

Finishing Strong: Wear the Polka Dot Jersey

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Romans 5:1-15/Isaiah 40:28-31

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. Romans 5:1-15 (NRSV)

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
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 (NRSV))*

Our Sermon series, “Finishing Strong,” really has two meanings. One is, of course, our focus on perseverance, but the other is aiming at our Capital Campaign, our Transformed Campaign. We began this in the spring, though we’ve certainly been planning it for many years. We’d postponed it a couple of times, began in the spring, and then took a pause through the summer as the pandemic continued to rage on. We began it again just last week, and we had the opportunity to find out so much more about this community center that we intend to build. I hope you can see the picture if you’re watching online, and there’s a picture in your bulletin. Last week I told you that we were at \$19 million towards our goal of \$23 million. This church is so amazingly generous. I’m just overwhelmed. We are now closer to \$20 million, so we can get there if we’ll all work together. These are three-year pledges, and we’d love to invite you to support this.

It was in 2013 that we had a capital campaign and raised almost \$40 million as we were expanding our facilities, building a youth building, a student ministry building on this campus for the families that are here in our congregation and neighbors around us. Most of everything we did was really for our congregation here. But this is tied to our DNA of being a congregation that wants to reach out to our community. So this Community Center is the lion’s share of this campaign. It has a student ministry building, almost just like the one we have here. It’s got a few

differences. It has a gymnasium, a commercial kitchen – and a teaching kitchen for PX Project, our workforce development program. A place for reVision, our work with gang-affected young people in the juvenile justice system or at risk. It's really a place for amazing things to happen.

So I wanted you to see the rendering. I found it so exciting this week and encourage you to think and pray about whether you'd like to support it. You can go to stlukestransformed.org and see all the information about it. There's a video, and each project has a little tab you can get the details on. I just hope you'll take some time and then think and pray about whether God's calling you to support this.

Let's join together in prayer. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel. Then O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

The Tour de France is the premier men's bicycle race in the world. It was begun in 1903 and has been run every year, mostly in the summer ever since except during World War I and World War II when France was occupied, and they were unable to race. It is 21 stages over 23 days and goes basically 2200 miles. It goes mostly through France though it does go outside of France sometimes. It goes both through the Pyrenees and Alps Mountains. It is a challenging race. So each day there's a certain number of points associated with it, and the leader of points gets to wear the yellow jersey, which means they're the leader on the next day. Once you get that yellow jersey, you fight to keep it and keep riding on forward. There's a green jersey, and that's worn by whatever rider that won that day's stage. The yellow jersey is compiled times. The green jersey is the sprinter's jersey, the one that won this day. Then there's a white jersey for the best young rider, aged 26 and under. But my favorite is the polka dot jersey. It's white with big red spots. It is the climber's jersey, worn by whoever is winning in the compilation of the mountain climbs. There are certain stages along the way that are the really tough mountain climbs. And there are time trials along the way of those to see who the best climber is.

One of the iconic climbs on the Tour de France usually is more often than not on the climb, not on the race. The race route changes every year, so it's not always the same. But one of them is called Mont Ventoux. It's really difficult because a little more than halfway up, the vegetation has been stripped away, and it's just white limestone rock. It's the middle of the summer, and it's super hot but the winds blow about 60 mph. So they're climbing on this incredibly steep grade with the winds blowing and the heat just bearing down on them. One of the climbers, a man

named Paul Maunder, writes this: “The air is dry and scarce. The crosswinds can have you leaning your bike just to stay on two wheels. And the heat reflects off the merciless rocks. A cyclist should not fear the gradient, the heat, or the wind. He or she should fear the combination of all three. In a race, tactics are minimal here. By the last few kilometers, toward the aptly named ‘storm pass,’ there is only road, white rock, wind, and pain.” (Paul Maunder, *re Mont Ventoux*).

Has there ever been a place in your life where there’s nothing but headwinds and pain? We all face some really difficult times in our lives. Some of ours more difficult than others. But all of us have those mountains.

They call the wearer of the polka dot jersey “The King of the Mountains.” I like the noble edge, the one who faces difficulties.

I’m going to tell you my favorite sermon illustration of all time (and I’ve been doing this for 40 years - more than that), and I reserve the right to use my favorite sermon at least every five years. I may use it more often – maybe next week. Who knows? But it goes this way – a man from New York is driving through the Deep South, and he stops for breakfast in Tupelo, Mississippi at a diner there. He goes in and asks for breakfast and orders two eggs over easy, bacon and toast. The waitress comes back, and she brings him breakfast. There are two eggs and bacon, and toast and then there’s this white stuff on the plate. Grainy white stuff with yellow butter floating on the top of it.

He says, “Ma’am, what’s that white stuff on my plate?” I wish I could do a New York accent, but I can’t. She says, “Those are grits.” He says, “I didn’t order grits.” And she says, “Oh, honey, you don’t order grits, grits just comes.”

You don’t order hard times. Hard times just comes.

So what can we learn in facing hard times from the kings and queens of the mountains? I have four things I think we can learn that these Scriptures teach us. First, kings and queens of the mountains realize they can do more than they ever thought they could. If I were a biker – which I’m not - and I were riding along, and there was a mountain there, I would look for some way around it. But you can’t always go around the mountains, can you? It doesn’t always work out that way.

When I was with our worship team, and we were talking about this sermon, Michelle Manuel and Julie Ellerbrock and our children's director, and a bunch of others launched into in perfect unison, some little song I'd never heard before. I guess it comes from the Girl Scouts or Camp Fire Girls or something. It goes this way: "We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day! We're not scared – uh, uh!" Hey, some of you know it – they're singing with us! But it goes on, "Long wavy grass – we can't go over it, we can't go under it. Oh, no! We've got to go through it." Then they say, "Swishy, swishy, swishy." Everybody's got a different thing – okay. So you have to go through it, when you come to the mountains, you can't go around them. You have to go over them. You have to go through hard times.

Here's what often happens. Someone goes through a terribly difficult time, and in the midst of that, someone comes up – I would do this. I say, "I don't know how you're doing this. I don't know how you're doing this. You're an inspiration the way you're going through this." And they respond almost universally: "I didn't know I had a choice. If I had a choice, I wouldn't have done it. I didn't know I had a choice." That's because that's the way it is.

Sometimes this passage of Scripture is misunderstood, and I think it's really important to get the clarity. Paul is not seeking out suffering. When Paul says, "I boast in my suffering," he's not seeking out suffering. The word "boast" in Greek is *kauxáomai*, and sometimes it's translated by some translators a thousand different ways. The New International Version says, "I rejoice in my sufferings." This one says, "I boast in my suffering." King James says, "I glory in my suffering." The word means "I hold my head up." Literally, it comes from a word that means "a strong neck that holds up one's head." I like that picture – "I hold my head up through my suffering." Because in the midst of it, God will get me through it. I will experience the power and presence of God, holding me up, getting me through this.

I don't boast in the suffering – I don't look for it. But I can trust that God will get me through it. I don't really have a choice.

The Scripture we read today - with that picture in your mind, then listen again to what he says. In verse two, he says, "We have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." (Romans 5:2). In which all these things are coming at us – all these hard times. I can stand up because I have the grace of God. Or verse 5: "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:5). I can do

this. Or from the Old Testament passage we read where even the young ones will fall down, exhausted, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.

Kate Bowler is a Professor of History at Duke Theology School at Duke Seminary, and she is a young woman in her thirties. In 2015 she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. She has a small child. It was devastating. She wrote a book in 2018 called *Everything Happens For a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*. Let me read what she writes. She talks about the presence of God and how you experience the presence of God, "That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact, I had grown so accustomed to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it. So I began to ask friends, theologians, historians, pastors I knew and nuns I liked, what am I going to do when it's gone? And they knew exactly what I meant because they had either felt it themselves or read about it in great works of Christian theology. St. Augustine called it 'the sweetness'. Thomas Aquinas called it something mystical like 'the prophetic light.' But all said, yes, it will go. The feelings will go. The sense of God's presence will go...But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, they said, they will leave an imprint. I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God." Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*.

I may not feel good all the time. When I talk to people who are going through hard times, they're honest about their anguish. Sometimes about not feeling God's presence. But they know God's presence has marked them.

The second thing is that kings and queens of the mountains develop courage and grit for the next mountain stage. They learn something on this mountain stage that they can use and develop and use on the next mountain stage.

A St. Luke's member gave me a gift of a book by Malcolm Gladwell called *David and Goliath: Underdogs, misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. Some of you may have read it. It's about stories of various small resisting big, easy versus difficult. In fact, one of the sections of the book is called "The Theory of Desirable Difficulty." It's not good when everything is easy. So the last story in the book is about a man named André Trocmé. He was a French pastor, and in the second World War after the Nazis invaded France, they set up the Vichy regime, which was a puppet government for Hitler. They began to gather Jews and send them to the camps. He was a pastor in the south part of France, and he was part of a denomination called the Huguenots. He lived in a small village, and the people there were largely Huguenots. This was a Protestant

denomination that had separated from the Catholic church around the time of the Protestant Reformation but not in association with Martin Luther. In fact, what had happened was that over the centuries, the Huguenots had been incredibly persecuted, and there had been genocide in the 1700s of these people. So they understood what it was like to be persecuted.

Trocmé and his friends said, “What’s happening here is wrong. So they said to all the Jews in France, “Come to our village.” They actually put ads in newspapers throughout France saying, “Jews are welcome in our village.” They came by the droves. Initially, they hid them, but then so many came they couldn’t hide them. When the Vichy regime came calling, they sent a group of students out to meet the generals with a letter from Trocmé and other leaders of the village. It was a long letter, but the last line was, “We have Jews, you can’t have them. We’re not going to let you do this.”

The little school that Trocmé ran grew from 18 students to 350 students. Almost all of them were Jews. He had to flee; he was chased down and then arrested and then exiled and ultimately exterminated. They interviewed his wife and asked, “Why would you do this? Why would you put yourselves at risk this way?” And they said, “You don’t understand – we’re Huguenots. We know what it’s like to be persecuted. So we never thought we wouldn’t help. We only thought of how we could help.”

Trocmé, when he was asked, said, “My parents died when I was ten, my son took his own life, nothing could be as bad as that. I can do anything now.”

I’m privileged to be on the Board of Houston Methodist Hospital and something which happened in 2001 you may know of. This was before I was on the Board. Tropical Storm Allison came through Houston – you all remember that. It was bad. Here at St. Luke’s, the whole basement was flooded, and we lost power, and there were about a million dollars of damage of equipment. The same thing happened at the Medical Center and in fact, the generators that were going to power the hospital in storms- where did they put them? – they were put in the basement. So they were useless. The whole hospital was without power. Well, the doctors and doctors, nurses and medical personnel, and everyone else there picked up the patients on their gurneys and carried them down the steps. Seventeen floors in one place. All the way down. They waded through the waist-deep water carrying the patients on their shoulders so they could get them into ambulances where they could be taken to hospitals out of the area where they could be cared for.

What's so interesting is that it became a defining moment for the hospital. They still claim today that that was the moment that changed at Houston Methodist Hospital in terms of the values that were driving them forward. When the pandemic came, they said, "We can do this – remember what we did in 2001?" When we go through hard times, when you get to the other side, you look back on them and say, "Man, I did that! I can do anything now!" It refines us and builds mettle. That's not to say that we look for it, Don't misunderstand me – you don't hope for those things.

The third thing is that kings and queens of the mountains sometimes crash their bicycles. Everything doesn't go right. Just because you're trying hard doesn't mean you're going to be wildly successful. A story I read was about this year's Tour de France race when in stage 14 during one of the mountain stages. It says, "Michael Woods helped create the day's main breakaway on stage 14 of the Tour de France, but his chances of victory were hampered by a crash. However, he found consolation by taking the lead in the mountains competition and by pulling on the polka-dot jersey. The Canadian hit the deck with 50km remaining when he slipped out on a gentle left-hand bend. He took the impact on his upper left leg, which ripped his shorts and left him with road rash. Woods was leading the 14-man breakaway at the time and while Mattia Cattaneo had to swerve to avoid him, none of the others were caught up. Woods quickly remounted and set about chasing back on, although he looked far from comfortable as the road continued to snake..."

Let me finish the point I was trying to make. Kings and queens of the mountains sometimes crash their bikes but they get back on them. We've been talking about perseverance, but there's a corollary to perseverance, and that's resilience. That says when you crash your bike, you get back on it. When terrible things happen, when it doesn't go well, when there's a setback or a problem, you find a way to get back on your bike.

Listen to what Paul writes in II Corinthians: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). Struck down, but not destroyed.

I confess that I was writing this sermon this week, and as I was writing it early in the week, I watched the Astros. Games 2 and 3 – how could that happen? They were awful! Awful! But then I got an illustration for my sermon! So now I can wear my Astros socks to celebrate it. Resilience! And I think the whole Astros arc of the story is about resilience over the last five years. At some point, you say, “Man, kind of screwed up. I crashed my bike; I’m going to get back on it.”

Look, I’ll spare you the stories about Abraham Lincoln losing ten elections before he was elected President. And I’ll spare you the stories about Michael Jordan not making his varsity basketball team. But I do want to give you these stories. A couple who endured – no experienced – an extramarital affair in their marriage and their family. And the trail seemed like they could never get through it. But they worked, and they worked, and it was not just a matter of saying, “Oh, you’re forgiven,” It was a matter of working to rebuild trust and staying at that and continuing to rebuild trust. Now they’ve been happily married for more than 40 years.

I can tell you the story about a woman whose husband died, and her heart was broken. She thought she could never ever love again. But she fell in love again. I can tell you the story about a friend of mine who battled with alcoholism and would be sober for three months and then fall off the wagon and be sober for three months and then fall off the wagon. Then once he was sober for a year, he fell off the wagon again. Despair took over him. But now, he’s been sober for 20 years.

Resilience means that you have setbacks, and you do crash your bike. Sometimes it’s our own fault. But you stay at it.

Here’s the last thing we learn from the kings and queens of the mountains. Kings and queens of the mountains know that Paris is at the end of the race. Here’s what I like about the Tour de France. Stage 21 is pretty much ceremonial. And the yellow jersey team – it’s a team sport – the team of the yellow jersey wearer – serves champagne to all the riders before the last day’s race. Not after, but before the last day’s race. So stay out of their way as they come into Paris – because they’ve been drinking. They come into town, and they ride three times around the Champs-Élysées. That means “The Elysian Fields,” the Greek definition of paradise.

We know that paradise is at the end of the race. We know that God has promised God will put things back together again. That which is unjust will be made right. That which is broken will be healed. That which is dead will be brought to life. And we have that picture ahead of us,

that paradise. So Paul can say, “Your work is not in vain. Keep on because this is what’s at the end of the race.” That’s why Paul says, “We have hope in sharing in the glory of God.” The glory of God is that moment that we get to share in. We get to be a part of that.

Let me close with reading this passage, and I invite you to just close your eyes and listen. Just listen to this picture of the Scriptural Paris. It says, “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:2-5a)

Gracious God, we confess we don't like the mountains. We don't like climbing difficult times. The challenges that sometimes overwhelm us. And yet, in those times, we experience your presence in profound ways. We find ourselves getting stronger, developing mettle for whatever comes towards us. We discover that we can get back on our bikes. We can get back up again and keep moving. All because we have a hope, a hope that you promised us of what's ahead. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.