

EPIPHANY 5B – Feb 4, 2018

The Secret of Endurance

(Isaiah 40:21-31)

Back during my high school days, our football coach – Coach Bluhm, insisted that we had to compete in at least one other sport, preferably two others, actually, just so that we would stay in shape year-round. So my junior year I went out for basketball in the winter – was that ever a disaster! The basketball coach and I never did hit it off. And then, in the spring, I ran track, which went much better since Coach Bluhm was also the track & field coach.

Now I was a decent sprinter in my youth, believe it or not, so running the 100 was pretty much a no-brainer. In fact, even as a lineman I was the fastest player on the football team; in pads, that is. There was, however, a sophomore running back who like me, was also a sprinter. But he was a little faster than I was on the track...

However, for some reason Coach Bluhm also thought that I would make a good half-miler as well. Apparently, years before, he had coached someone I reminded him of, also a football lineman, who turned out to be a Nebraska state champion or something in the 880. (You can tell I'm a dinosaur since we still measured the distances in *yards* back then, instead of meters!)

Anyway, just before our first track practice, Coach Bluhm came up to me and asked if I would be willing to *try* the 880. "Sure," I said. After all, what did I have to lose, I thought. So after about an hour of stretching and conditioning, I joined the other distance runners on the track – half-milers, milers, and two-milers and we started running; at a pretty good pace, as I recall.

The star of our track team back then was a kid named Bobby Mueller who was an excellent miler. To give you an idea of just *how good* he was, in dual meets he not only won each and every race, and won easily, but typically finished his mile – 4 laps around the track – while his closest competitors were just finishing their *third lap*! You got it. In other words, he regularly lapped the entire field of runners...

Anyway, I was young and dumb as they say, and figured I could keep up with Bobby Mueller. I even took it as a personal challenge to show everyone that I was just as good as he was. (In retrospect, not such a great idea though!)

So, as we started running, I settled in directly behind him, right on his heels, so to speak; keeping the very same pace. And I hung with him and stayed there during the first lap around the track, and then well into the second one as well. But about halfway through that second lap, at approximately the 660 yard mark, I felt my right calf muscle begin to tighten up – then quickly seize up entirely in a major league cramp! So I started hopping on my remaining good leg, the left one, until it too seized up in an excruciatingly painful cramp and – now deprived of *both* legs! – guess what? I went crashing down to the ground; ending up sprawled out all over the place on the track. And watching the calf muscles on both legs literally contract into these hard, softball-sized *masses* underneath the skin! As all the other veteran distance runners stepped over, and raced past, me with smirks on their faces.

Needless to say, that was my *first* and *last* day as a distance runner.

I just wasn't built for it, I guess. Back in the day, I could run endless sprints just as long as there was a brief pause between them. Apparently I was blessed with more "fast-twitch" muscle fibers (that are good

for sprinting) than I was with “slow-twitch” muscle fibers (that are necessary for longer distances.) In other words, endurance just wasn’t my thing.

But in the years since, and through my daughter Sarah who ran cross-country in high school and college, as well as my sons-in-law, who were both distance runners as well, I have now come to realize that it’s not just about body type and muscle fibers, however. Or even staying hydrated; that is, taking in enough fluids. The secret to endurance, I have since discovered, especially for long distances, is also about *calorie* intake as well.

In fact, distance athletes apparently even have a term for what happens if they *don’t* consume enough calories while competing. Interestingly enough, they call it “bonking” and, as one writer has described it, it’s “the equivalent of running out of gas in the fast lane of the Long Island Expressway.”

Chris Legh, a lanky Australian triathlete, is a famous victim of this so-called “bonking.” According to an article in *The New York Times* some years ago, his meltdown at the 1997 Ironman championships is a classic cautionary tale. Apparently, just a stone’s throw away from the finish line that year, Mr. Legh’s limbs went as limp as a rag doll’s because he was both woefully dehydrated *and* underfed. One moment he was cruising along, running with perfect strides. The next, he had collapsed. (Even more dramatically, it sounds like, than my own tumble back in high school when I was trying to prove that I could keep up with Bobby Mueller.)

Now most of us worry about being *overfed*, don’t we? (And often times, rightfully so.) About consuming *too* many calories, in other words.

But endurance athletes, it seems, who literally race for hours, actually worry that they haven’t consumed *enough*. And, without adequate carbohydrates and electrolytes, as the writer of that *New York Times* article put it years ago:

“their senses will take leave and a full-blown bodily insurrection will take hold.”

In other words, “You can do all the training in the world, but if you go out too fast, or if you make a mistake with your nutrition, then your day is done,” said Mr. Legh at the time. “The bonk is not a lot of fun,” he added. “Sometimes it catches you before you know it.”

So here’s the thing. It seems to me that life itself is a lot like distance running. In other words, the key to life is *also* endurance. As someone once said, “Life is a marathon, not a sprint.”

And if that’s true – and I have come to truly believe that it is – in other words, if the key to life is endurance, then we too, not just distance athletes, *also* need to be thinking about the *secret* of endurance as well. We too need to be thinking about feeding our bodies for the long haul; not just physically, of course, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, *spiritually* as well.

Now marathons and triathlons and other endurance-type races are long and grueling for sure; without a doubt. But life *itself* – just *living* – can be equally, if not even more, exhausting because it doesn’t end – except at death. It doesn’t stop; life just keeps going on day after day after day. And it can literally wear you down. And wear you out...

The other night, someone on my pastoral relations committee asked me, “Are you having fun yet?” I was caught off guard by that question and I’m sure that I didn’t give a very coherent reply. But as I thought about it later on my ride home that evening, I realized that some days my answer is probably, “No.”

Some days, quite honestly, I'm just exhausted and feel run down. Maybe you feel that way some days too. Maybe more days than you would prefer or would care to admit. Because life – with all of its challenges and disappointment and heartbreaks and, yes, even tragedies can just plain wear you down. And life is relentless. It just keeps coming at us, doesn't it?

Now I'm not saying that we don't also experience wonderful blessings in our lives, or don't have happy and joyous moments that we celebrate and cherish. Of course we do! Or that I don't have them as well. Because I do.

I'm just saying that some days, and sometimes for entire *seasons* of our lives, life can be harder than usual; more difficult and downright exhausting: physically, emotionally, psychologically, and, yes, even spiritually.

Pastor James Lankin talks about a new Sunday school class they formed at the church where he is serving. It's a Sunday school class for the parents of preschoolers. Several names were kicked around for this new class; names such as "Seekers," or "Searchers," and even "Learners." But all of these, he said, seemed too removed from the everyday wear-and-tear of their lives. Finally, one idea rose to the top, he says. It was simple, truthful, and inclusive. The very next Sunday, when he walked by the classroom, he saw the name on the door. The laminated sign simply read, "Tired Parents Class." And that said it all, he observed.

So what's the answer? What *is* the secret? The secret of endurance... *in life?*

In our first reading this morning, we have a wonderful passage from the Old Testament book of Isaiah written during a difficult time in Israel's history; a time when *they* were tired and worn out from living in exile, and wondering if they had the strength and the stamina to go on, and to make the return trip

back home. A passage that I think can speak to us today, in our *own* struggles and our own weariness.

The passage begins with the words, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” And it goes on to remind the people that God has been a constant in their lives and in the life of the entire world, since the very beginning; indeed God is the *creator* of all that exists. And, as such, God has been and always remains, therefore, a constant source of strength whenever the times get tough, and the body, mind or spirit grow weary.

Later in the passage, those very same questions are asked again, “Have you not known? Have you not heard?” And then it says *this*: “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does *not* faint or grow weary...” What’s more, it goes on to say, “He gives *power* to the faint, and *strengthens* the powerless.” In other words, God is a literal reservoir of strength and power for those who are exhausted and weary and run down by life.

“Even youths will faint and be weary,” it continues, “and the young will fall exhausted...” Even young people are not immune from the weariness and exhaustion of life, in other words. However here’s the answer, here’s the solution, here’s the *secret*. “...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.”

At that same pastoral relations committee meeting this past week, someone else made the observation that a lot of Christians – especially young Christians – have a desire to work for justice and peace in the world. But they aren’t always as interested in what happens *here,,* in other words, in worship. I think that’s a fair assessment. And not just for young people either.

Worship attendance and participation seems to be a rather “hit and miss” proposition for Christians of *all* ages, to be perfectly honest.

And so I thought about that as well, during my drive home that night. Because *this* is the place, I believe, and *this* is the time each week when we are fed and nourished for the journey that we call life, the journey of faith; that long, arduous, sometimes exhausting, journey with all of its ups and downs, and ins and outs, and trials and temptations.

Years ago, I was at a conference on Christian education right here in the New Jersey Synod. And I can still remember something that an African-American pastor said that day. Because it has stuck with me ever since.

“White people,” he observed, “study the Bible to learn more about the Bible. Black people,” he said, “study the Bible in order *to make it through the week.*”

I’ll never forget that. It’s one thing, you see, to study the Bible merely for the purpose of knowledge and edification. But it’s quite another thing to study it because it gives you the strength and the stamina and the endurance to face life’s challenges that relentlessly come at you day after day.

And I think he was on to something there. We are *all* bombarded by the challenges and difficulties of life on a daily basis. Sometimes those challenges and difficulties can really get us down. Sometimes we run out of energy, and our endurance and stamina wear thin...

Now, going back to that Australian triathlete for a moment. As we heard, Chis Legh said that “you can do all the training in the world, but if you go out too fast, or if you make a mistake with your nutrition, then your day is done.”

Sometimes in life, itself, many of us go out “too fast” as well, don’t we? We race ahead of ourselves in life, at a frantic, unsustainable pace. And, inevitably and invariably, we “hit the wall,” so to speak (as distance runners would put it), and figuratively run out of gas. That kind of unrealistic pace is unhealthy and can even be dangerous.

I heard a story once about a Navy fighter jet that shot itself down over the deserts of Nevada while testing a new cannon mounted on its wings. The plane was flying at supersonic speeds, you see, but the cannon shells were *subsonic*. So what happened is this. The fighter actually ran into the shells it had fired seconds before because the jet was traveling *too fast!*

Sometimes we can be like that as well. Sometimes we can be barreling along through life at breakneck speed and run the very real risk of shooting ourselves out of the sky, figuratively speaking. The simple answer? Slow down.

In today’s Gospel, for instance, we heard how Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, and how by that evening the entire city was literally gathered at her door to *also* be healed. So what did Jesus do? He cured many of them, we are told. But in the morning when they went looking for him, because they assumed that he would keep *on* healing at such an unsustainable pace, even for *Jesus*, they found him off in a deserted place praying instead. Even Jesus, you see, had to slow down and recharge his batteries from time to time.

So the first secret of endurance is simply to slow down. Easier said than done, of course. But to recognize that we all have our limits, and that traveling at unsustainable speeds and pushing ahead at an unrealistic pace is both unhealthy and even dangerous.

But the second secret of endurance, as Chris Legh pointed out, has to

do with our nutrition; that is, to be properly fed and nourished. And I would argue that *this* is the place – in worship – where we come each week to *be* fed and nourished.

Because of a scheduling issue, I had to go to physical therapy for my knees this past Thursday at 4:45 in the afternoon. And, as I was working out, it just happened that the TV was turned to the “Beat Bobby Flay” cooking show. So here I was puffing along doing my exercises, all the while watching Bobby Flay and the guest chefs cooking up beef stroganoff in the first episode, and jambalaya in the second. Needless to say, especially at that time in the afternoon, my mouth was soon watering and my stomach growling. And I knew that I was hungry.

Well, I would suggest to *you* that whenever you feel tired and weary, whenever life is running you down and leaving you exhausted, whenever you feel that the pace of your life is far too frantic and unsustainable, what you are *really* feeling is a hunger for God, and the need to be fed and nourished by God’s word and God’s holy supper.

St. Augustine put it best, when he said, “Our souls are restless, O Lord, until they rest in thee.” All too often we seek to cure our profound sense of restlessness in life by doing *more* and also by doing the *wrong* things. Augustine realized that what we need to do instead is to do *less*, and do the *right* things – to find meaning, purpose, fulfillment, and peace... in God.

“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.”

The well-known pastor and preacher, the late John Claypool, once said,
“There are three stages of life. Sometimes we mount up as an eagle and fly.
We’re on top of the world.

“Sometimes we run, and we don’t get weary. We just keep going through the
routines of our lives.

“And *sometimes* it’s all we can do to just walk and not faint.”

And maybe that’s all we *can* do in those moments.

But this much we know; at each and every stage, and in each and every
moment, God is with us. And we are able to endure and to persevere because
God accompanies us every step of the way...

Amen.