

# “What a Race!”

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**Hebrews 12:1-3** *So then, with endurance, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne. Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won't be discouraged and you won't give up.*

A number of years ago my daughter Anna who was in grade 8 at the time was training for a 400-meter race. We decided we'd go out to the new track at TISS and help her train. It then turned into a family race — in particular between me and Anna! We were talking smack all the way to the track. (“You're goin' down! You're gonna eat my dust!”... that kind of thing). I was in half decent shape at the time. I had done a couple of triathlons which focus more on endurance than speed. But to be honest, my focus was more like survival rather than speed. I thought I had a chance at beating Anna. (Truth be told, I was sure I could beat her!)

Now the 400-meter is an interesting and challenging race. If you treat it like a 100-meter all-out sprint, you'll die; and if you treat it like a 5k longer run, you'll never win. You have to sprint but save your energy, especially for the back half of the race.

We set out, and with a lot of fun and a lot of excitement the race began. I was on the inside track so I started behind my daughter, but I was sure I'd catch up. You've probably figured this out already – I didn't. At the 100-meter mark I knew I was in trouble. By the 200-meter mark the race was over. It was so bad that around the 300 mark I just stopped dead. I was tired, but it was the total failure that had me stop. Anna didn't know how bad it was – she did the right thing and just kept running her heart out without looking back. I wanted to just give up and walk off the track but a voice inside me said “Finish the race Heath!” Painfully I made myself start running again and finished the race. It was so bad that my son Stanley, instead of laughing at me and making fun of me (I was expecting that kind of “Ha, ha mom, you went down!”), well he just looked at me very seriously and earnestly and said “Mom, I feel so bad for you!” (You know it's bad when you get genuine pity from your kids!) Sometimes life can feel like that.

Some of you are at the 300-meter mark now. Some of you remember being there in the past. Whether it's looking after a loved one or your own physical or mental health, you are not alone. We all have races that we are running.

Beyond the personal, when I zoom out on the Google map of my life, I see the Church struggling at a time of tremendous change. I figure we've got about 7 years to figure it out and set ourselves on the right footing for the future – just in time for our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary here at Wall Street.

And then we zoom out further. When I look at the world and the needs of today I get even more overwhelmed. I'm 50 – born in the early 70's. I grew up in an optimistic world. I thought things like World Wars, and economic depressions and racism, apartheid, gender inequality, the threat of nuclear annihilation (and we could go on and on ...) I thought those things were ancient history — and things like a pandemic *seriously* ancient history. But now with climate change, war, economic uncertainty, when we think of the great need and dwindling resources in our world, it feels overwhelming and exhausting.

We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Scholars are quite sure that Paul didn't ... but we don't know who did. We don't know who the recipient was either. And it's not even really a letter – it doesn't start with greetings or end with the typical sign-off that the letters in the New Testament have. Thomas Long, in his commentary on the book, sees it more like a sermon than a letter. I like that.

In a way I think all of this unknowing adds to the timelessness of the book of Hebrews. Because it is not tethered to a person and a location, it is easier to let it resonate and speak to us today.

Indeed, it certainly speaks to today. The preacher of Hebrews is preaching to a weary congregation. They are tired, and they don't know if they have it in them to keep going.

As Tom Long says: *“They are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”*

I don't know about you but some days I resemble that comment!

Now we come to one of my favourite verses in the Bible where the author of Hebrews compares our call to be the church, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, *to a marathon*. How are we to run this race?

*Let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely... What weighs me down? Perfectionism, worrying too much about the expectations of others and thinking it's all up to me – that I have to figure it out. Friends, you can't run in an overcoat! Being aware of what weighs us down is the first step to renewal.*

Sing with Taylor Swift "It's me, I am the problem, it's me."

How do we run with endurance? For me it's about slowing down. Parker Palmer said "*If you want to catch up with God, you have to slow down.*" I don't run anymore. I walk. Everything else is a race in my life, so walking is a time to re-center and catch up with God. I've had a daily devotional habit for many years and I've added a meditation practice. It is counter-intuitive in the face of so much more to do, to slow down and do less – except when we remember that *connecting to our creator is what gives us fuel/bread for the journey.*

Remembering that we are not alone is another key ingredient to surviving and thriving in this race. In the book of Hebrews the writer/preacher connects the listeners to a long chain of saints who had gone before them. We think of all the saints of the Bible, from Abel and Abraham to Peter and Paul. We think of all the saints of the church from that time to today, most of them unnamed. *Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ...*

This is All Hallows Eve eve, the day before the day before All Saints Day.

*Who have been your saints? Who are in your great cloud of witnesses — who have gone on before you and who surround you today? Take a moment to think about those who have helped to form you and pass on their faith to you.*

Here's the thing. It is more of a relay than a solo race. And even 'relay race' is not quite right, because we remain connected to the saints of today, the saints of yesterday and the saints of tomorrow.

Don't go thinking it's all up to you. You are not alone on this journey; *we are not alone on this journey.* It's not just the saints of the past, the saints of the present and those saints of the future that we're counting on. It's that this marathon has already been run and won. *Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that lay before him,*

*endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated on the righthand of the throne of God.*

Yes, the race can be hard, the hours can be long — but if we focus only on ourselves and the heaviness of the load today, then we will miss the marvelous mission that we play a role in.

Zoom out on that Google map of your faith beyond the hardship. Zoom out to see this beautiful world spinning in a galaxy created and deeply loved by God. Loved so much that God became human, to run a race of transforming, saving love.

Remember that the race that Jesus ran looked like it was over, done and defeated at the 300-meter mark. He was carried off the track on a stretcher and they were sure he'd never run, walk or even breathe again — his life brutally and in front of everyone cut short on a cross.

But no humiliation, no defeat, no suffering, no injustice, no death could keep the author of life from finishing the race and not just winning — but bringing victory, salvation, life and love to all. He didn't cross the finish line to bring glory to himself, but to bring each of us life. A life that lasts!

Dr. King in his writings talked about Mother Pollard. During the Montgomery bus boycott, which was organized to protest racial segregation on the transit system, Black Americans took up the cause and walked to their destination instead of riding the bus, and the 72-year-old Mother Pollard was one of them. Dr. King suggested that perhaps she should take the bus again because of her health and she famously answered: *"My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."*

This is a challenging time to live in. By the power of God working in us, may each one of us help to give life to a weary world.

*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40: 28-31)*

Thanks be to God, Amen