

“Looking Back”
Hebrews 12:1-2
All Saints’ Sunday

November 1, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

As some of you may know, I used to be a runner.
Can’t run any more, injuries took their toll, but when I was
younger, I loved it.

Road races, cross-country and track back in high school...I ran a
marathon 25 years ago...this was what I did for exercise, this is what I
did to release stress.

Now I realize that not everyone appreciates running.
Not everyone has been in a track meet or competed in a road race.

So I want to lift before you one of the cardinal rules of running that
my track coach used to preach.

The rule is this:
When you’re in a race, NEVER LOOK BACK.

See, the tendency is to want to see who’s behind you.
But don’t do it, my track coach would say.

Especially at the end of a race, never turn your head to the right or
left...it slows you down...just look straight ahead toward the finish line,
keep your eyes focused on where you need to go.

When you’re running a race, never look back.

Of course, this is more than just good advice for running.
It’s also what the Bible teaches, in various places, Old and New
Testament.

Do you remember the story from Genesis 19?

When Lot and his family were rescued by angels at the city of Sodom, because God was about to destroy Sodom?

The angels said to Lot's family, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere..."

Do you remember what happened to Lot's wife?

She became a pillar of salt.

Why was she turned into a pillar of salt?

Because the Bible tells us that she "looked back".

Jesus spoke about the danger of looking back.

Gospel of Luke, end of chapter 9:

"Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and...[what?] **looks back** is fit for the kingdom of God.'"

So we come to our text from Hebrews.

A familiar text, one that uses the image of running a race to describe the life of faith:

"...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."

Sounds like the same message:

Keep your eyes focused on what's ahead.

Keep your vision on Jesus, who leads the way.

Is that what this text is saying?

These words from chapter 12 come immediately on the heels of a longer passage in chapter 11. A passage in which the writer talks about past heroes of the faith:

“By faith Noah...built an ark to save his household...”

“By faith Abraham obeyed...”

“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea...”

“By faith the walls of Jericho fell...”

What is the writer of the letter to the Hebrews doing?

Looking back.

You see, looking back may NOT be good advice if you're on a track. But if you're journeying by faith, there are occasions when looking back is essential to taking the next step.

Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry recalls preaching at Harry and Megan's wedding a few summers ago:

“...preaching...at St. George's Chapel. I realized that there was a whole host of people who formed and shaped me to say what I said. It wasn't just Michael Curry [preaching]...It was a host of people and they were speaking in that moment.

“...there was a moment after the sermon I sat down...
and...I thought about my grandmother.

“And I thought about the host of slave ancestors that I never knew who were before me...they believed in a God who's bigger than time in history.”

Curry also recalled a couple from his past named Dr. and Mrs. Bullock. He remembered how, when he was a young boy, his mother had a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

They were visiting family in New York City at the time. So his mother was there in New York, in a coma, but their home was in Buffalo.

Michael and his sister had to get back home to go to school. They couldn't stay there with their ailing mother.

And their father—he was a pastor, he had a church to tend to in Buffalo. So he took his children back home, and Michael's father spent his weeks going back and forth between Buffalo and New York.

And when their father had to go to New York to visit their mother, it was Dr. and Mrs. Bullock who kept Michael Curry and his sister at their house, so they could go to school, while their father was away.

He remembered them too.

“Man, I tell you when your life is lived as part of something greater than yourself...you could march through [anything] for a heavenly cause if you have to.”

Those people he remembered that day—they were, the Rev. Curry said, “a cloud of witnesses” —and they were with him, as he preached at a wedding that the whole world was watching...¹

Do you see the power that comes from looking back?

¹ As told on Kate Bowler's podcast, "Everything Happens," a transcript of which can be found at <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/bishop-michael-curry-the-power-of-ordinary-love/>.

Looking back is not simply an act of nostalgia.

We look back—according to the writer to the Hebrews—because we are a SURROUNDED people.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

Have you ever thought of yourself as a surrounded person?
Not surrounded by fear, or surrounded by obligations.
But surrounded by the saints of God?

When I think of being surrounded, the person that comes to my mind is my grandmother. When I was a boy growing up in Michigan, we would always spend Christmas at my grandma and grandpa’s house in California.

She treated me special, made me feel loved, and in some mysterious way I cannot explain, she helped share the Christian faith, made the grace of God very real for me.

How did she do it?
I don’t know how she did it.
But I do remember there was one thing she always did.
The simplest act in the world.

Whenever we would go to California, my grandmother would always pull me aside, and at least once during the visit, she would say to me: “Ben, remember—you will always have a special place in my heart.”

So when I was 12 years old and my grandmother died from cancer, I was devastated. I remember going to the funeral home, her body was

there in the casket. It looked like her...but it didn't look like her...and I was upset, and I started to leave the room.

But then I knew I had something I needed to tell her.

So I went back to the casket, and I said to her, "Grandma, you will always have a special place in my heart too."

Knowing that you are not alone at this moment.

Knowing that the community of saints is with you at this moment.

That's the first reason the writer to the Hebrews says we need to look back.

And the second reason is this.

Not simply because we are a surrounded people.

But because we are a SERVANT people.

Did you notice how our text puts it?

"...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..."

Not the race we choose.

Not the race that we decide we can win, or even finish, as if we're in charge of our lives.

But the race that is chosen for us.

That is set before us.

That's what it means to be God's servants right now, I think.

To run the race that God has set before us.

How will we run that race right now, at this very unusual time in the life of our church?

It helps, I think, at times like this...to look back.

To look back and see how other servants of God have run the races that were set before them.

I'm confident that I'm not the only one who has been shaped by a grandmother along the way.

The Rev. Craig Barnes tells the story of growing up with his two grandmothers:

his City Grandmother,
and his Country Grandma.

Both women, he says, were products of the Great Depression, that was the race they had to run. And both were convinced that it would return anytime. But the ways in which they coped with that fear were remarkably different.

Barnes says that his City Grandmother tried to RISE ABOVE her fear. She was an elegant lady, and even though she had very little money, she insisted on teaching her grandsons about STYLE and MANNERS and GRACE.

There was an appropriate way to live, an appropriate way to behave.

The difference between the two grandmothers was most obvious at the dinner table.

City Grandmother always had a lace tablecloth, very elegant. The grandchildren always needed to be cleaned up and ready when they came to this very nice, very pretty table.

And when they got to the table, the first thing the grandchildren would always notice was that there were TOO MANY FORKS. Forks over here, forks over there, forks were lined up everywhere.

Why all the forks? It's confusing...but City Grandmother took a lot of pride in teaching her grandsons which forks to use at what time.

And not just forks—you had to remember other rules too:

Like you always stand up when a lady arrives.
You always keep your napkin on your lap.
You always keep your voice at a certain level, never let it get too loud.

And the LAST thing you wanted to do was spill your drink on that pristine, lace tablecloth. See, it was **A LOT OF WORK for a little boy to eat at City Grandmother's table.**

When Barnes and his brother would go down to the FARM, to Country Grandma's house, things were different.

They always ate in the kitchen,
on a red and white checkered vinyl cloth—
and this tablecloth took spills just fine.

You only had ONE FORK at Country Grandma's table. If it fell on the floor, you just picked it up and used it again...only you HAD TO BE QUICK, because there was always a dog nearby, keeping vigilant lookout for spilled food and forks.

The grandchildren had no idea who would be in Country Grandma's kitchen on any given day. Sometimes it was family, but sometimes complete strangers were there. People right off the road—

they would come, and they were always welcome in Country Grandma's kitchen.

The food was plentiful, and even though Country Grandma also had very little money, there was always LAUGHTER at her table.

She was a BIG WOMAN.

She loved to tell jokes, and she loved to laugh at her own jokes. Whenever she laughed at her own jokes, she would slap the table THREE TIMES...slap, slap, slap—in this very Trinitarian sort of way.

Barnes says that even though he was much more comfortable at Country Grandma's table, he was grateful that BOTH TABLES were a part of his life. Because city Grandmother taught him things about—

civility,
and respect,
and hard work—
lessons he has never forgotten.

While Country Grandma taught him things about laughter, and hospitality, and joy...lessons he has never forgotten.

And Barnes knew, he always knew, that he was always welcome at BOTH TABLES.²

Now this pandemic may not be the Great Depression...but it's a heckuva race, nonetheless.

How will we run it?

² The Rev. Craig Barnes told this story at the Mid-winter Lectures at Austin Theological Seminary in 2012.

Because this race isn't over yet.

How will you run it?

As you consider how you will do that...may I suggest that you look back?

Look back to those who have come before you.

Look back to those who have modeled service and sacrifice for you.

Look back to those who have taught you something—
 about laughter and joy,
 about hard work and hospitality,
 about rising above your fears...

That would be a faithful way to spend this All Saints' Sunday.

And as you look back and reflect on those people, let me invite you to recall one final point that I think our Hebrews passage makes:

Not just that we're a surrounded people...
 Not just that we're a servant people...

We are also a STORIED people.
 It's a story we've inherited.

We are not the authors of the story.
 We are servants of God with important roles to play.
 But we are not in charge of the story.

Will Willimon tells of the time that he was visiting a man who was dying. Willimon asked him if he was afraid.

“No,” the man responded, “I’m not fearful because of my faith in Jesus.”

To which Willimon replied, a bit cluelessly:

“We all have hope that our future is in God’s hands.”

To which the man said:

“I’m not hopeful because of what I believe about the future.

I’m hopeful because of what I’ve experienced in the past.”

“I look back over my life, all the mistakes I’ve made, all the times I’ve turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed, and got lost. And time and again, he found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn’t looking for him. I don’t think he’ll let something like my dying defeat his love for me.”³

Do you see what that man was doing?

He was looking back.

Not at the story he had written with his life.

But at the story that God had written, a God who was always at work in his life.

Which is, of course, our story too.

Now...I realize that your neck be getting a bit sore at this moment. You’ve spent the better part of 20 minutes doing all this looking back, your neck may be sore.

So you can look forward now.

³ William H. Willimon, “Undone by Easter: Keeping Preaching Fresh,” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.

And as you do, as you look ahead to the rest of this day, or this week, or this year...I want you to consider the story that God is writing in your life.

Consider the people whom God has sent to you...
and the gifts that they gave you.

Gifts of hope and grace, gifts of faith and generosity and love...

Look forward ask yourself:
With whom does God want me to share those gifts?

Amen.