news will be preached to the poor, that the meek will have their inheritance, that the grieving ones will be comforted.

When Mary uses all of a treasured jar of nard, 10 months wages, to anoint the feet of Jesus, Judas says what a lot of Jesus' other followers must have been thinking. Couldn't this treasure be put to better use? Bringing about the Rule of God is going to be hard work. The odds are against us. We can't waste any resources.

But God is doing a new thing in Jesus. He is a puzzlement to many because they cannot adjust to the newness of it. Jesus is going to change the world by dying for it. Others want him to change the world, and they expect him to do it according to the world's terms, by grabbing for power.

Jesus said, "In so far as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me." Judas wants to know why Mary doesn't give her treasure to the poor. But what Mary sees, perhaps, is that Jesus is "the poor."

To follow the way of Jesus is to change the way that the world views the poor. Rather than being the objects of hand-outs, the poor are the objects of love. Rather than being objects of pity, in the poor we see the face of God. Mary sees in Jesus the vision that excites her so much, she throws caution to the wind and runs to grasp it. No greater gift can be given to the poor this day than to prepare Jesus for his death, which is God's complete identification with all the poor ... with all of us.

"The poor you will always have with you," for indeed we are all poor. We are all those with whom God has identified; we are all those for whom and with whom God has suffered. And at this moment we have the opportunity to respond as Mary responded. Today we also can run excitedly toward that vision, by choosing to worship God on bended knee, to anoint the feet of our neighbor, in whom we see the face of Jesus.

Running is not very cautious. Mary threw caution to the wind when she broke the jar of nard and anointed the feet of Jesus.

If you see God's vision of the renewal of the earth, run toward it.

If you see the vision of reconciliation with all God's children, run toward it.

If you see the vision of peace breaking out, run toward it.

If you see beloved community, health, wholeness, justice ... run toward it.

If you see new life, run toward it.

Run toward God's salvation by living faithfully. Run toward God by investing to make the vision real – to bring the future into the present. Run toward God by praying without ceasing, loving without reservation.

Run with your eye on the prize, says Paul. "Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."