

Calvary United Methodist Church
July 7, 2019

LET'S RUN THE RACE
Rev. R. Jeffrey Fisher

Children's Message:

Isaiah 40:29-31

I invite our children to come forth for the children's message. All the children would like to come forth? Come on up. Welcome. Good to see you all. Did you have come picnics this weekend? No picnics. Wow. (Child speaks.) Well, I hope you have one sometime this summer because picnics are a great chance. Come in closer together if you can. Just squeeze on in here.

I want to talk to you today about the strength that we get from God. It's a very important passage of scripture that I think will be one that you will hear many times throughout your lifetime. It comes from a prophet whose name was Isaiah:

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar like wings on eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

Did you ever see someone like this? In about 15 minutes if you look out there there will be a lot of this, right? What are they doing here? Sometimes when we see those things in life we actually can hardly stop ourselves. When I was making this up the other day I started looking at the pictures and I started yawning, right? Animals do it, bunnies do it, puppies do it. It is called a yawn because we get tired or we are exhausted. We get weary in one way or another from too much work. We get so tired we can hardly stay awake.

What makes you tired? (Child speaks.) Reading, it puts me to sleep every time, right? I have to read in the morning because if I try to read at night it wouldn't be good. (Child speaks.) Warm glass of milk. (I was going to say a warm glass of milk, but my sister stole mine.) She took it, ok. (Child speaks.) Crying...it can really wear us out.

Well, there are a lot of other things that make us weary, like if you are stuck in the kitchen all day, right? Cooking and preparing and cleaning. How about doing laundry all day. Does that make you tired? No? Sweeping? No? It doesn't make you too tired. How about tending your gardens and working outside, mowing the grass? You kids have it rough. And you know what else? Just playing. When you play hard you get tired, right?

It just happens that the long days we just get tired and sometimes we get weary. Do you know what makes me weary sometimes? When I have plans and they change. They change. What changes them? Things like Pennsylvania. Have you ever seen rain much this summer? And

you were going to go to a park or visit grandparents or do something fun outside with your friends and the rains come and I get weary. How about being sick and you want to go do stuff and you can't?

It's called "Life happens." And what do you do when you're tired and you are weary. This man Isaiah knew this almost 2,000 years ago that sometimes life happens and it's disappointing because life doesn't always go the way you want it so you have to pray to God that you become "Superwoman." Can you do that? Because there comes a time when you say: You know what? In spite of the rain, in spite of the work, in spite of how tired I am, too tired to do anything, I am going to choose to be strong.

And there's ways we improve that like some of you probably do exercises in phys ed at school. Have you done that? Some people even as adults we work out because we want to keep our bodies toned. We work out through the way we eat, right? And there are other things spiritually that we do. We not only want to keep in physical shape, but we want to be in spiritual shape. Why? Because when I see children I want folks your age to grow up all the days of your life knowing that when you have those tough days, when life happens, God is with you; that you can face whatever it is because you can be with your friends and you can be happy and strong because.

How do I do that? Because from the time I was a little boy and to now as well, I pray when I am weary. You could pray for your friends, you could pray for your family, you could pray to help you with your studies, to stay awake when you are too tired to read your studies. You could pray for all kinds of things: to make the world a better place, and always know that when you pray it is just like this...it's talking to God. It's as simple as that. There are not magical words, no special words.

We can tell God when we are mad. We can tell God when we are happy. We can ask things from God because God wants to be in relationship with us and we learn that by reading the Bible. And I hope if you don't read it a lot on your own, you get your parents to get you a child or youth Bible that you can understand because God wants you to grow up knowing He loves you. It's an important thing to know that we are never alone.

One of the greatest hopes for the church, our great concern for children is that they grow to love God about all else because there are days you are going to have to be superwoman and superman because life will get difficult. Sometimes in school it won't always go the way you want. Sometimes friends and family hurt us. Sometimes there is disappointment but when you have God with you, you say: You know what? I can get through this tough time.

And the scripture says not only get through it, you will soar like an eagle. Have any of you ever seen eagles? You know there are lots of eagles around Central PA now and you may have to go check them out. They are one of the largest birds you will find here in our America and it is a beautiful sign of strength for us.

And the scripture again says: Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint.

God wants you to know that God is your strength.

I thank you for coming up today. I pray you have a wonderful week and that you get a picnic someplace. And there are also some fruit snacks here for you before you go back.

Thank you coming up today.

Message:

Hebrews 12:1-3

We are on a journey and sometimes it has wonderful strolling along times and sometimes we are climbing mountains and sometimes we are down in the valleys and most of us like it best, we are on plains. But it is not always there. This scripture today is reminding me that we are in this race and races, I think, are better together. When you are going the journey with someone, going alone is not as easy as it is with someone else, so of all else that I would want you to know today on this journey, fix your eyes on Jesus. Wherever else you find yourself, if your brother or sister or family or friends aren't with you, we really are never alone. God is present with us, for we can only imagine all the time that our Lord who said he will be with us in Spirit wherever we are is about as near as the lips of our breath. When we breathe out, God is with us.

Sometimes on my journey when times get tough, I look at the cross and I think how beautiful. And as Christians sometimes we look at this beautiful cross and thinking what God has done, but we want that easy faith. It is easy to look at that cross, especially as we sit in comfort. Padded pews? Air conditioning? You remember the days, some of you, a decade ago it would have been pretty hot in here by now.

But what we don't recall enough is what it is to be a disciple and I didn't want to put the ugly pictures of the cross out there, of him hanging there. The cost, the burden of someone who loved us so much, who doesn't want members of his church, members of Calvary, followers from time to time. God wants disciples, people who are committed not just once in a while but every day we walk out, every day we get up, He wants us committed with our families, with our friends in all we do, God wants us to be untangled from the things of this world that we are consciously, daily, moment by moment, hour by hour reminded that we belong to God, we identify, we are the walking, living, breath of Jesus Christ to those around us who are broken, filled with addiction and the sins that we have. And they are looking for someone who would be in a sense their earthly savior, to take them by the hand and walk them on that path of life that leads to redemption, that leads to new life, that leads to hope.

Most of us get entangled in things. I am going to a family reunion this afternoon. Do you

know what happens at family reunions? We talk. We meet here on Sundays. We're a family. Guess what happens sometimes? Talk without truth is brokenness. We are entangled with sins, with workers and friends and family. I am mostly entangled and you probably are too with ourselves. I wrestle all the time with me. Do you do that? The things that we think and do and the finances and the health and concerns of family and friends and God says: I want to set you free from that.

There is a reason that children can run so carefree when they are running toward the goal. Because they just see that crown. And you and I sometimes we lose heart because there are so many obstacles in the way to that crown of glory. And the obstacles sometimes are our choosing because we refuse to put them behind us. Obstacles in relationships because they refuse to let go of unhealthy things in our life, all those patterns, those habits, those beliefs.

You see, to not lose heart takes a lot. To keep our mind and our heart and our strength in God. I am amazed when I see the pictures of veterans, when I see the photos also of cancer survivors who seemingly have done the unbelievable. They come back and lose legs and limbs and organs and somehow they say: I am determined to do whatever it is to continue my life on the journey until one day I am with God. And you know what's really the greater feat than running? It's the mind. It is truly the mind. You could take a lot of people and put prosthetics on their legs and they still couldn't run because sometimes you have to choose to be a winner. And sometimes you have to choose to go to the goal and sometimes as a disciple of Christ you have to decide that in spite of the death and the loss and the illness and the disappointments and the hurt and the aggravations, I choose to be on that journey to Christ. I choose to go to the mountaintops. I choose because a winner never quits, and quitters never what? You know it. They really never win.

A long time ago a man named Jesus met with a bunch of folks and he was just starting this ministry of his, going around telling them a better way than legalisms of the Old Testament. He was saying you need to love God and you need to love one another and get along and work together and I want you to be a part of that: disciples they are called. That's what you are called. You are not a member. You are a disciple. And we are called to follow him and to give our all that we can bring the Kingdom of God on earth. And the men thought that was going to be easy until he said to them: Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests. The Son of God has nowhere to lay his head. In other words, it's not going to be an easy journey to be a part of the kingdom if you really want to call yourself a disciple.

Folks, God doesn't want us just to take it easy, to put it in neutral and coast through life. I don't know all of your gifts, I don't know all of your situations. We are all different, we are all gifted. God is saying to every one of us: You are different gifted so you can do different things than other folks. But you are gifted for is to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, to make this place less hateful, for forgiving, more filled with grace, more filled with love, that the people around us would look and say: I want what they have. I want this family to be that. I want to be it myself because some days it's not easy to be the disciple of Christ we are

called to be because there is always challenges up ahead.

I went out to Colorado last month to be with my niece and nephew and I wanted to do some hiking and climbing and sometimes do you ever look at yourself and you say: What did I say? What did I say? Sometimes when people ask you things you think: can I do it? Can I teach a Sunday School? Can I go and pray for someone who is in the hospital? Can I visit the elderly or the shut-in? Could I help in the daycare? Could I help somewhere? And you say: I don't know. And God says: Well, I don't know which of those is really your calling. Some of us aren't called to all of those things. God is simply saying: Would you listen and find out what you are called to?

When I think of someone getting weary I remember these days when you have all those school books and you want to fall asleep when you read your books. And I remember that life isn't an easy journey.

I first was made aware of this I think my second trip to Africa in 1984. Thousands, not hundreds, not even thousands, not even tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people were packing up and leaving a war-torn country. I met them at a United Nations refugee camp. It's all tents. Ten years later these people who packed up from their homes are still living in them. Imagine packing up today and you are going to walk to Tennessee with whatever you can carry and that's where you are going to be the next ten years of your life. The people who visited Pastor Bob and me last fall from Myanmar spent 20 years in such a camp in Nepal. You see, you and I can't imagine it.

I call my friend Bryma who is like a son to me. I met him when he was 8 in Sierra Leone. He's now 43, has a wife and two little boys. When I call him in a land that is difficult with very little food, very little anything, the words: How are you doing today? He says: By God's grace we are managing. Not: Well, I'll check my deep freezer...there isn't one. I'll check my dry cupboard to see how many extra bags of sugar, flour, and brown sugar do you have in your cupboard? I see very few of us who don't have spare food. Most of these people in these countries don't have any spare food. They manage because they go out today and try to find some means by their work, but not just by their work, by their faith, trusting that God alone will be their Savior, not only for their salvation but to get through the day.

You see, we have learned to be such comfortable Christians, comfortable disciples, we don't do much discipling, we don't do much teaching, we don't do much inviting. We just come here and go every week. God wants more from us. God wants us to make this kingdom on earth better. In the midst of our brokenness and our weariness of our families we cannot lose heart, we cannot lose our way.

There are so many scriptures that are a little old fashioned for us today, but we're close enough to Lancaster this can be somewhat real. Did you ever see someone having a horse and they are plowing or running a harrow or something? The scripture says when you put

your instrument to the plow, horses to the plow, don't look back. You know why? If you do and you are looking this way and you have that thing in hand, there is going to be crooked rows all through your farm field. You look forward. You know what happens when you look back? Did you ever see someone who goes through a broken relationship with a family and they keep going back? They expect something that was really nasty before to change and it's never going to change. You have to look forward for a new life. Partnerships in business, doesn't work and you keep saying maybe if we try this; it's probably not going to work. Things, the way you do something around...what's that thing, if you keep doing the same thing looking for different result it is insanity. We are broken because we want to look back too much...in our lives, in our families and sometimes even in the church. We are called to look forward. We are called...don't give up. Don't give in. Keep the faith. Keep your eyes on the prize. The prize when you leave the starting line isn't back there, is it? It's at the finish line. It's at the goal posts.

We are people of God who are called to go forward. Don't give up on God because he'll never give up on you. I want you to know that wherever you are, whatever problems you are facing, whatever difficulties, God is bigger. There is no one in this room who hasn't had losses, disappointments and discouragements, and you are here today.

Anytime I am with someone in counseling and anytime I'm down myself, and sometimes some of you have to remind me of this, when I think I can't do this anymore, whatever that is. I'll say: what did you do the last time you went through this? You can't get through one more loss. I say: What did you do that last time you had a loss? You had to move your house? What was it like when you lost your mother or father or you child, your spouse? What was it like, and somehow you don't know because it was so long ago, but you overcame and you are still here today, meaning that we are built by Almighty God to be people who can overcome time and time and time again because we are on this marathon called life.

Sprinting are those who are in it for speed. Marathon, it's endurance. When we made a decision to follow Jesus Christ, it is a long time. When I was in youth, our track coach used to take the people 12 miles over mountains and have them run back to school every afternoon. I didn't join cross country. My mother didn't raise no fool. But the marathons in life are for the long run. I'm asking you today: Are you here for the long run? Or do you want an easy out? An easy out won't take us anywhere. The long run means I'm for God. I'm a disciple. I'm willing to pay my price. I'm willing to serve. I'm willing to give. I'm willing to be my...what did we say? My all in all. I'm ready to go. And for me, you know, it's really not the crown. What it is for me is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. I believe with all of my heart in this kingdom that one day all the saints of glory will be united. And I believe the saints of glory are praying for me and I believe that they are praying for you. And I believe that strength that we get is remembering my teachers when I was a little boy and a teenager and as an adult, that people have left a mark on me for Jesus Christ, that people I've read about and never met. The testimonies I hear about and have never seen because God is present with us day after day.

This scripture one chapter into the next has this beginning titled: Therefore, why? Why do we keep on going? Because we've had a witness through the ages. Some of you have gone, I believe it's on the Ohio border to see this ark? People come up to Noah and said: You are crazy. You are building this ark and there are no rivers. There is no lake. There is no ocean around us. Why are you building that? And you know how many years it took him to build the ark? 120 years. And he built it and God used it, didn't He?

You see, these stories that we hear from the Bible are the stories of people who remain faithful. There was a man named Abram who God kept telling him he was going to be a father of many nations and he became an old man married to an older woman named Sarah and they had no children, but God pulled them aside and said now you are going to have children. We could go through the Bible and if you listen to God and if we trust God, God will fulfil God's message through us.

You want to hear some others? Moses led the people out of slavery. David led people into battle, conquered the giant all by himself. Samson refused to give up the truth and died. Joseph, the coat of many colors, his family sold him away but he rose to power to save them. Mary, who wasn't sure what people would talk about her, became the mother of Jesus. Deborah became the judge. And I don't need just those people in the Bible. I have my own grandparents and friends and teachers who I've met. And if you listen you will hear God calling you.

I'm just asking that you don't give up, you don't lose heart, you don't quit. Why? Because these saints are the ones praying for you and me. Why? So we'll bring the kingdom of God here.

I don't even like to listen or hear news anymore and we do this. This doesn't change the political atmosphere, it doesn't save the children who are dying to addictions; it doesn't save the people who are going down the wrong path. What it will is when we become living disciples, followers of Christ, convinced to change the people around us, not by our words, by looking at us. How we treat others, how we treat people on vacations and away from the church. How we treat the person at the cash register. When people see us, they will say: I want to be that person. I want to love like they do. I want to forgive. I want to have grace.

People are looking. I love this comment: if you are ever going to get to doing anything for God, do it now. Did you ever have that: the road to you-know-where is paved with what? Good intentions. Nothing gets done if you are waiting until tomorrow.

When I see children, I have the same hope for them that I suspect my parents and grandparents and generations before had for me. I thank God for teachers, from my parents who were teachers, not teachers in an academic setting, but people who took time to instruct me on life journeys. My grandparents, and the teachers in school and my teachers in church. I want to

lay before our children, and I hope you want that as disciples, to teach them that no matter what storms come their way, God is with them and we will be with them. It's not easy because it will face challenges.

When I was in high school one of the biggest challenges in phys ed was pull ups, another one of those nasty things and I would get up there and I would be standing there trying to pull...I just had too much to pull up. And my instructor, and I wasn't nearly this big, he had those old boards, remember those clipboards, and every time I'd say I can't, he'd go whack! You know what? At the end of the semester I climbed the rope the whole way to the top at the ceiling. Literally, it was a lot higher than this one is, double distance to the top of our gym. It's amazing what inspiration will do to you.

It's one thing to be inspired; it's something else to be incredible. One of the greatest events that I remember as a young man was I was running a Y for a year and I had a young man come in who was in trouble with the law 2 or 3 times. Actually had to have him arrested. I knew the judge and asked if I could work with him. I had him weld some equipment for the weight room. He graduated that year and went off to the Marines. Probably the only such thing I've heard in 37 years of ministry. He came back the next year and thanked me for changing his life and getting him on a path. He came from an abusive home, an abusive family, a road, a track, that was leading him into trouble to spend a lifetime in jail. I didn't do anything special other than ask him to use a talent that he had. He was taking welding in vo-tech. It changed his life forever.

Do you want to be incredible? Be a disciple for Jesus Christ. Don't be a church member. I don't like church members. I like disciples. People who want to make a difference for the kingdom of God. We need to love, forgive, heal, serve and give. We need to be like Jesus, because someone is looking to you and they are hurting and they are crushed and they want a new start. They are not looking for us to judge them or condemn them or put them down. They are wanting us to dare to be a disciple that we can be all we could be.

I have to pray Jeremiah because he knew this: Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.

We need to be in a saving business and it's Jesus who does it. We need to be prepared. I was a Boy Scout and one of our mottos was being prepared. You have to be fairly old to understand this next photo. Do you remember a place called Woolrich, Pennsylvania and before they had all these light weight things to keep you warm they had...remember this? Woolrich clothes. My grandfather gave me his when he was not using it and he was about ready to pass on. I thought it was wonderful and until I put it on one winter day and it snowed and frozen rained when I was out hunting and it doubled my weight. Honest. Those things sucked up like a straw.

Jesus says something about this: Put aside everything that hinders. You can't crawl any-

where when you have extra burdens, can you? We have burdens, folks, and you know what? It doesn't do you any good to hold them.

Relationships: I don't know how many times I've sat in my office for people who go back and forth in relationships. If God's giving you signs it's not good, it's probably not good, and I'm not talking husband and wives and boyfriends and girlfriends only. It can be work relationships. Sometimes it's with brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. There are times we don't need to dislike, we don't need to hate, we just need to go apart from people who are unhealthy in our lives. We have distractions, we have habits. If the habits in our life and some of them are even good, you know we have a lot of good habits: discipline, running and jogging and exercising, that if whatever it is in our life is more important to us than God, it's a problem. Even good things can be problems, including our wealth.

Churches across America pretty much live in the same comfort we do here. Wow! And to think we are too busy to be disciples. We just want to come for an hour and say: Oh, that's all I got this week. We're not willing to find where it is that God wants me to use my gifts.

It's called sin. We don't use that word much in church anymore. It's called being disobedient. You say it to your children: you need to listen to me. You are being disobedient. We are adult children of God. A lot of times we are disobedient and we need to come home to God. We need to focus on Jesus. We need to set goals so we can get on that marathon. It is a long journey, and say: God, here's what I am for. I'm in for life. And you are going to help me.

And our gifts change all through life, what I can do. What I did as a young man isn't what I can do as a middle aged man, isn't what I can do as an older man. But there is something that the kingdom of God can use for us all the way. We just need to decide to get started. We need to get at the go line and we need to go. And sometimes we need a little help because we do get weary. Our batteries run down a little bit and it seems like at the end of the day we are just going down. Right? We need to find strength and it comes through perseverance and it comes to looking to Jesus, never giving up, never letting the temptations around us get to us.

One of the things the marathon runners hit that short term sprint runner don't get is called the wall. They hit the wall. You are running a 29 mile marathon and all of a sudden you are about 1 miles and you think: I don't know if I can do the next. You've hit walls. Have you ever worked in your kitchen and you are baking something or cleaning something and you break something...oh, I'll get that done. And you start again and you forgot to put in the baking soda and the cake didn't turn out because it didn't rise. You know what it's like. Everything you do that day seems like it is going wrong. And you think: I'm done.

We get to walls with relationships. We get to walls with discouragement. We get to walls all around us and Jesus Christ invites us to quit looking at the comfortable cross and look at this one. He says: I will bear your burdens. If you look to Jesus you are not going on this jour-

ney alone. He didn't just get thrown on that cross; he chose to follow God to give us a path of what it would be like to be an obedient disciple. He lets us choose where we will use our gifts to bring His kingdom, to bring His peace right here. He invites us to not lose heart, don't give up and don't quit. Why? Because we look to Jesus and we live.

Church, it's time we live. It's time we're filled with life. It's time we choose not to be a member, but we choose to be disciples.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you. We praise you for the privilege that you would entrust us with your kingdom. Children, youth, adults of every age, of every nation, of every tribe need you. Keep us from discouragement. Fill us with your power, Lord, that we can go and find our way to bring your kingdom. We ask in your Holy Name. Amen.