

I didn't know that Bruce was going to start his Minute for Mission with a story about the marathon and the idea of taking a first step on a long journey, our journey through life. We have heard this morning how so often it feels so hard, and we can feel overwhelmed with all that is going on. I was thinking back to the Israelites as they left Egypt and were going out into the wilderness, and how they were feeling overwhelmed at trying to find their way as they wandered in the wilderness. Sometimes even today it feels a little like we can be wandering in the wilderness.

As we begin to think about what it means to take that first step and what direction we might go, we might start with recognizing what leads us to the wilderness. One of the things, I think, is our losses. Things we thought were one way might be another. We certainly think today about the losses we have in terms of people and the grief we bear after people are gone. Sometimes it feels to me like there's almost a sense of a river of tears that we walk through with grief, that time of struggle.

It is about the losses of people, but it's also the loss of the shared life that we have together. We recognize that it's not just the people we lose that brings grief, but it's those moments when we think something is one way and it turns out to be another or we experience a loss of hope. It is at that moment I think about that idea of starting the marathon because to do that we have to have a direction to go. We need a way to go. That's one of the things scripture does for us—it begins to show us the way.

I remember recently, in Venice, Italy, it turned out that as the front-runners ran the marathon they all got lost except for one guy, and he was the one who won because he didn't get lost. It was about who they followed. So I imagine one runner went the wrong direction and everybody else just followed along. You see, our scriptures give us those folks who we can follow. And certainly if we look at the whole story of the Old Testament, there are those who go the wrong direction and there are those who seem to go the right direction. Of course, there are those heroes of faith—Abraham, Moses, David, and the others that were listed in the Hebrews reading. So we have those great people of faith that we look to and see how they went. They guide us. They help give us that direction to go.

But I want to note that it's not just those “great” people of faith. It's not just Abraham, Moses, and David. There were a lot of people along the way. We read the story of Deborah today and how she was a judge in a time when the society was patriarchal, and there she was, a judge of Israel. She was a person of faith who led God's people.

We think about others that were unexpected heroes of faith. As they were going into the promised land, Rahab was a prostitute. And yet, she discerned God's action and will and she became part of that family of faith. In fact, she is now one of those in the lineage of Jesus. If we look, I think it was her son who ended up marrying Ruth, a foreigner, who also becomes a member of the family of faith and part of the lineage of Jesus. Then there's somebody like Esther, who was an orphan, yet ends up saving her

people from extermination. Then there are Anna and Simeon. The wonderful thing about Anna and Simeon, in my mind, is their faith. Here we have Simeon, a righteous and devout man who happens to listen to the Holy Spirit and so gets to see the baby Jesus. We know nothing else about him. He's just righteous and devout. And Anna, who is also there, connected to God.

I think one of the things these heroes of faith, this cloud of witnesses, reminds me of is how they connected to God, they desired to do God's will, to be righteous and devout, and to listen for God's way and will. We think about those figures of faith identified throughout the Old Testament and then into the New Testament. The continuation of those who are disciples and followers of Jesus has not stopped. I think about those people in our own lives who have gone before us and who have given us some guidance and helped to show us the way on our journey, our marathon through life.

Who do you remember? Who is it in your life that helped guide you, show you the way, open up the grace of God? Who comes to mind? Perhaps a friend, a parent, a relative, a teacher. We can think of those who have gone before us, who have been part of our lives, who have shown us the newness and wonder of life.

The wonderful thing about the Hebrews passage is that one of the things it says about Jesus is that he was a pioneer and a perfecter of our faith. What comes in between those two things? Jesus is the one who enters into our life in a way that leads us into faith. In that way, he is a pioneer in getting us going. He doesn't leave us, but he guides us then into a community and family of faith that helps guide us. In between that pioneer and perfecter, I think, are the people who help show us the way.

One person I remember is Beth Seale. One of the things I enjoyed about Beth, particularly towards the end of her life, was that she kept up her curiosity. She kept thinking and seeing life in front of her. It's the people who have gone before us and helped us see again, who in some ways opened up the possibility of seeing how Jesus is perfecting us, sculpting our lives and putting the final touches on as we live them.

How does this relate to being in the kingdom of God? These people, I think, show us the kingdom of God present among us. It's not the nation-state that is forcing us to be any particular way, but it is the grace of God lived out in our daily lives, in those moments where somebody gives you a hand or protects you from the rain. In those moments when we recognize that somebody gives up something of their own so that somebody else can have what they need. It's those moments where the kingdom comes near, is present through the grace of God in Jesus Christ as we acknowledge God's presence with us. It is living it out in acts of helping. It is as we become rooted and grounded in love in the community of faith, recognizing the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us.

Today, we come and gather around a table so that we are sustained in our faith, and yet it is as we are rooted and grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit's work among us that the kingdom sprouts and lives among us. And as we go forth and live our lives and show the grace of God to one another, God's kingdom comes, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.