

August 14, 2022
"Taking the Baton and Running with It"
Jeremiah 1:4-10 / Hebrews 11:29-12:2
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I ran track for a couple of years in middle and high school. I started in eighth grade, having never run any kind of distance in my life. I ended up running the 400 and the 100m hurdles.

I was so-so in the 400; I won some races, I lost a lot more. But in the hurdles, I never lost a race. Impressive, right? I take some pride in telling people that. I take some pride in telling you all right now. I mean, how many people can say they were undefeated in anything?

My height was my obvious advantage. I was already 6-2, taller than all of my competition at the time. My long, lanky legs allowed me to three-step between the hurdles when everyone else had to take four. That was my not-so-secret weapon. And it propelled me to victory after sweet victory.

That was eighth grade.

I took that streak and my newfound confidence to high school track, where both came to a screeching halt. I thought I was fast; turns out I just had really long legs ... for an eighth-grader. Once I started racing against older kids, some of whom were as tall or taller, and most of whom were faster, reality quickly put me in my place. Brought me back to earth.

Relay races were my saving grace. I mean, not enough to save my track career – which also came to a screeching halt after my freshman year – but enough to save that season for me.

No longer the fastest, or even the most efficient, I was relieved to know there was still a place for me in the team game. As a relatively weak leg in a four-leg race, I could pass the baton to someone else to cross the finish line. And still – at least sometimes – win. To feel like I was part of something, like I had an important part to play.

That is, in essence, what the passage from Hebrews is about. The race of faith, passed along from generation to generation.

It was faith that got the Israelites through the Red Sea as if it were dry land. Faith that eventually felled the walls of Jericho. Faith that saved Rahab. Faith that propelled Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets. On and on. Faith conquering kingdoms of this world, establishing justice, obtaining promises, shutting the mouths of lions literal and proverbial, quenching fire, escaping the sword, putting foreign armies to flight, winning strength out of weakness. If you start at the beginning of chapter 11, before our reading this morning, you get a much longer list of faith heroes.

“Yet all these,” the text tells us, “were commended for their faith” but “did not receive what was promised.” They ran a leg on the relay race, and important leg, but did not cross the finish line themselves.

The unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews was writing to the second generation of Jesus' followers, followers who had witnessed and experienced serious persecution. Our reading this morning leaves out those details, verses 35-38: witnesses to the faith who were tortured, mocked, flogged, chained, imprisoned, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by sword, tormented, destitute, forced to hide in order to stay alive.

The word for “witness” and “martyr” is the same in Greek.

These early followers were understandably discouraged, to say the least, that the promised kingdom, the “kin-dom” of God as they understood it, as far as they could see, had not yet come. There was no finish line in sight. There were no victory laps.

But faith, like life itself, is ultimately and necessarily a team exercise. There is no “I” in team. We need each other in the moment, and we need each other across the generations. We stand on the shoulders of all the saints, all the ancestors, who have gone before us.

Those faithful followers, those determined pursuers of the divine promise, may not have seen or experienced the promised land themselves. They may not have crossed the finish line, but they ran their necessary legs in the relay. They passed the baton.

You can't help but think of Dr. King's final speech before an overflowing crowd in Memphis, Tennessee, in the midst of an ongoing sanitation workers' strike. April 3, 1968, the night before he was shot and killed, for so boldly daring to point – as so many others were with him – to another world, a different way. A better way, marked by love, equity, justice.

“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop ... I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

Faith, like life, is ultimately and necessarily a team thing – together keeping alive and well “the ASSURANCE of things hoped for, the CONVICTION of things not seen.”
(Hebrews 11:1)

Love is a team thing. Justice is a team thing. Activists know all-too-well the frustration, the discouragement, the disillusionment, of working so hard to dream and organize and agitate and disrupt and protest and resist for the sake of a more just and peaceful planet, only to see little, if any, fruits from their labor. Only to see, so often, one step forward and two steps back.

But over the long haul, within the race we're all running together, the labor is also the fruit. The labor of faith and hope and love and justice is a team effort; the baton passed side to side, and forward through time, generation to generation. Carrying and passing on the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Even if you don't ultimately or fully get to see for yourself.

Carrying and passing on the baton, moving closer and closer to the finish line, even if you don't cross the finish line yourself.

The writer of Hebrews offers such perspective.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely to us, and let us (US) run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

“Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” the text encourages, as those who mean to follow him and his way of love. Jesus who himself was tortured, mocked, flogged, imprisoned and eventually killed “for the sake of the joy that was set before him.” For the sake of love undeterred by the cruelty of a cross. For the sake of love undeterred, unconditional, unrelenting.

We are surrounded by “so great a cloud of witnesses.” We are not alone in this race. So keep running. And pass the baton when you need to.

Jeremiah, among the cloud of witnesses, is a poster child for that kind of perseverance. Jeremiah, the prophet, was not well received. It’s not hard to understand why. A few examples:

From chapter 5: “But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away...Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.”

Chapter 6: “Thus says the LORD, ‘Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’ But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ Also I raised up sentinels for you: ‘Give heed to the sound of my trumpet!’ But they said, ‘We will not give heed.’”

And finally, from chapter 8: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace. They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush.”

“The word jeremiad,” writes Frederick Buechner, “means a doleful and thunderous denunciation, and its derivation is no mystery. There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn’t denounce.”

It is not hard to understand why Jeremiah and his ‘thus says the LORD’ were not well received.

He’s rejected every step of the way. He receives death threats; there are assassination plots against him. He is tried before the courts, beaten, persecuted, imprisoned, thrown into a well where he’s left to die of hunger (though he is ultimately rescued).

And as Jewish tradition has it, though the book itself does not say so, Jeremiah was ultimately killed for what he said. For doing what God apparently told him to do, saying what God apparently told him to say. Jeremiah does not see the finish line; he does not reach the finish line himself. He’s worn out from the race. He desperately wants to stop, but he doesn’t. He keeps running.

His name literally means the LORD exalts, but if you read through the book of Jeremiah you know that most of the time he felt anything but exalted. We get from Jeremiah not one but six ‘laments,’ the first coming when he initially hears that the powers-that-be are planning to kill him.

Even as Jeremiah bemoans the injustice and unfairness he sees all around him, we hear him decry his own prophetic task: “I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

At one point Jeremiah goes into Jerusalem in search of just one person who “acts justly and seeks truth” so that the whole community might receive God’s pardon. He looks first among the poor and when he doesn’t find one there, he goes to the rich in hopes of finding one there. No such luck.

Jeremiah expresses absolute anguish over the suffering of his own people; over the judgment it clearly pains him to pronounce to them over and over again: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land...for the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me...Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Where is the finish line? Where is the promised land?

And his complaint—or more accurately, his prayer—extends to God. “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you”—and by you he means God—“are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.”

“Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!...Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” Where, O God, is the finish line?

All this—the physical, emotional and spiritual toll Jeremiah endures in trying, faithfully, to run his leg of the race—makes his call story all the more poignant. You can’t appreciate Jeremiah’s initial call without understanding the intensity of the labor to which he was called.

Jeremiah will eventually say, “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow,” but the word of God comes to him before all that, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” echoing Psalm 139, “and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

“Then I said,” – and here Jeremiah’s hesitation is not unlike prophets before and after him, including Moses – ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’”

Now if you get nothing else out of this sermon, please, please, hear this. Hear God’s response to Jeremiah: “Do not say, ‘I am ONLY a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I

send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.'"

Do not say, I am ONLY this or I am ONLY that. Stick this to your bathroom mirror on a post-it note. Don't sell yourself short. You are not ONLY anything, you are a beloved child of God! We need you on the team. You are not alone. Don't be afraid.

"When I dare to be powerful," Audre Lorde famously said, "to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

Trust that what you have the courage to give to the world now, in the pursuit of love and justice, during this one life you're given, will bear fruit long after you're gone.

In that spirit, hear Audre Lorde's poem, "A Litany for Survival":

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;*

*For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.*

*And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid*

*it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

*So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

We all have a leg to run, but the race is bigger than any one of us.

“Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.’”

Jeremiah took up the prophetic baton and ran with it, seeking a now that could breed futures, even when the running turned into stumbling. And even when the running turned into falling, he just kept getting back up. In spite of his fear. In spite of the fact that he could not see and would not reach the finish line himself.

He would eventually pass the baton, and so it goes.

As those who have received the baton, as those surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run and keep running with courage and perseverance the long, ongoing relay race of faith, of hope, of love, of justice, that is set before us – seeking a now that will breed futures filled with faith, hope, love, justice. Even when we can't see it ourselves.

Guide our feet, O God, while we run this race. May we run and not be weary. And when we are weary, or afraid, which we will be, may we trust that we can always pass the baton. And may we help others to trust that they can pass the baton to us when they're weary or afraid.

It's a team thing. It's a team thing.

May it be so.