



**“The Course of Faith”**  
**Scripture – Hebrews 11:29-12:2**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, August 18, 2019**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*

These words jogged my memory. It wasn't a race, exactly. I was not competing against anyone. Reaching the finish line first was not the goal. But it was a test of endurance, both physically and spiritually – the kind of journey that leaves the body with bumps and bruises, and the soul transformed.

I was twenty-three years old and half-way through my year as a Young Adult Volunteer in southern India. Because my fellow volunteers and I had come to India on tourist visas — allowing only six months in the country at a time — we had to leave midway through the year and travel to neighboring Sri Lanka.

We had done remarkably little planning for this trip. The six of us landed in Sri Lanka with a flight itinerary, an outdated guidebook, and one backpack per person and, then, spent the better part of a week hopping on and off buses whenever and wherever a description in *Lonely Planet* piqued our interest. It was the kind of trip you tell your parents about *after* the fact — when you are home safely.

So it was that we found ourselves in Sri Lanka's central highlands at the base of Adam's Peak. This mountain takes its name from its “sacred footprint” near the summit — a rock formation that has long been the subject of sacred storytelling: Buddhist tradition holds that the footprint belongs to the Buddha; Hindus attribute it to Lord Siva; and, in some Muslim and Christian traditions, faithful imaginations see evidence of Adam's first step beyond the bounds of Eden.

For adherents of these traditions, Adam's Peak has become a holy site. Pilgrims from across Sri Lanka set out in the wee hours of the morning when the night is black as pitch and cool air hangs in the valley. They begin the journey up the mountain at this ungodly hour so that they are standing on the summit at sunrise. This pilgrimage intrigued us. So my friends and I hopped on a bus to the highlands and checked into a hotel at the base of Adam's Peak to catch a few hours' sleep before starting our hike up the mountain. The hotel van dropped us at the trailhead just after midnight. I remember standing there, yawning, in my blue jeans and t-shirt, a bulky jacket that I'd rented from the hotel tied around my waist. It was one-size-fits-all, which meant it swallowed me whole. Too bad I couldn't rent hiking boots as well, because the only shoes I had with me were a pair of flip-flops. But, hey, there were elderly women who were embarking on this pilgrimage with no shoes at all — a mark of the truly devout — so I figured, “I got this.” Ah, to be young and stupid.

I charged off down the trail with the bravado of a novice distance runner, setting my pace for a sprint rather than a marathon. And, after a mile or two, I was doubled over on the side of the trail — my muscles screaming for relief, my lungs gasping for breath, my legs threatening to buckle under me. If not for my friends, I may well have collapsed then and there, a crumpled heap to be retrieved on their way down the mountain. But, no, they were not going to leave me behind. John poured the contents of his water bottle down my throat; Lindsey fetched some food from a nearby stand. And, then, after a few minutes' rest, they picked me up and urged me onward. Ariel fell in step beside me; David checked in every half-mile, encouraging me to stay the course. With the help of my friends, I managed to put one foot in front of the other, even when the trail turned into an endless staircase up the mountainside. We pressed on — left, right, left, right, up and up and up — until, finally, by the grace of God and the support of steadfast friends, I reached the summit of that mountain in time to watch the sun rise over the blue peaks beyond.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*

Sometimes the race that is set before us is like that hike up Adam's Peak. It's like a journey you're really not prepared to take — one you embark on without proper preparation or the right equipment, but you don't realize it until it's too late to turn back. It's like an endless slog on weary legs, your spiritual muscles groaning for respite and release and, sometimes, even threatening to collapse. It's like a trek through the darkness, where you press onward though you can only see a few feet in front of you because you trust — you hope — that the sun will rise ... eventually.

This was true for the community addressed in the letter to the Hebrews. These early followers of Jesus had grown weary of the Christian life; they were struggling to keep the faith in the face of hardship and suffering and persecution. So the author calls to mind the heroes of the faith: "Remember Abraham," he writes. Abraham and Sarah set out on a journey into the unknown. Even though the years had made it painfully clear they could not have children, they trusted the God who promised to make of them a great nation. So they pressed onward in faith, and found God faithful.

And remember Moses, who heard God speaking from a burning bush and, so, returned to Egypt to lead his people out of bondage. Even with Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, Moses trusted God to deliver the Hebrews from slavery. And God did. By pushing back the waters and making a pathway through the Sea. And remember Rahab, who defied her king's command and sheltered the Israelite spies. In the face of death, she trusted the God of Life. And, with her help, the Hebrew people crossed safely into the Land of Promise. Remember them — the heroes of the faith.

Now, the writer of this letter does not recall the specifics. But the listeners surely remembered the rest of these stories: How even Abraham's trust wavered ... how he needed reassurance, how the Lord brought him outside in the dark of night. "Look toward heaven and count the stars," God said to Abraham. "So shall your descendants be." And, surely, the community remembered all the times Moses complained to God during those forty years in the wilderness — a journey that must have seemed like an endless slog on weary legs, their spiritual muscles groaning as they wandered.

Even these heroes of the faith endured hardship as they ran the race that was set before them. As did those many others, whose stories the letter writer had no time to tell. But, still, the author assures us, they abided in faith — faith that is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. They clung to this faith in the dark, when they could only see a few feet ahead on the path they traveled, and on endless slogs when their souls grew weary and their courage flagged. Our spiritual ancestors stayed the course; they finished the race. And now this cloud of witnesses cheers us on as we, too, run the race that is set before us.

Now, the course of faith rarely carries the same risks for us that it did for our forebears in the faith. For the most part, we do not suffer *for* our Christianity; we don't live in a time or place where believing in Christ might land us in jail or condemn us to death. But, God knows, we live in a world that is full of suffering and persecution ... A world where too many loved ones didn't make it home from running errands because a gunman opened fire on a Walmart. A world where rampant racist rhetoric has incited violence against our sisters and brothers. A world where our children start every school year with drills against active shooters.

There are so many days when this world seems a far cry from the "heavenly country" God envisions, the world God calls us to nurture and inhabit. Though it has been promised, God's reign of justice and peace seems beyond our grasp, set outside our reach by ungodly grabs for power, by hate-filled behaviors, by blatant disregard for the well-being of God's creation.

In his adaptation of the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, playwright Aaron Sorkin gives voice to this tension. You remember this story: It's a tale of justice denied, when an all-white jury condemns an African American man to the electric chair for a crime he didn't — he couldn't — commit. After combatting bigotry and ignorance throughout the trial, Atticus Finch — the lawyer who defends Tom Robinson — struggles to reconcile his belief in the goodness of his neighbors with the evil of their actions. Yet there is a moment at the end of the play — after Tom Robinson has been shot, after the Finch children have been attacked — a moment that surprises us. Atticus turns to Calpurnia, the family's housekeeper, and lays claim to God's promise: "Weeping may endure for a night," he says, quoting the words of Psalm 30. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." And Calpurnia, an African American woman who has lived her life in the Deep South, responds with the wisdom of experience: "Yes, but sometimes the morning takes a long time coming."<sup>1</sup> Yes, we echo: Sometimes the morning takes a long time coming.

But — my friends — we do not wait for the morning alone. Even when the sunrise takes its sweet time, even when the course of faith becomes a strenuous trek through dark terrain, we have what's needed to run this race. The Letter to the Hebrews calls it a Great Cloud of Witnesses — that company of the faithful who has stayed the course, who has finished the race, and who now fills the stands to cheer us on. See — over there — that's Abraham and Sarah; and over there — that's Moses and Rahab. There are the martyrs and the mystics and others who know what it's like to make this slog on weary legs. And there are grandparents and Sunday school teachers and Stephen Ministers and faithful friends. And this great cloud of witnesses, it includes us, too — this community of saints that gathers week in and week out to remember our story, to offer encouragement, and to uphold one another as we set our eyes on Jesus and strive to run the race that is set before us.

Look around. These are the people who will bear witness to God's faithfulness when your legs are weary and your spiritual muscles are groaning for respite and release ... when you find yourself pressing on through the darkness, even though you can only see a few feet ahead. These are the people who will run by your side when the course of faith feels too long, too hard, and you're tempted to give up ... just like my friends did for me on that mountain in Sri Lanka. And together we will travel toward God's new day.

When I reached the summit of Adam's Peak, I was breathless, I was exhausted, I was sore ... and I was grateful. My legs had not given out. My muscles had not failed me. My spirit was revived. With my friends' encouragement and support, I had stayed the course. I had finished *this* race. And, now, I stood with hundreds of pilgrims on the top of this mountain — watching, waiting for the sun's rays to pierce the darkness. In those last moments before the new day dawned, I remember looking behind me, down the path we had just climbed. From above you could see a trail of lights curving down the mountainside. On the way up the mountain, those electric lamps had seemed so dim — their bulbs barely casting enough light for us to make out the next few steps. But, now, the view from

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<sup>1</sup> *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Aaron Sorkin, directed by Bartlett Sher, performances by Jeff Daniels and LaTanya Richardson Jackson, August 8, 2019, Shubert Theatre, New York, NY (quoted from memory).

the peak showed me that it was never quite as dark as it had seemed ... that our entire course had been illuminated, as if by the company of the saints keeping vigil on our progress. And then, as my friends and I looked out across the peaks beyond, the landscape transformed. The night sky turned from black to a deep indigo to a soft blue as the sun's first rays peeked over the horizon and painted the heavens in gold. It was a glorious reminder that the morning always comes – sometimes after endless uphill climbs, sometimes after nights of weeping. The morning always comes.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. And, surely, we too will see the dawn of God's new day.*

### **The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Creator of the cosmos and ever-present Spirit, help us to calm our fidgety minds and to slow our rapid pulse in order that we may sense your presence and perceive your purpose for our lives. Speak to us through the Scriptures, the voices of others, the experiences of our lives and the whispers deep within our soul, so that we may understand your blueprint for a rich life.

God, help us to understand that sin begins long before it becomes visible in outward action. It takes root in the depths of our being when unkind thoughts and unchecked emotions find fertile soil. We pray that you will purge our hearts of venom, rid our minds of vengeance and cleanse our souls of vindictiveness. Then, grant us a thirst for what you have shown us is noble and virtuous and satisfying.

Gracious God, you have shown us that when our actions evolve from a heart of compassion and a desire for justice, we are in harmony with your ways. Prompt us to extend ourselves for the well-being of others and to strive for those things that enhance the lives of everyone.

God, sometimes the race that is set before us seems beyond our capability. It is not a 10 miler or a full marathon, but an ultramarathon, and we have grave doubts that we will be able to finish the race. Remind us that we do not run this race alone. You are by our side and we are surrounded by our community of faith, our friends, and a great cloud of witnesses.

Eternal God, you have *not* created us to be independent islands untouched by others. We are incomplete if we are unconnected; deficient if we are detached. Spur us to forge loving bonds, because the ties that tether us to others also draw us ever closer to you.

Now, hear us, as not alone, but together, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**