

“Staying Strong in the Days Ahead”
August 11, 2024

Isaiah 40:28-31

I Corinthians 9:24-27

A former President survives a shooting.

The current President ends his reelection campaign.

Assassinations and bombings and violence increase in the Middle East.

The stock markets soar. The stock markets plummet.

I go away for a few weeks and all manner of things happen!

Rather than rehash the rapidly changing current events of the past month, however, I want to look forward this morning, to set our sights and our hearts and souls on our life together in the challenging days ahead. There is much coming our way.

To start, hear again Isaiah’s wonderful words of hope and encouragement: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.”

Those words kept coming back to me during the past two weeks as the Summer Olympics presented women and men of great strength, those who seemed to have learned the secret of running and not growing weary.

Writing to the early Christians in Corinth, Paul digresses from his main thought and offers a rare and wonderful image of athletic competition and faith: “Do you not know,” he asks, “that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air...”

As is often the case, Paul doesn’t really carry through with a single image and badly mixes his metaphors. He starts out running and ends up boxing. Still, we get some sense of what he means.

Certainly, those Corinthians would have known what he was talking about. In ancient Greece there were several athletic games in addition to the legendary ones at Olympia. There were the Athenian games. And there were Isthmian games that were held eight miles from Corinth—most likely just a year or so before Paul’s letter was written. The recipients of that letter would have known about boxers and runners.

Even the “perishable wreath” would have been fixed in their imagination. Some say that the wreath in the Isthmian games—the symbol of victory—was made from pine branches. Others suggest it was made of wilted celery—a far cry from the gold medals and product endorsements that athletes compete for today—but a prize nevertheless.

The modern Olympics often strike me as commercialized and corrupt, but I continue to tune in every two years for a chance to see the best doing their best. I see purpose and discipline and achievement. And Paul suggests that those three words characterize the Christian life as well.

The Christian life is a life of purpose. “I do not run aimlessly,” Paul writes. There is a goal toward which we run. Paul encouraged the early Christians to keep their eye on the prize.

The bylaws of our congregation begin with a statement of purpose. We claim that our purpose is “to worship God, to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to celebrate the sacraments; to realize Christian fellowship and unity within this church and the Church Universal; to render loving service toward humankind; and to strive for righteousness, justice, and peace.”

With these words, we affirm what is most important to us.

With these words, we are clear about what we love, what we value, what are our ultimate commitments.

These words save us from the aimlessness that is so much a part of contemporary life. We need to blow the dust off of that statement and start holding it up to what we’re doing around here to see how we measure up.

Worship and celebration. Loving service. Righteousness, justice, and peace. These are the goals toward which we run as a congregation.

We don’t run aimlessly. The Christian life is a life of purpose.

The Christian life is a life of discipline.

The Olympics—and, really, any athletic event—call for the discipline of training over many years.

Paul gives us the image of athletes exercising self-control and of his own “punishing” his body. The point here is not that we beat ourselves up, but that we watch our actions, that we watch our words, so that what we do and say might show the love of God working in us and among us.

You know the problem: It’s easy to get sloppy in our life together, to take the image of God in one another for granted.

This is one of the many reasons why we pray—to help us get to the place where we are living what we believe, to help us recover ourselves so that we may present ourselves more fully to God.

In the silence of prayer, we can be still and know God and know that we are not God. Prayer calls us to be honest in a world that is filled with lies. Prayer gently invites us to

open all the closed doors of our lives, that we might discover both our emptiness and the places where we are full. We discover our strength and our broken places. We discover God present even in the valley of our shadows.

Madeleine L'Engle recalled hearing Rudolph Serkin playing Beethoven's "Sonata Appassionata" better than it could be played. She said, "It was absolutely incredible. People were standing on their seats, screaming and applauding." She thought to herself: "OK, that was a completely numinous, spirit-filled production. However, I'll bet Serkin practices the piano eight hours a day, every day, and if he didn't, this performance couldn't have happened." L'Engle concluded: "So in anything we do, unless we do our equivalent of practicing, the Holy Spirit has nothing to work with."

We have a high calling—to love one another as Christ has loved us. That doesn't always come easily. It requires the discipline of the Christian life—as individuals and as a community before God—so that the Spirit of God might find in us *something* to work with.

The Christian life is a life of achievement.

Those Nike ads shown during the Olympics announce, "Winning is not for everyone." And even Paul encourages us: "Run in such a way that *you* might win the prize."

Paul differs from Nike in that he is not imagining a race with only one winner. He's not suggesting that we should be in competition with each other. In fact, the context of those words shows that he means exactly the opposite: that striving for excellence means considering the welfare of others. Maybe it's more like a team sport in which players couple rigorous training with restraint of their own egos so that the team might succeed.

Do you remember how Martin Luther King, Jr. imagined Jesus talking to his disciples? "You want to be first...you want to be great. You want to be important. Well, you ought to be. If you're going to be my disciple, you must be...Don't give up...Keep feeling the need to be first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity. That is what I want you to do."¹

The goal toward which we run is different than the goal of many others. For many, a wreath of withered vegetables or a shiny medal or a shiny car is enough. God calls us to something more. God offers us something more.

Run to win the prize. The Christian life is a life of achievement.

At the ancient Olympics, the athletes took an oath that they had practiced for the preceding ten months. Today they prepare year-round for years on end. As we live out our own commitments to love one another as we have been loved, we recognize that the justice, peace, and right relationships that we desire do not happen overnight. But the world that we desire, the congregation that we desire, the life that we desire will develop only as we start and maintain the practice of the Christian life.

This is a life of purpose, discipline, and achievement—for all of us together as a congregation and for each of us as individuals.

We return, then, to those words of Isaiah still echoing in our souls: “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.”

It’s been said that we should not confuse this with the tired argument that “God acts in God’s own good time”—for God constantly acts and all time is God’s time. As we trust in God, we find ourselves renewed in and for the present moment.²

To wait for the Lord means that we will act out of a sense of who we are and who God is—not confusing the two. We recognize our limitations *and* our abilities.

To wait for the Lord means that we will continue to work for peace in a world that prefers for war.

To wait for the Lord means that we will continue to affirm the value of each person even as the voices of hate get louder—and even as we liberal Christians can find so many people whom we would like to disparage.

To wait for the Lord means that we will continue in our busy lives to love one another.

In other words, to wait for the Lord means that we will work for the good whenever we have the opportunity.

This is the encouraging good news for these tumultuous days: Do not give in. Do not give up. We work for the good, we do what is right because such acts matter now and in the larger scheme of God’s creation. There is a powerful and forgiving love that will sustain you through all the discouragement and opposition and failure as you act in the world.

Do not give up. Do not quit the god and valuable work that you are doing. While it may feel like it at times, especially at times like these, we are not without power. What you are doing in these days matters.

And the promise endures—you will run and not be weary.

¹ MLK, “The Drum Major Instinct,” in *A Testament of Hope*, pg. 265.

² *Second Isaiah*, Anchor Bible, pg. 25