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10/8/23, Philippians 3:12-14

“The Best is Yet to Come”

There’s a multi-Emmy award winning reality show consisting of teams of two people. With a limited budget, these teams of two embark on a race around the world that rewards \$1 million to the first team to reach the final destination. It’s called The Amazing Race.

What I notice is that the challenges they face in this race around the world are the same challenges we face in real life, only on the show, they’re amplified. The teams of two can be a couple, family members, or friends. They spend a lot of time with one another, making decisions under pressure. Some of the teams fight amongst themselves the whole time.

They might start in Los Angeles and get a clue that says, “Get to the Hilton Hotel in Madrid.” Then, they face real life decisions. What’s the best way to get to the airport? Which team will book the best flight? What if something unexpected comes up along the way? They go all over the world and have incredible experiences. It really is an amazing race.

I want to suggest you and I are in an amazing race right now. In his New Testament letters, the apostle Paul sometimes used the metaphor of a race to talk about faith. In today’s reading, he doesn’t say it explicitly, but you get the sense of it. We might think of his words “straining forward” and “pressing on toward the goal” as running toward the finish line. We might think of “the prize” he mentions as a trophy or a medal one might receive at the conclusion of a race.

This is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible. Paul writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” He goes on to say, “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I find those words incredibly inspiring. I’ve run in a few road races in my life and it’s true. When you’re in a race, you’re not focused on the past. You focus on what lies ahead. You press toward the goal. If anyone had reason to be proud of who they once were or content with what they accomplished in the past, it would’ve been Paul.

He lists his credentials as part of God’s people. He was circumcised as every good Hebrew male was. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was as Hebrew as Hebrew people got. He was a Pharisee, which means he was very learned and was an expert in the law of Moses. He was so dedicated to the tradition he even persecuted the followers of Jesus. He lived a righteous life.

However, because Jesus took hold of him and Paul embraced this new relationship, who he was in the past, no longer mattered to him. He was ready to forget who was and all his accomplishments in the past and look to what the future held.

When I first started in parish ministry, I went to visit an elderly couple in their home. I’m guessing they were in their late 80s. They were world travelers. They had this one large wall in their house that was all framed photographs of places they visited. I remember thinking, “Someday I want a wall like that. I want to be able to look back upon my life and have fond memories of the places I’ve been and things I’ve done.” Most of us have photos of people and

places from our past that we remember fondly. If not photos, we might display awards or diplomas and reminders of life's achievements.

My family teases me about the plaque I display in my living room which I received from the Berkshire County Humane Society. I keep it next to the framed photo my ex-wife submitted for the 2003 Feline Furr-Tography Contest. I hate to brag, but our cat Putter and I won the Owner/Cat Look-Alike Award.

I think it's a natural thing to do, particularly when one becomes older, to look back and remember, and perhaps find contentment in what one did and accomplished. We might take satisfaction in a long career. We might look back with nostalgia on the years shared with the love of our life. We might take pleasure in the fact we raised kids and released them into the world to have their own lives. It's easy to be focused on the past.

And here's the thing about what Paul is saying in the text this morning. Whatever the past or the present has been like, the future will be better. If we look back on our life with regret, wishing we had made different choices or taken advantage of opportunities when they arose, Paul wants us to know our future holds something far better.

It's that image of the bison on the plain. I've shared this before, but it's worth repeating. Cows will walk away from a storm, which means they'll stay in it longer as the storm follows them. When a storm comes, bison will face it and actually walk towards it. They instinctively know that if they move forward, they will spend less time in the storm and eventually come out to blue sky and sunshine.

Storms are something we go through and come out on the other side. There's a line from the movie "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel" which puts it another way: "Everything will be okay in the end. So, if things are not okay, it's not the end."

There was a thing called the "It Gets Better Project" intended to empower and encourage queer youth. You may have seen these videos in which LGBTQ adults tell kids: If your parents don't approve of you, or if your church doesn't accept you, or if you feel like nobody loves you or understands you, keep moving forward in life, because it gets better. You eventually find support or develop resilience. The message is to keep going.

On the other hand, even if life has been good and we've accomplished an enormous amount, what God has in store for us will be even better. Even if we can't imagine life getting any better than it is now, the best is yet to come. Paul talked about someday "attaining the resurrection from the dead." For him, that was the most glorious thing one could experience. That may have been the prize to which he was looking forward at the end of his race.

For me, running road races started when I was in eighth grade. Because the middle school did not have a cross-country running team, the school system I attended allowed eighth-graders to run with the high school. I've always remembered my very first race. It was an invitational, so there were dozens and dozens of kids from various schools, maybe 100.

When the starting gun went off, everybody sprinted. I thought, "What in the world? I can't run 3 miles at this speed. What in the world have I gotten myself into?" I learned that the initial sprint was just for people to establish a position. Very soon the pace moderated.

The finish line was set up at the opposite end of the high school football field. All the runners emerged from the woods and completed the race by running down the middle of the entire length of the field. Parents and students lined the edges and cheered from the stands.

Toward the end of the race, I was hurting. I had a cramp in my side. I felt like walking and maybe finding a different sport in which to compete. Lots of runners finished ahead of me, but when I reached the football field, and I could see the finish line at the other end, the pain eased and I realized I couldn't stop now.

In fact, I picked up the pace. Part of it was knowing that once I crossed that finish line I could stop running. But mostly there's something about seeing the finish line. I wanted the satisfaction of knowing that I finished strong. I knew that my teammates, who finished their race ahead of me, would be there to give me a high five and welcome me to the long-awaited finish line.

And I'm here to tell you that wherever you are in your amazing race, finish strong. You've come this far. You've dedicated yourself to the life of the church. You've found ways to serve others and love your neighbor in every stage of your life. You've invested financially in God's work through this church. You've trusted in the promises of God. Don't take your foot off the gas now. In fact, the closer we come to the finish line, the more energized we ought to get.

No matter how old you are, no matter what you have accomplished or left undone, keep going! It ain't over till it's over.

Press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Press on. The great football field in heaven is lined with cheering people, with those who have already finished their race.

Press on, because the best is yet to come.