



May 3, 2020

## **It's Not a Sprint, It's a Marathon**

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles  
*Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10*

Who would have thought it? What began as precautions has turned out to be a way of life — not the “new normal,” as people are fond of saying, but a new reality until further notice. When we began this coronavirus-warranted set of precautions, it was March. Now it is May.

We have been learning things along the way that we may not have wanted to learn. We have had to make sacrifices that we may wish we did not have to make. We have adjusted our way of life, which, before that time, was well-ordered and more or less pleasant. We have formed new habits of social distance. We have learned to use the phone, texting, and email more than we ever did before. We have avoided crowds, touch, travel, and more. The list goes on.

We know that, while not unprecedented, this is highly unusual. We have compared it to what happened at the time of the Three Mile Island event, if we lived in Pennsylvania at that time. We have compared it to the worries surrounding Y2K, and have wondered if perhaps we could have managed a bit more preventive steps so that the impact of this pandemic would have been lessened. We have compared it to when the planes hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the Shanksville field on September 11, 2001, and we have realized that the uncertainty, as well as the horror, are similar.

What have we — who trust in Jesus — learned in this time?

We are dealing with stressors that are different from but not disconnected to His own.

Peter talks about that in our New Testament lesson:

*“When He was abused, He did not return abuse; when He suffered, He did not threaten; but He entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”*

So, are we to think that Jesus was weak, and that we should be pushovers?

No. He suffered for a reason. Like a lifeguard who jumps into the water to save someone who is drowning, He exerted effort on our behalf, so that we could have life and have it abundantly.

And He entrusted Himself to God, the One who judges justly.

Sometimes we have to do that. Because, even though we know in our heart of hearts what is the wise, prudent, challenging, hard thing to do, not everyone else will agree with us. We will get a lot of pushback. But somehow — trust me, I know it to be so — when we entrust our entire pathway to God, God will respond in kind with a trustworthy response.

Jesus is in the business of saving people's lives. That is what the word “Savior” tells us.

So, you have to put Him in the same category as an EMT or firefighter, a police officer, a lifeguard, and so forth, whose daily work puts their lives on the line, on behalf of others — willing to go and to risk and to do, and all because of you. You are the person in need of help, you are the person trapped in the burning building, you are the person being held hostage by a criminal, you are the person who is being swept out to sea.

And then, Jesus comes along.

Who is Jesus?

Yes, Jesus is the One who teaches us the way; He is the One who reminds us who God is; He gives us precepts for living that are the high road of truth, love, and justice. But all of this is a subset to the larger reality that Jesus has come to save you.

And that is exactly why:

*“When He was abused, He did not return abuse; when He suffered, He did not threaten; but He entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”*

I am thinking that you may be up against something today that is overwhelming you. It is that problem that you cannot solve. It is a hill you cannot climb. It is a puzzle you cannot solve. It is more than you can handle on your own.

The good news is that you do not have to. Someone is here to help. Give it to Him, and I promise you, without a doubt, that He will solve and He will save. I don't know exactly how. But I have seen it happen.

Pray and trust, and someone will come into your life with just the right answer at just the right moment. They will take on what you cannot carry. They will give you the insight you could not find yourself. They will build you up and encourage you. They will take the problem on, and solve it.

Does it sound like a miracle? Yes. So, hang in there.

You are running a race that is **not** a sprint, it is a marathon. And God has given you most of what you need to run it. And God will provide the rest of what you need to run it, as the need arises — through the love and strength of Jesus.

I suppose that I have never heard a sermon on the strength of Jesus. I do not know why. He is the strongest man who ever lived. Not the Charles Atlas kind of strength. (If you don't recognize that reference, you can look it up later.) Not the kind of strength that comes from power lifting — wait, maybe I have that wrong. He has the power to lift you to where you need to be. So, talk about power lifting! Jesus is your man. And He will knock down whatever is trying to hurt you or bear you down, all the while lifting you up again — setting you on a place that is safe and secure and solid.

Trust Jesus. He has done it again and again. And He is ready to do that for you.

This is the wishful thinking of an optimist, someone will say.

No. This is the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ — which is not a Pollyanna approach to life. It is the God-of-the-ages approach to life.

Who do you always want on your side? The One who gets you to the finish line — first, second, third, or last — and therefore you are a victor, a winner.

My friend Sean is a marathon runner. I have seen him out running. In fact, I used to see him every day along Wekiva Springs Road, the main road between my home and my church in Florida. I would call out, “Hey, Sean!” and he would smile and wave and keep on running.

As I say, I have seen him out running. It isn't pretty. Sean sweats a lot, and he wears T-shirts that get drenched from the long runs he takes. Usually, Sean's hair is matted. And he has a runner's gait that is nothing like a dancer's stance. In fact, I am not sure how he does it. He is what we would call middle-aged.

But he has run the Boston Marathon a number of times, and he is fast. I am glad Sean is fast. Because he finished so quickly on April 15, 2013, that his mother and he were miles away having lunch when those bombs went off — at the finish line on Boylston Street, in the exact spot where his mother had been standing to watch Sean run past during the race.

Sean is also a dedicated youth leader in his church and has been on more mission trips than anyone else in the congregation. I believe the number is thirty — as a youth, and as an adult leader.

I asked him, once, if he had to sum up what makes for completing a successful marathon, and he said: "Practice and persistence."

I suspect you know a marathon runner who would say something similar, if you asked him or her. And I suspect you know any number of followers of Jesus Christ who would say something similar.

Jesus would also tell us that sometimes you have to save people who do not want to be saved.

We get that message all through Scripture and especially in the beloved words of Psalm 23. He is the Good Shepherd, and people are the sheep of His pasture who ought to be traveling along still waters and enjoying green pastures. It is a strange thing that they wander off and get into trouble. They think they can do it on their own. They think that they know better than God knows. They are certain that everyone's viewpoint matters, but not as much as their own. They doubt that God can do much for them.

Oh, there are any number of reasons they would give. But would a person trapped in a burning house turn away the firefighter who came through the flames in order to get them out safely? No.

A ship stopped, mid-ocean, at about ten after nine o'clock in the evening. The husband and wife, who were in their stateroom, noticed that the ship had stopped moving.

"Something is wrong," he said.

"What do you think it is?"

"I think someone fell overboard."

"Oh no, really?" she said, in quiet disbelief.

But a moment later, the ship began moving again, and on the TV monitor screen in the room that indicated the ship's progress, it was clear that the ship was turning around.

In a few moments, it stopped again. And then gigantic spotlights were trained back and forth, on the dark, deep, open ocean.

As that was going on, a launch was lowered into the water. And about half an hour after that, the ship started up again, returned to its original course, and was underway.

In that short period of time, the crew had rescued a woman who had fallen into the water from the thirteenth deck. She was tremendously lucky that she had not fallen onto some other portion of the ship on her way down. She was even luckier that people on the thirteenth deck had seen her fall, and had thrown a life preserver that lit up the moment it hit the water. She was even more lucky that the captain and crew were quick to act, and — luckiest of all — that she survived her ordeal.

Now, would a person who is all alone in the water, in the dark, mid-ocean, say, "Oh no, I don't need that life preserver"? But it is strange that people who are perishing resist what Jesus can do for them, isn't it?

I would urge them to reconsider. We all would urge them to take the help that is extended to them. We would say, "Let Jesus do what He came to do. Let Him keep you safe."

If you have a chance to save someone who does not think they need it, do that. And remember, it may take a while. But this is a marathon, not a sprint.

There is an old hymn, not much sung anymore. No matter, it expresses what we are talking about when we are experiencing unusual times.

*"Far off I see the goal — O Savior, guide me;  
I feel my strength is small — be Thou beside me;  
With vision ever clear, with love that conquers fear,  
And grace to persevere, O Lord, provide me."*

["Far Off I See the Goal," Robert R. Roberts, 1925]

Amen.

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