



## RELAY RACE

November 5, 2017, The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints' Day  
Observed

Joshua 3: 7-13

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Theme: We're all runners in a great relay race.

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*God of time and timelessness, God of our generation and every generation, pull today's ancient words of Scripture across the chasm of time and culture. May they may be lively and timely, and strengthen us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

When the Marathon runners are loping down Fifth Avenue and pass the corner of 91<sup>st</sup> Street, they've run about 90 percent of the race. They've only got some three miles of the race's 26.2 miles to go. They're tired; some of them have doubtless hit the infamous runner's wall – that point when muscles start running low on glycogen and want to burn fat. A few runners throw in the towel and don't finish. But I gotta wonder if many of them wish that the New York Marathon were a Biblical-style race.

The modern marathon race is named after an extraordinary (though probably mythical) run made in 490BC. The Greek army had just defeated the invading Persians in a decisive battle at a place called *Marathonos*. Tradition has it that one of the Greek soldiers in that battle, a young guy in great shape named "Pheidippides," was appointed messenger to bring the happy news home to Athens, some 25 miles away. He ran the distance in record time, announced, "we won" to the city's leaders, and promptly died on the spot. I gotta wonder if Pheidippides might have wished that his marathon had been a Biblical-style race.



In the story from the Book of Joshua that Will just read to us, the people of Israel are at the end of an epic run we call “the Exodus.” They’re about to enter the Park down by Columbus Circle. Actually, they’re about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The Bible tells us that their great race has been 40 years long.

The number “40” should not be taken literally, by the way. The Bible uses “40” for what we might mean when we say, “a million.” We don’t literally mean a million, just a whole lot. So 40 days or 40 years in the Bible means “a really long time.” Noah is 40 days in his ark. Jesus is 40 days in the wilderness. And Israel wanders 40 years in the desert on their way home from Egypt. But I digress (yet again.)

There are two things about the story of this Biblical marathon called the Exodus that are instructive for you and me as we run the race called life. Both of these truths are imbedded in the seven verses we just heard.

The first is this. Except for two guys named Joshua and Caleb, not one single person who left Egypt as an adult makes it to the Promised Land. It was their children and the children of their children who finished the race. Even Moses and his right-hand brother Aaron died in the wilderness. In the passage Will read to us, the baton of leadership has been passed from them to Joshua. So, the first thing that’s different about this Biblical marathon is that it’s a relay race. No one person has to run the whole thing. The baton is passed from one runner to another and then from that runner to yet another. I remember relay races from Junior High School. Five guys on a team. Each of us would run once around the track and pass the baton to the next kid. It was a team effort. The Exodus, the great jog from slavery to the Land of Milk and Honey, was like a relay run, one generation handing off the baton to the next.

And just so, our lives are relay races, one generation passing the baton on to the next. In a little while, during the communion prayers, three young people, our



rising generation, will read a long list of the names of dear ones who have, in the words of Paul, “fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith.”

Not only is life a relay; church is a relay race. Elders, Deacons and Trustees serve for a few years and then pass the baton on to the next class of leaders. And your ministers are running a relay race. I’ve run with you for 15 years, and in a few weeks, the baton-passing process will begin. In a year or two, it’ll be passed to the 14<sup>th</sup> Senior Minister of the Brick Church.

My 15-year run is exactly average by the way, if you make allowances for Gardener Spring’s 63-year tenure in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. And must tell you, I’ve loved my run, just loved it. Oh, I got tired sometimes, but I never did hit the wall, and I always felt that you were all loping along beside me. And soon, just as it’s happened 13 times before in our 250-year history, a new pastor will pick up the baton to run the next rounding of the track.

Truth is, we’re always challenged to pass the baton on, or to switch metaphors, to “pay it forward.” I remember a story to the point that a preacher friend of mine, a good-old boy from South Carolina named Jim Lowery, once told me about his father. Jim’s dad died not long after Hurricane Hugo hit the Carolinas in 1989. You may recall that Hugo made landfall as a category four storm. My friend told me that the storm ravaged his 90-year-old father’s family farm. The most wrenching of the damage was what Hugo did to a proud grove of ancient oak trees that his dad especially loved. The old oaks were uprooted, devastated. Jim’s 90-year-old dad was uprooted, devastated. But the first thing the old man did after the arboreal mess was cleaned up was to go out and plant rows of little oak seedlings exactly where his beloved mighty oaks had been. He’d never see them grow great, of course, but that’s not the point.

The second truth embedded in today’s story about the crossing of the Jordan is that those Exodus runners were not in the race alone. They carried with them what’s called “The Ark of the Covenant.” It was a fancy box hung on shoulder poles in which lay the tablets of the Ten Commandment. But the Ark was way more than a wooden box with a couple of engraved rocks inside. The Ark was an emblem, a



visible symbol of the presence of God. It was a sign that God was with them. When it was carried across the river, the story says that the water somehow got out of the way.

Joshua, to whom the baton had just been passed, interprets all this, saying, “*By this you shall know that among you is the living God...*” Then Joshua warns them about all the foes they will encounter in their path: “*Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Ammonites, and Jebusites.*” (Good job on those names, Will!)

The second truth embedded in this story for you and me is the promise that God is with us in the race. God will be with you, Brick Church, in the race before you. You’re not likely to encounter any Hivites or Perizzites or Girgashites, but you will encounter that fearsome tribe called “change.” You’ll meet up with the scary clan of “budgets to balance.” You’ll come face-to-face with giant construction projects. There’ll be new leadership and fresh preaching styles in your path. And of course, you’ll be met by that most dread tribe of all – the tribe of new ideas! But do remember, remember always, as Joshua put it, “*that among you is the living God...*”

One more story, another story about crossing a river. The first, and still the best-selling, novel in the English language is John Bunyan's 17<sup>th</sup> Century allegorical masterpiece, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Over 250 million copies have been printed. As the title suggests, *The Pilgrim's Progress* uses a journey as a metaphor for life.

The very last scene finds the chief character, Christian, who is the archetype of a person struggling to lead a life of faith, coming to the end of his symbolic travels. His race has taken him through many grave hardships with names like the “Hill of Difficulty,” and the “Valley of the Shadow of Death.” And Christian faces temptations, mostly famously when he attends what Bunyan named the “Vanity Fair.”

The last leg of his journey requires that he cross a fearsome river. Christian is afraid. Together with his friend Hopeful, Christian wades into the waters. Bunyan



wrote the scene this way. These are his words: "*Christian began to sink in deep Waters;*" Christian cries out, "*the Billows go over my head, all his waves go over me...*" Hopeful, who is just ahead of him, replies to his cry of fear with what may be the most hope-filled words in all of literature; "*Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good...*" "*Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good...*"

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*