

KEEP PRESSING ON

My first love in preaching is to teach a verse by verse exegesis of the passage. Sometimes the passage is so familiar to the congregation that a different approach is needed to accentuate the truths. To make the passage real for people who are listening and wanting to engage it helps to make them a part of the story. That is where narrative preaching comes in. I am not an expert in the method but the following is my second attempt at narrative style preaching.

When you began the race you shot off the starting line like a bolt of lightning. You were so excited in the beginning; you couldn't wait for the starter's pistol to explode and open the run. Even though there were thousands waiting with you, you took off and led the crowd, running like a thoroughbred.

Some said you were going too fast and that you would expire after the first mile or so. It's a 26 mile race uphill, reaching to the top of that mount, which is somewhat larger than Abe's Hill in Steinbach. No one said it would be easy. The officials said that the running would get tougher as you went along. But in that first mile you felt like you had wings on your Nikes.

Those people who said you set too torrid a pace...they were right. Oh, no one can blame you for wanting to tear up the track. But in the second mile you began to feel your lungs burn; you slowed to a walk while you heaved and gasped for breath. Those Nikes now felt like lead weights.

The mass of runners long caught up to you and passed you at a steady clip, leaving you in the dust. Upwards they jogged and slowly pulled away leaving you alone on the trail.

Suddenly a lone runner blew by you and abruptly turned 90 degrees and headed into the trees and underbrush. He crashed through the branches and headed off into the ever thickening forest until he disappeared behind the foliage. "Where was he going?" you asked yourself. You began to wonder if there was something in the depths of the forest you should investigate. But no, that couldn't be right, you thought, it didn't fit the master plan for racing. You trudged on with some determination to stay the course.

One foot in front of the other. Another step further. The course seemed so long and the race seemed to be longer than you anticipated. Sweat poured off your brow as you continued on albeit somewhat slower than you began.

At one point you looked back down the gently sloping hill and you noticed that you had not come that far. Looking up the increasing grade it seemed the way was longer than you thought. Times of discouragement came at various points along the course, but this was a mistake. You shouldn't have looked back when you were feeling this way.

From the corner of your eye you saw a break in the bush that lined the raceway. Before you could investigate, a small group of runners, ten or so, bust past you and, with some pause and deliberation among them, they decide to take the "shortcut." As they take this new path your eyes follow the new trail which seems to lead more directly to the finish line. It seems to, but you weren't sure. What did they know that you didn't know? You began to question your conviction about the race. You began to wonder if there was an easier way to win the prize.

What if the race organizers were wrong? What if the officials had no better idea of where this race ended up than the ten who went down this new path? Weary, disillusioned and feeling the hope of finishing drain away, you found yourself standing completely still, not moving, not taking another step.

Do you go back? Do you take the new trail? Do you continue on? Your aching feet and knees bloodied from having endured such trials along the way tell you not to abuse them any further. Or do they? Perhaps they are telling you that they have invested too much in sweat and blood to quit now.

You decided to keep going. You are continuing the race even though you still wondered about the detour.

You came another mile and were approaching another bend in the curve when down the hill coming straight at you was a whole mob of runners. What's going on? There were so many in the mob they threatened to pound you into the dust beneath their Adidas. "Sorry," one said as he shouldered you. "Sorry," another one said spinning you almost off balance. "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry." One apologetically explains as she rushed by you that they discovered they were going the wrong way. It was much easier to go downhill and so logic, plus their new leader, encouraged this new direction.

You got to be kidding, you thought. As the mob passed down the sloping hill back to where they began, you stopped to take stock of these confusing obstacles. Why were you running the race again? What was the purpose?

What were the instructions again? Oh yeah, you remembered, the map was pretty clear, even though you had never been that way before. You remembered some more: Watch out for detours. Don't get distracted. Stay the course. Remember the prize. That was the strange one. The prize! What did they say? Somebody came down from the top of the hill and started at the bottom, raced up the hill setting the course, and won the race. That's bizarre. The race is already won! But there's still a prize. And the prize goes to the ones who finish...not the ones who win.

That cleared up a lot for you. You started putting one foot down, and then another, and another, until new determination set a decent pace.

Up ahead you finally noticed that someone was going in the right direction and was setting an even better pace. That person ran with a style that impressed you, so much so that you decided there was something to learn from that runner. And when that runner jumped a fallen branch, or skirted a muddy puddle, you knew better what to do when you got to that obstacle. This is great, you thought. How encouraging to see someone run with such passion and purpose. It gave you hope of making it to the end.

While you pondered this new energy and example, you heard footsteps and panting behind you. Looking behind you noticed that someone was following you too. How long had he been watching you, following you? Maybe he saw the runner up ahead too. But no, the way the path curves he could only see you at that moment. Someone was following you. How did that little ditty go again?

Right now ... someone is following you.

Right now ... someone looks to you to show them the way.

Right now ... someone prays because they heard you pray.

Right now ... someone is watching you fight your personal battles.

Right now ... someone wants to be like you.

Right now ... someone is cheering you on.

Right now ... someone sees Christ in your life.

Right now ... someone admires your strength.

Right now ... someone is borrowing your faith because they have none.

Right now ... someone believes you are the best Christian they know.

Right now ... someone is hanging tough because you are standing tall.

Right now ... someone is smiling when they think of you.

Right now ... someone thanks God for your friendship.

Right now ... someone cares that you make the right choices.

Right now ... someone is following you.

Now there is more reason to stay on the path. Keep your eyes on the prize. Someone is following you. "...one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Jesus is both the champion of this race and the prize for finishing. You have decided to keep pressing on. Keep running. The end is in sight. But the race goes on. And as you follow the example of others, you yourself have become an example to others.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by 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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1-2).

The race goes on. Keep pressing on. The prize is worth all that must be endured. Waiting at the end is Jesus to embrace you and say “good race.” Press on!

AMEN