

“Hitting the Wall”

Luke 2:1-7

Series: Follow the Star

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The Woodside Church

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It started on Easter. My daughter Kristin and her husband Bryan gave each of us plastic Easter eggs. “Open them!” I was hoping for chocolate, jelly beans, marshmallow peeps. Instead, what hatched from the egg was a black and white picture. “We’re going to have a baby girl!” We were overjoyed. So started the marathon. There’s a lot to prepare for a baby these days. Doctor visits, ultrasounds, baby gift registry, birthing classes. Two baby showers – the one at our house was a Disney Princess theme complete with a castle. My son-in-law wanted a stroller made by Jeep. It’s an exhausting nine month marathon.

Then, at 2:06 am on November 3, we received a text from Bryan: “Baby Evie is here! Everyone is doing well. Let us know your plans to visit.” Nothing in heaven or earth could stop me from seeing our new granddaughter except one thing: November 3rd was a Sunday. Now the real marathon began. I need to do two morning services, race up to Manhattan, see the baby and be back for the evening service at 6 pm. I preached through the morning services in hyperdrive. I skipped two of the three points in my sermon. Nobody will notice. “Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem...any questions? Good. See you.” I rudely dashed out of the Classic service without shaking hands. Jumped into my car, slowed down just enough so my wife could do a flying leap into the front seat, rode the train to Penn Station New York. Rode the subway to Columbus Circle. Everything was working perfectly! We were going to make it!

And then we hit the wall.

November 3rd was not just a Sunday. It was the Sunday of the New York City Marathon. And the finish line was right by Columbus Circle. All 8 million New Yorker crowded into that one spot. Even Columbus looked worried. I wanted to shout, “It’s great you just ran 26.2 miles, but can you walk two more feet and get out of my way?” But I didn’t. Slowly we weaved our way through that wall of humanity.

Ever hit the wall? Pastor Bryan Wilkerson describes the moment it happened to him while running the New York City Marathon.

At about mile 16 or 18, you hit the wall. You're absolutely miserable. Physically and psychologically, you're busted. All you want to do is stop running. I remember passing one of the first aid stations. There were runners lying on cots—pale and gaunt, with IVs dripping into their arms. I thought to myself, *Those lucky dogs*. At that point I began to despair. I imagined myself having to go home and tell everybody I didn't finish. Why did I ever sign up for this race? What made me think I could do this?

Life is a marathon. The moment you’re born they fire the starting gun and you’re off. Infant to toddler to preschool, elementary to secondary to college and career. Marriage, moving vans,

children and more moving vans. Next comes empty nest, downsizing, retirement and then the finish line. We're always running. That's why they call it "The Human Race."

Even getting through Christmas can be a marathon.

- It's dangerous to decorate. The Consumer Product Safety Commission says 14,700 people visit emergency rooms due to Christmas decorating accidents.
- It's stressful to shop. In 2018 the National Retail Federation says we spent \$717 billion in November and December.
- It's rough on relationships. Data from Facebook posts and statuses reveals the most popular time for couples to break up is two weeks before Christmas. The second most popular is two weeks after Valentine's Day.

Maybe in your marathon through life you've hit the wall. Physically and psychologically, you're busted. You're exhausted. All you want to do is stop running.

- Your college courses or your career is stagnant or losing steam
- Your marriage is stumbling and limping along
- Your family is fractured and running in different directions
- You've gotten off track following an affair or an addiction
- You or someone you love is struggling with an illness that threatens to end the race.

Life, like a marathon, can be lonely. You keep running after affirmation, affection, appreciation, acceptance. And then you hit the wall.

There were a lot of marathons on the first Christmas. Mary and Joseph covered more than three marathons from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the last weeks of her pregnancy and then ran more miles to escape to Egypt. The shepherds, "hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (Luke 2:16). The wise men spent two years on their thousand mile marathon following the star to Jesus.

When Lisa and I finally made our way through the multitude at the marathon, we raced up to the eleventh floor of the hospital and arrived at the room to find – nothing! The room was empty. Then Bryan, our son-in-law, came in to tell us mother and baby were at a class. Man, they start education early in New York. Time was ticking. I didn't want to miss the baby.

There were some on that Holy Night who missed the baby born to save us. Herod was too angry at God to journey the short distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. No baby born in a manger would take his kingdom away. The chief priests knew where the Messiah would be born but they were too busy with their studies and rituals to search for Him. The people partying in Bethlehem were not interested in another screaming brat. So they all missed the arrival of God's Son. Today there are multitudes who are missing God's greatest gift. One statistic says 92% of Americans celebrate Christmas yet only 46% celebrate it as a religious holiday. Some are too busy indulging, some are indignant with God and some are just indifferent. Why should you welcome God's newborn Son into your life?

Jesus was born to run your marathon with you. On Christmas, God entered our race – the human race. God became human. God came to be with us. Scripture says,

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). Matthew 1:22-23

After tensely watching the minutes tick by, my daughter Kristin entered the room with her beautiful new baby Evelyn Vera Kliefoth. When I cradled her in my arms I was overwhelmed by the intense love and the deep joy I felt for someone I just met. After all, Evie can’t talk or walk, hug or kiss, speak or smile. I thought she smiled at me but they told me it was just gas. The only thing she could do I didn’t want to deal with. Human babies are born completely dependent and defenseless. It would be a few weeks before she picked up her head.

That’s how far God will go to be with us. The one who traveled the longest marathon, the first Christmas, was Jesus. He didn’t just descend from the lofty heights of heaven to the dark depths of the earth. He surrendered all His kingdom, power and glory in heaven to become a helpless human baby. The One who held all creation together now depended on the nourishment of Mary. The One who ruled the cosmos needed Joseph to defend Him from rulers like Herod.

Why did Jesus take such a risk? God wants to be near you, beside you, with you. He is not a distant, wrathful thunderbolt wielding tyrant. He is the God who comes near to be with you in your heartache, your loneliness, your anxiety, your confusion, your suffering. He is running the marathon alongside you.

Why? He wants to put courage in you. From time to time, we all could use some courage. When we think of courage the image which comes to mind is a valiant warrior or a roaring lion. Yet courage is more just the voice inside us which says, “I will not give up. I will try again tomorrow.” God comes to be with us so He can put courage in us. In fact the word “encouragement” means to come beside someone and put courage in them. Starting on January 5th, the first Sunday of the New Year, we’ll discover how we can receive courage from God and give more courage to each other. You’ll learn skills on how to be encouraging in your marriage, with your children, at school and work. Join us and let’s make 2020 a courageous year!

Now sometimes you need more than encouragement. That’s why **Jesus was born to get you over the wall.**

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:10-12

The angel did not say He would be a prophet, a poet, a philosopher or a politician. We’ve had plenty of those. He will be a Savior. A savior is someone from the outside who lifts us out of the problem, who delivers us from danger. When runners hit the wall it means they’ve suddenly run out of power to go another step. All of us hit the wall on this marathon we call life. We run into something we can’t stop, can’t escape, can’t beat. We are powerless. It could be a hurt, a habit, a hunger, a hatred. No matter how hard we push we keep hitting that wall. Then we discover all

these are symptoms of a deeper problem called sin. We work hard to cure the symptoms and fail to stop the disease.

God came down to get us over the wall of sin. The most famous of Bible verses says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-17

Even Laura Demarest, a caver with 19 years of experience, can get stuck underground. Three years ago this month, Laura and six caving friends were entombed for 40 hours in the Binkley Cave in Indiana. Heavy rains on the surface flooded the cave and blocked their escape. The space was barely tall enough to sit up.

In the end, a team of rescue personnel came to our aid as the waters were receding. They brought us food, water, warm clothes, and smiles. One later commented when he reached our little hovel, the smell was fantastically terrible from all of us clustered together for so long in our stinky cave gear. But he said it was the best thing he had ever inhaled.

It took at least four hours of exhausted wading, scrambling, and crawling for all of us to exit. We were greeted on the surface by relieved and jubilant family and friends, bright lights, medical personnel, fried chicken, and a very inviting campfire. It was surreal. I wanted to celebrate with friends. I wanted to go home and sleep forever.¹

The Son of God descended into our cave to rescue us. I'm sure this world stank to high heaven. Yet He comes to be with us. He does for us what is impossible for us to do: to get out of our cave, to get over our wall. Yet that's not the end. God is also preparing for us a party with our family and friends on the surface above.

Jesus was born to lead you beyond the finish line.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Matthew 2:6-7

When I lead a Holy Land trip, I always take the group to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It is one of the oldest, continuously used churches in the world. Many are surprised to find it is built over a cave. Animals and their mangers were often kept in caves and the most ancient tradition tells us Jesus was born in this cave. When He entered our world, He came into our cave. Yet there is another cave only about 5.5 miles away in Jerusalem. In the Bethlehem cave, Jesus was wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger. In the Jerusalem cave, Jesus was wrapped in cloths and laid in a tomb. The Bethlehem cave tells us He descended to live with us. But the empty Jerusalem cave tells us He rose so we can live with Him forever. Christmas and Easter tell us when your life marathon is over, it doesn't have to be over. When you receive Jesus, when you believe in Jesus, when you follow Jesus, your life is not over when you cross the finish line. You discover this life

¹ Laura Demarest, "What It's Like to Be Trapped in a Cave," The Washington Post (7-6-18)

is just the warm up. The real life awaits you and me beyond the finish line. That's what Paul, one of Jesus' followers, found out. At the end of his life he wrote,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.
2 Timothy 4:7-8

Paul didn't fear the end of his race. He looked forward to the finish line because he knew Jesus was preparing an eternal celebration for him on the other side.

Tonight I invite you to let Jesus lead you as your Lord and Savior. Let Him be with you, lift you over your wall and lead you across the finish line into eternal life. Tonight you can take a step and commit or recommit your life to Jesus Christ, let Him guide you through this marathon called life and beyond the finish line into eternal life. Join us for the Encouragement message series. Join a Growth Group – a community of believers who will support you as you run your race. Sign up for Pizza with the Pastor and discover how Woodside can help receive God's strength and peace.

I did make it back in time to preach at the Higher Ground evening service. It was an incredible marathon day. The one memory that stood out for me above all others was the moment when my daughter wheeled her sweetly swaddled newborn daughter into the room. Nobody would call that short distance a marathon. Yet I knew in my heart that I will remember that moment when little Evelyn takes other steps. I'll remember that moment when she takes her first step, when she goes off to her first day of school, when she leaves home for college, when she walks down the aisle, when she presents to me her first born child.

And I know Evelyn will be there with me, along with the rest of my family, when I cross the finish line at the end of my life marathon. My greatest hope and prayer for her and for all of you is that you will cross the finish line and enter the great celebration God has planned for us. It will be the greatest family reunion of all. For no one will ever have to say goodbye again.