



Loops and Zigzags

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Hebrews 12:1-4

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“So then let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us.” The older I get, the more daunting this text sounds to me. In literal, physical terms, the version of running that I do nowadays can better be described as a brisk walk. And, more to the point, spiritually I’ve been running this discipleship race for a long time, and there are days when I feel a little worn out. Perhaps some of you have had days like that, too – days when you wonder if the church is worth all the effort you put into it. If you have not had a day like that, God bless you. But if you have, then today’s text is for you, because it is written to a congregation that’s pretty tired.¹

We don’t know a lot of specifics about this congregation, so we don’t really know why its members are worn out. Maybe they are tired because they have had one too many pastoral turnovers lately, and it is steep, uphill work to get used to yet another voice in the pulpit. Maybe they are exhausted because they keep trying to turn their church in a more faithful direction, but nobody seems willing to listen. Maybe they are worn out because they feel like they have been doing more than their share, and too few people seem appreciative. Maybe they are depleted because they are Christians in a world that does not prize their values, a world that disparages and marginalizes their passions, a world that mocks their commitment to follow Jesus, or one that makes a commodity of their faith.

We don’t really know what is up with this congregation in Hebrews. What we do know is that no matter how much they love running this race, and no matter how much genuine joy they find in following Jesus, at the point when they receive this sermon, they are like marathon runners who have hit the proverbial wall, and they are not sure they can finish the race. And to help them power through that wall, and encourage them to keep going, the writer has one reminder and two bits of advice to impart.

His reminder is that they do not run alone; they are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses.” One scholar suggests that we think of the cloud of witnesses as a team that runs a relay race of faith.² For a while one person carries the baton, then another; we all make a contribution. And when we are not doing the actual running, we are offering support, prayer, and encouragement. None of us runs the race of faith on our own. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, who are or have been our fellow runners. Connie Henderson-Damon described them last week as “a gaggle of guardian angels.” As our testimonies of care have reminded us, the Christian love shared by gaggles of guardian angels can be life-giving; it can help us to power through walls of exhaustion and defeat.

¹ Thomas G. Long. *Hebrews* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997) 3.

² *Ibid.*, 128.

But even with each other's love and support, sometimes the race feels really uphill. That is especially true if we are carrying baggage we do not need to carry. When I used to go to Weight Watchers, we had a coach who often reminded us that every time we lost five pounds it was like setting down a sack of potatoes that we carried around everywhere we went. Let's admit it, we carry metaphorical sacks of potatoes in our spiritual and interpersonal lives, too. We can feel the heaviness: The weight of our sin. Our anger or resentment. Our grudges. Our disappointment in ourselves and others.

The preacher in Hebrews thinks this sin and weight drag us down. "Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up," he says. He invites us here to hard, spiritual work. But it is work that is worth doing; letting go of all the stuff that weighs us down can be as life-giving as the love we receive from a gaggle of guardian angels. Letting go forms us in humility. It teaches us to forgive and be forgiven. It builds trust. Letting go of the baggage of our lives is like losing extra weight; it allows us to be more energetic, more fully alive. Let it go, counsels the preacher of Hebrews. Let it go.

We have to let this stuff go, because the race we run is not an easy one, and we do not run it on a well-manicured track like an Olympic stadium. The track on which we run is full of twists and turns, loops and zigzags, detours and GPS directions that are all garbled up.

The picture on the front of the bulletin is one that I took a few years ago while I was on the island pilgrimage at Iona, in Scotland.³



Iona is the site of an ancient monastic community, and for about a hundred years it has been revitalized as a contemporary community that teaches people about worship, work, and the engagement of the church in the world. Every summer people come from all over the world to learn, work, and worship together. On Tuesdays the community does its version of a pilgrimage:

³ <https://iona.org.uk/>

a long, slow, contemplative walk around the island. They tell you to bring really good shoes, because the pilgrimage does not stick to paved roads. In this picture, we are going down a grassy, muddy, stony slope toward the sea. The footing in this section of the pilgrimage is uneven and precarious. One woman had a pretty nasty fall, even though we went slowly and carefully down the hill.

I'm taking this little detour, and showing you my vacation picture, because I think that the race we are running as a congregation and as Christians is on a path like this one. It has precarious footing, and takes us through a foreign terrain that we've never before encountered. It is a challenge to run a race on a track like this.

But, however challenging it is, this is exactly the path along which Jesus leads us: a path that's uneven, risky, full of loops and zigzags. It is the sort of path he followed, the racetrack on which he ran.

A couple of years ago I read a great book called *Putting Jesus in His Place*. It is written by a Norwegian biblical scholar named Halvor Moxnes.⁴ In the book Moxnes uses queer theory to examine texts about home, household, family, and kingdom. He makes the argument that Jesus was pretty countercultural, and that Jesus questioned the domestic and political conventions of his day. He did so from the margins of society. Jesus had left his household and village, and had nowhere to lay his head. In addition, Jesus operated on the fringes of political life; he lacked the power to put new economic relationships into place, or to reshape political life in Galilee. Instead, he created what Moxnes calls "imagined places" for people. He invited fishermen to leave their boats and follow him, and become fishers for people. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He touched lepers. He let prostitutes anoint him. He told stories about God's love for the poor, the sick, the outcast. In one small encounter after another, Jesus created imagined places for people, in which they could be whole instead of broken, loved instead of rejected. Jesus did that in his ministry, Moxnes says, by dislocating people from their old ideas and places, inviting them to run on different racetracks, and giving them new, imagined places to inhabit, places in which they could run free.

Look to Jesus, says the author of Hebrews, "faith's pioneer and perfecter." This is not a doctrinal statement. The preacher of Hebrews is not worried about whether you and I affirm the virgin birth, or believe in the bodily resurrection, or can say the Apostles' Creed with full confidence. This is a statement of accompaniment, not doctrine, and it's an invitation to imagination.

First United Church of Oak Park has been through a lot in the last several years. More than once you have been pushed off course and forced into detours you would never have chosen. The footing has felt precarious. That can be tiring for a body of Christians. From time to time it does feel like we are pushing through a wall of exhaustion. This is not where we all want to be. I know that. But the Bible reminds us that when we are following another detour, figuring out a way forward, and negotiating the uneven ground beneath our feet, we are entering territory where

⁴ Halvor Moxnes. *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

Jesus feels right at home. Our dislocation is his comfort zone. It is in places just like this and journeys just like ours that Jesus' imagination can take full flight.

"Follow me," says Jesus. When Simon and Andrew, James and John first dropped their nets and accepted Jesus' invitation, they had no idea what would befall them. Little did they know of the miracles they would see: Blind men receiving sight, crippled women walking tall, tax collectors repenting, social outcasts finding acceptance, multitudes being fed and satisfied. They never dreamed of the seeds they would plant: Seeds of hope, seeds of possibility, seeds of life. I'm sure they had no clue that they would be the rocks on which a church would be built.

Perhaps we are not quite as clueless as they were that day, standing on the lake shore. But neither has any of us fully entered into the imagined places that Jesus offers us. There is yet more adventure to be had, life abundant we have only begun to taste. "So then, let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us."

He is the Way (wrote W.H. Auden)
Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts,
and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek him in the Land of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city
that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage
all its occasions shall dance for joy.⁵

Amen.

⁵ W.H. Auden. *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*.