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Finishing the Race Well | 1 & 2 Samuel

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SPEAKERS

Rev. Dr. Tracy Saletta

So today, as we come into this moment, it is indeed a glorious and beautiful one. It is a time when individuals are making a public declaration of the transformations that have occurred in their lives through Christ. They will be standing before all of us in this community, sharing through the sacrament of baptism, proclaiming that this is an external representation of the divine work that has transpired within them. They are declaring their newfound identity, and surrendering their lives to Christ. This ritual, which has persisted for centuries, allows us to unite with the early church in acknowledging the profound change that Christ has ignited within them. It is a profoundly beautiful and powerful, yet somehow, also a mysterious moment.

But what exactly does it invoke within us? I urge you to reminisce about the day of your baptism, and the stirrings within you on that momentous day. Recall the instance when you first perceived Christ in your life and the significance it held for you at that time. As we partake in this beautiful ritual today, remember not only those who are getting baptized today but also your own spiritual journey.

Reflect on the changes and the divine encounters with God, those significant moments in our lives. Unfortunately, as time progresses, the initial exhilaration and the splendor of those moments tend to fade away. I've found myself dwelling on the story of King David, particularly in the books of First and Second Samuel, contemplating how to finish the race of life well.

Looking at David's life, there's an aspect that has always irked me; he began with immense vigor but concluded in what seems to be a whimper. During my time journeying with David, who is a character I deeply admire in the Bible, I often find myself pondering what went wrong. I sense that the potential to get distracted, to lose our initial zest, or to grow weary and disillusioned is always present. Sometimes, it feels like cynicism is lurking just around the

corner, ready to engulf us in disillusionment with the church, fellow Christians, or life in general.

How then do we maintain our trajectory when we commence our journey with such fervor, with dreams and visions, but then find ourselves derailed, perhaps by betrayals or disappointments in religious leadership? The Apostle Paul shares a resolute perspective in Acts 20, emphasizing the paramount goal of completing the task that Jesus has assigned to him, even if it meant considering his life worthless. Furthermore, in Hebrews 12, he encourages us to persevere in running the race that has been set before us. This sentiment is echoed in Second Timothy, where he states that he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.

So, how is your race progressing? We all find ourselves at different stages in our spiritual journeys. Some may be just embarking on this path, bubbling with youthful enthusiasm, convinced that they will never waver. I recall a similar zeal when I first obtained my driver's license, eager to explore without understanding my parents' reluctance to drive.

However, over time, perspectives change, and what once seemed a boundless road now feels like a trek to a distant land. In this gathering, there are individuals who have been steadfastly walking this path for a long time, while others may be grappling with fatigue and disillusionment. Some might even be doubting their faith in God, weighed down by the pressures of the world and challenges within the Christian community.

So, how do we finish the race well? Paul provides guidance in First Corinthians 9, urging us to run with the goal to win the everlasting crown, through discipline and focus. This race, as Paul suggests, requires us to govern our bodies wisely, not yielding to the desires for constant indulgence. It entails making daily decisions that align with our divine purpose.

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that each one of us is on a unique journey. I mentioned in my previous sermon the importance of focusing on our individual paths, and not getting distracted by others' progress or methods. The central question remains: How are you running the race that is designated for you? Have you succumbed to weariness, disillusionment, or distractions? Have you drifted away from your initial fervor and devotion?

Let's revisit David's story for a moment, condensing vast chapters from First and Second Samuel to glean insights from his life. David started as a shepherd boy, faithfully tending his father's sheep, a time during which he forged a deep connection with God. His youthful courage and faith were evident in his fearless confrontations with a lion and a bear.

David, anointed by the prophet Samuel as the youngest of Jesse's sons, wasn't even considered significant enough to be presented among his siblings initially. Yet, his profound

relationship with God, cultivated during his time as a shepherd, defined him as a man after God's own heart. This identity was not rooted in his actions but in his intimate relationship with God.

Now, I would like to refer to a verse from Galatians 5, where Paul questions the Galatians about the obstacles that hindered their faithful race. Similar to David, sometimes it's the small decisions that lead to substantial consequences. David's early life showcased a deep communion with God, an attribute that earned him the title of a man after God's own heart. This wasn't about his deeds, but his relationship with God.

In his youth, while tending to his father's sheep, he exhibited a remarkable communion with God, evidenced by the Psalms he penned during that period. His courage and faith were apparent as he valiantly defended his flock from lions and bears. Later, we witness him being anointed by the prophet Samuel, despite being the youngest and seemingly insignificant in his family.

It is vital to ensure that we are not led astray from our destined paths by external influences. Often, it's the small choices that snowball into significant consequences, a lesson evident from David's life. From a shepherd boy with a deep connection to God, his journey took several turns, culminating in moments that seemed incongruent with his early fervor.

As we delve deeper into David's life, we find that his devotion was not confined to his deeds, but was deeply rooted in his relationship with God. Even as a shepherd boy, his communion with God was apparent, a connection that was nurtured through faithful service and profound spiritual insights gained while tending to his father's flock. It's evident that David held a deep understanding of what it meant to walk with God, an attribute that characterized him as a man after God's own heart.

So, as we navigate through our individual races, let us strive to retain our focus, nurturing our connection with God and resisting the temptations that threaten to derail us. Remember, it's the daily choices, the small acts of faithfulness, that truly propel us forward in our divine race. Let us run with endurance, holding fast to the love and fervor that initially set us on this spiritual journey, aiming to finish well, with our eyes fixed firmly on the everlasting crown awaiting us.

And he goes, 'Well, I got my son. He's like a shepherd. Do you want him to,' and they have to go out to the fields to find David. So, he comes back and Samuel anoints him king over Israel, after Saul lost his kingdom. Nothing basically happens next. He is anointed as king. Imagine this moment. It's as if people are professing their faith in Christ. You're told you're going to be king. He's anointed, experiencing this big prophetic moment, but then he goes back to tending sheep. Samuel goes home and does what prophets do. That's that.

It was 15 years later that he actually stepped into his calling. Those 15 years were filled with numerous challenges. And, PS, by the way, it then took seven more years until he became king over both Israel and Judah. So quick math, that's 22 years. 22 years from the moment God marked your life, laying out the path for you to follow, before you actually step into your role.

In the way only God can orchestrate, David ends up in the service of Saul. Being a masterful harpist, David could alleviate the severe headaches Saul suffered, possibly from demonic attacks. However, Saul starts to feel threatened by David, not liking his anointing, and recognizing that David is next in line for the throne. Saul decides to take matters into his own hands, planning to kill David to prevent him from becoming king.

A few years go by and a war erupts between Israel and the Philistines. Enter Goliath, a giant who challenges the Israelites daily, demeaning them and calling them names. Every morning, the Israelites face Goliath but no one steps up to fight him, allowing the intimidation to send them home. This goes on for months. Meanwhile, David is tending sheep.

One day, David's father asks him to deliver food to his brothers. As he is there, handing out the food, Goliath appears again. David, a mere teenager amidst armored men, is incredulous at the sight of Goliath and his challenges. Curious, he inquires about the reward for defeating Goliath, irritating his brothers in the process. However, David's zeal for God fuels him to volunteer to fight Goliath. Surprisingly, his offer is accepted despite his young age and lack of armor.

Saul tries to outfit David with his armor but David declines, opting for a familiar and trusty slingshot and five stones instead. Standing before Goliath, David declares his faith in God, promising victory over the giant who defied the armies of the living God. As Goliath charges in rage, David, filled with faith, runs towards the battle line to meet him.

As a young teenager, David demonstrated a powerful, zealous faith and deep conviction, characteristics that guided him as he grew into a community-focused and powerful leader. Before each battle, he would consult God, seeking His guidance and following it diligently. Despite being anointed as king, he didn't force his way to the throne. Instead, he fostered growth in his leadership abilities, developing integrity and character.

People began to gravitate towards him, seeking refuge and protection from the distress caused by Saul's reign. Even as he was fleeing from Saul, who was determined to kill him, David attracted a following of those cast aside by Saul's kingdom. Offering them protection and a place in his clan, David continued to develop as a compassionate leader. He resisted opportunities to kill Saul, opting to wait for God's timing instead.

His humility and integrity were evident, refusing to harm Saul even when the opportunity presented itself twice. Instead of taking advantage of Saul's vulnerability, David chose to preserve his integrity, demonstrating a deep respect for God's anointing and timing. This attitude carried over into his leadership style, promoting unity and equality among his followers, even in matters of sharing the bounty from battles.

However, a shift occurs in David's life, documented in Second Samuel 11:1. David, once zealous and character-driven, starts making decisions that prioritize his own interests. A change in heart leaves us pondering the transformation in David's journey, especially considering his strong initial zeal for God. This change beckons reflection on personal life journeys and the desire to finish the race with the same fervor and passion for God that marked the beginning

"How's your race going?"

Where are you in your race? Are you disillusioned? Are you tired? Where are you on this journey?

David, however, stays behind. He doesn't go; he doesn't stay in his lane. He isn't where a king is supposed to be. He makes this one decision. Was he tired? Was he comfortable? Something was clearly going on with David, but something shifted. Our lives are made up of a lot of little decisions. These moments are so powerful and they're beautiful. But what really matters is how we live in the in-between times. It's how we make our choices and decisions in our lives.

This week, I was talking to someone on the phone and they were discussing some decisions they were making. I listened to them and thought, that's not good; it seems like you're making a choice that's going to cause you trouble. Their response was, "it just feels so good." The decisions we make can lead us to places that create a snowball effect in our life, which is what happened to David here.

So, he stays home, sees a gorgeous woman, and decides to sleep with her. She gets pregnant. Instead of facing it, a characteristic that David has always embodied, he avoids it. He brings her husband home from the army, trying to get him to sleep with his wife, so they can pretend the child is his and not David's. However, Uriah shows more integrity than David, refusing to sleep with his wife while his men are fighting on the front line, and instead sleeps outside on the ground. This leaves David in a dilemma.

So, David writes a note to Joab instructing him to put Uriah on the front line. Despite Joab's protests regarding the strategy, David insists. Uriah is placed on the front line and gets killed, leaving David seemingly free of his predicament.

But then Nathan, another prophet, approaches David with a story that holds a mirror to David's actions. Furious, David demands to know who the person in the story is, promising to kill them. Nathan reveals that the person is David himself. This confrontation serves as God's rescue plan for David, a warning about the path he is heading down.

In Richard Rohr's book "Falling Upward," which is one of my favorites, he discusses the two halves of our life. Initially, we are zealous and full of energy, eager to serve God and fight for justice. But, if we are not careful, as we age we might become cynical, tired, and disillusioned, questioning why we should bother anymore. Rohr emphasizes the importance of remaining soft and receptive to God's work, constantly checking in on our ego and false self.

Unfortunately, I think that's where David fell short. Despite Nathan's intervention, David continues down his ill-fated trajectory. Rohr contends that if change and growth aren't programmed into your spirituality, which involves humbling ourselves and being open to self-examination, then your religion will end up worshipping the status quo and protecting personal advantages.

As we transition into Second Samuel, we see a change. Absalom, David's son, has turned against him, attempting to usurp the kingdom. This raises questions about David's memory and awareness of God's promises and his own identity.

A messenger alerts David to Absalom's actions, setting off panic and urgency. Without pausing to pray or consider his actions, David decides to flee, a stark contrast to his younger self who ran into battle fearlessly. Despite his followers offering to fight for him, David chooses to run, leaving us to wonder what happened to him at this moment.

Richard Rohr, once again in "Falling Upward," talks about a deeper voice of God that one needs to heed in the latter half of life. This voice guides us towards risk, trust, surrender, and love. It requires us to stay sensitive and attuned as we grow older, preventing a shift towards hardness and cynicism.

So, as we embrace this moment, I want to urge those being baptized today, and those who have already experienced this sacrament, to finish the race well. Stay sensitive, do not fear self-examination, and remain open to God's loving voice within you. Maintain a daily communion with God and foster community with others.

This race isn't just about proclaiming oneself as a Christian destined for heaven; it's about nurturing relationships and community, running the race marked out for us individually. Like Paul, we should strive to control our bodies and make conscious choices, staying in our lanes and running our races well.

The key, in my experience, is daily listening and sitting with God, allowing His voice to guide us. Community is vital, as it encourages us and keeps us grounded in our faith journey. Therefore, strive to run towards the battle, not only at the beginning of your life but also at the end.

Amen. Amen.