

Running with the Wind in Your Face

Hebrews 12:1-11

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Sunday, October 8, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

How do you run when the wind is in your face? The meaning of life can be measured by the way we confront adversity. We don't need to choose adversity. Sooner or later, adversity will choose us. I suppose one reason I have been drawn to Abraham Lincoln is my appreciation of the way he faced up to so much adversity in his life. I always learn from people who have been to hell and back.

The foreground of this sermon is the story of the young Amish girls killed and wounded in Pennsylvania. As I was preparing this sermon, when the story broke, I did not really want to read about it or see it on television—it all seemed too awful and tragic. But by the end of the week, another story began to emerge, a story we will turn to in a few minutes, because it intersects the meaning of today's scripture and sermon.

Adversity can either turn us away from God and others, or turn us to Christ and each other. The writer of the book of Hebrews is writing to a people facing adversity. The unknown author is offering counsel to Christian believers under persecution. Early on he tells his audience, "We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." (Hebrews 2:1).

Later, he encourages his hearers, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession" (Hebrews 4:14). But how do we not drift away from what we have heard? We have just bore witness to our faith by reciting the Apostles Creed today. How do we hold fast to our confession of faith?

The author of Hebrews pictures the journey of faith as a race. In speaking of this race he describes (1) the community around us (2) the obstacles that confront us (3) the disciplines that need to be within us (4) the goal before us. I suggest that for most of us the journey of faith is not a run, but a walk, or a hike, and sometimes a slog.

We arrived at the small town of Lone Pine in the high Sierras the day before our hike. We wanted to adjust to the altitude. Gene, my partner, once part of the college group in a Presbyterian congregation where I served as to students, was 11 years younger than I. We wanted to be on the trail very early the next morning.

We were determined to climb Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 states. The mountain towered above us--14,491 feet. We intended to climb Mt. Whitney in one day. We did not want to carry heavy packs on our backs. By 4:30 a.m., in total darkness, we arrived at Whitney Portal--8,361 feet—to begin our climb.

The first thing that caught our attention was that, even in the darkness, we were not climbing alone. People, whom we had never met before, were speaking words of encouragement. "Have you ever done this before?" "You can do it --just strike a steady pace."

The author of Hebrews describes "So great a cloud of witnesses" as the framework by which his readers will be able to face up to adversity. At the center of the Book of Hebrews we hear of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Rahab, and David who "quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness." (Hebrews 11: 34)

Dr. Gareth Icenogle has been preaching a series on Ephesians, a symphonic letter filled with melodies about the meaning of community. Ephesians also speaks about a cloud of witnesses, people "who are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." (Ephesians 2:19)

In my month here with you many of you have recalled the winsome ministry of Dr. Bryant Kirkland, who from 1991 to 1993 served as Interim Senior Minister here at National, and then returned to preach for a number of summers. At age twenty-four I served as a Seminary Assistant with Dr. Kirkland at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. I remember well a sermon Dr. Kirkland preached entitled "You Cannot Go it Alone in New York City." The burden of my sermon this morning: "You cannot go it alone in Washington or Chevy Chase or Potomac or Great Falls or Maclean."

By about 11 a.m. we reached Trail Camp, the base camp, where people spend the night as they prepare to ascend the summit in the morning. From Trail Camp we started the famous 99 switchbacks towards the top. Now the going got tougher as the altitude kicked in. The further up we hiked the more we slowed down. Gene and I agreed that we would practice the buddy system on our climb. We would stick together no matter what.

The closer we got to the top, the more adverse the conditions became, we were met with increasing frequency by the cloud of witnesses on the trail. A rugged man coming down from above spoke to us, "You can make it." A woman, with a reassuring smile, "you are only a little more than a mile from the top." A younger man directed his voice, "steady as you go, it's not too far now." Once, when I was going through the deep slough of adversity, I discovered who my friends were. I received regular calls on the telephone. People wrote notes to me by mail.

As we started the last fifteen hundred feet of our ascent we were met by a second surprising sight. All along the trail we began to see backpacks and fanny packs, shirts and vests, even water bottles. What was this? When you are facing the adversity of altitude, even in quite cold weather, the experienced climber wants to jettison everything that clings so closely and acts to weigh you down.

Are you traveling light or are there too many "things" that cling so closely in your life. I said at the outset that often we do not choose

adversity, it chooses us. The death of a spouse, the struggles of a young person, whether child or grandchild, the experience of divorce, a sudden loss of job in mid-career—all these are adversities cling closely and weigh us down.

Abraham Lincoln struggled for most of his life with melancholy. He suffered so much loss. He lost his mother who died when he was nine. His sister, Sarah, died when she was only twenty and he was eighteen. Ann Rutledge, the young woman he loved, and perhaps intended to marry, died at age twenty-two. Lincoln found himself afflicted with melancholy. He never defeated it, but he learned to live with it. I believe his struggling with his own melancholy made him more empathetic to the struggles of others.

Let adversity do its good work in you. A favorite story of Dr. Kirkland concerns a snowy Ash Wednesday in New York. Some church leaders advised Dr. Kirkland, because of the conditions, to cancel the Ash Wednesday service. Not Dr. Kirkland. As he arrived near the church, he purchased every pink and red carnation he could find. In the service he talked about the adversity of Christ in his walk toward the cross and the adversity that we can face as Christ's disciples. When the service was over, he invited everyone to come forward. He gave out his pink and red carnations and bid the worshippers to go out into the streets of New York, find someone in need, and give them a carnation, telling that person that they did so in the name of the love of Christ.

Third, the writer to the Book of Hebrews enjoins us "to run the race with perseverance."

We did not just start out on a summer's day to hike to the top of Mt. Whitney. Perseverance is the result of months and months of discipline. We need to learn the disciplines of faith in the daylight so that we can appropriate them in the darkness. Facing up to adversity is the result of years and years of training. We had been preparing for climbing Mt. Whitney by climbing several smaller mountains.

I do need to tell you that about noon we had an exasperating experience. We heard the patter of feet on rocks coming up very rapidly behind us. Streaking by us were several twenty somethings running up Mt. Whitney, dressed only in shorts and t-shirts, in the cold weather. When others appear to be running through life, with its adversities, it is not easy when you and I are walking or slogging.

Hans Lilje was a Lutheran pastor and New Testament commentator when Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany. As Hitler's mania raged on through 1942 and 1943 Lilje was confronted with an awful ethical question. Jesus said "thou shall not kill," but he became aware of a plot to kill Hitler to stop his killing. The attempt to kill Hitler took place on July 20, 1944, but the attempt failed and the Gestapo relentlessly sought out everyone involved. Lilje was arrested in his church and placed in the Tegel prison in Berlin. Everything was taken away from him. The guards, all brought in from outside Germany, were rotated regularly so that no attachments could be formed between prisoners and guards.

One morning, as Lilje remembered the nurturing disciplines of the Christian faith, he began to whistle the melody of "O for a Thousand Tongues to sing." Before he could complete the first line, a whistle came back from across the courtyard. He whistled the second line and paused, listening, and again the remainder of the line came back from some unknown prisoner. The next morning he began to whistle, "Our God, our Help in Ages Past, and the same amazing response came. In the months that followed Lilje connected with an unseen companion, a prisoner, like himself, but a member of Christ's community, in Tegel prison.

Fourth, we are encouraged to look "to Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our Faith."

As you climb from Trail Camp along the famous 99 switchbacks toward the top a disconcerting reality comes upon you. You can no longer see the top of Mt. Whitney. For a good part of the way it is blocked by another smaller peak in front of it.

Often, in the midst of adversity, it is easy to lose sight of Jesus. The power of the problem we are facing seems so overwhelming. The wind, rain, and hail of life obscures our vision. When you lose sight of Jesus you sometimes wonder if you are going to make it to the top.

Finally, at over 13,000 feet, we reached Trail Crest. This is a crest in the mountain where you can look at both eastern and western Sierra Nevada Mountains. Trail Crest is both a beautiful and frightening place. The wind was so strong that we had to get down on our hands and knees and crawl forward at one point on the trail.

But suddenly, after not seeing the top of Mt. Whitney for hours, it came into view again. Now we found ourselves pulled forward.

When Jesus comes into clear view I sometimes have the feeling that I am being pulled forward, even though my will is weak and my legs are tired. The writer to the Hebrews enjoins us: "Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees." (Hebrews 12: 12)

I am not suggesting that faith in Jesus is simple. One of the best parts of the discussion this past Wednesday evening at Wednesday Night Live was the suggestion by two persons of the difficulties and complexities in Lincoln's faith and in ours. Herbert Butterfield, great English Christian and scientist, suggested, "hold to Christ and for everything else remain totally uncommitted."

This past week has brought news of adversity almost unimaginable. But it has also brought another, surprising story. Did you hear it? The Amish community has responded to unspeakable violence with forgiveness. A television commentator asked: "what is the source of this forgiveness?" It is belief in Jesus. In a world increasingly filled with vengeance, the Amish, descendants of the Radical Reformation, have borne witness to their faith in the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ.

How do you run when the wind is in our faith? In the coming week, remember that you "are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Be aware of in the altitude of adversity of "the sin that clings so closely." Practice the disciplines of the Christian faith so that "you will be able to run with perseverance the race that is set before us." And look to Jesus, let him pull you forward, for he is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

