

## RUNNING ON EMPTY

Isaiah 55:6-9 / Matthew 13:1-9

Nickademus de la Rosa was an ultramarathon prodigy. At the age of 19, he finished a 135 mile race across *Death Valley* in California. At 21, he ran 135 miles in Minnesota in minus 35 degrees. At 24, he placed second in a 205 mile race through the Alps. It took him 76 hours to complete that race with less than two hours of sleep when he experienced severe hallucinations. He ran and ran, until he broke down with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. After checking himself into treatment with the help of his wife, he now runs only for fun and stops when he is about to cross his limits.

Years of emotional turmoil in his youth and young adulthood drove de la Rosa to self-medicate by keeping a punishing training and grueling race schedule. And while his example might be extreme, his predicament is rather common. Perhaps it is something we all can relate to. Running is but one way to self-medicate and so is work, among a myriad of things. We humans are ingenious when it comes to avoiding our inner and outer turmoil. As the country artist John Moreland sings, “I should be dealing with my demons / but I’m dodging them instead.” I used to run—back when I was able to still run—with a friend who always put in double the effort, or more, than I did. I once asked him: “What is it that you are running from?” He looked at me, puzzled, and he replied: “I don’t know.”

The prophet Isaiah reminds us on God’s behalf that “my ways are not your ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways.” These are wise words to consider in a world in which everyone, including us, seems to be running to their own drummer, most likely not realizing what it is we are running from. In a cultural climate where so many people are so sure that their way is “the right way” and their thoughts are “the right thoughts,” it is refreshing to read that while we are running like mad in one direction, God may very well have different paths and thoughts in mind for us and for God’s world in which we are all privileged to live. And in a world which is ever more inundated by floods—like the most recent ones in Vermont and India—scorched by fires and relentless heat, rising sea levels and severe draughts, we had better stop running and pay attention, really pay attention to what is going on around us.

The critical moment in all of our lives is the moment we begin to realize that we might be running on empty because we do not know what we are running from. And the line between self-medication and self-destruction is a thin one. When we

find ourselves in such a place, it is important to stop running, to listen, to open our eyes wide and to pay attention to what is going on.

Take Jesus, for example. In our gospel text today, there were such great crowds gathered around Jesus that he could not get a word in edgewise. They were shouting back and forth, arguing about this and that, yelling to be heard. Sort of like all the thoughts swirling around in our heads and all the things and people in our world clamoring for our attention. In all the chaos around us it is often difficult to figure out what we really need to pay attention to.

So, Jesus does something drastic. He removes himself from all the noise and commotion around him, hops in a boat, and goes where no one can follow. He puts a distance between himself and the crowd—Jesus in the boat, crowd on the beach. Only by creating this physical distance can he get their attention to tell them what they need to hear: “Listen!” he says to them, and he tells them the parable of the sower and the seeds. You know how it goes. “The sower sows some seeds. Some make it. Others don’t. Some grow fast and wither away as fast as they have come up. Others struggle. Continuously. And some succeed and their yield is far greater than anyone could have expected. Did you hear what I just told you?”

This is the parable version of the prophet Isaiah’s pronouncement that it is way above our paygrade to figure out what God thinks and what God has planned for our lives, the life of our church, of our nation, and indeed for the life of the world. Both Isaiah and Jesus agree as well that if there is any growth, if there is any beauty, and if there is any life it is God who grants that growth, beauty and life. And just like Jesus, Isaiah tells the crowd he addresses that it all begins by stopping to run and by paying attention: “Why do you spend your money on things that don’t truly nourish you? Why do you labor for that which does not give your life meaning and purpose? Listen carefully to me! Eat what is good for you! Delight in meaningful things! Incline your ear to me! Listen, so that you may live!”

What happens when we finally are too exhausted to keep running until we are empty, when we have no energy anymore, when we finally stop self-medicating and chase after endless distractions? Isaiah and Jesus tell us:

“You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. The mountains and the hills before you burst into song, and all the trees in the fields shall clap their hands. And it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off,” Isaiah pronounces. And “the seeds that fall on good soil [will] bring forth grain; some hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty,” Jesus shouts across the water to the crowd on the beach.

Once we realize, as Nickademus de la Rosa finally did, that we can neither outrun God (Ps. 139) nor our demons, we may ask ourselves a different question. After we have a better handle on what we are running from, we may wonder: “What are we running toward?” Into the arms of a loving God who eagerly awaits the prodigal’s return may not be a bad answer to that question.

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

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