

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill
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Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14

WE HAVE NOT ARRIVED

He went by his initials, J. C. His first name was James, middle name: Cleveland. He had grown up in Alabama, but when he was nine, his family moved to Cleveland as part of the migration of African American families heading north during the early part of the 20th century in search of greater economic opportunity in a place where racism might be less vicious. At his new school, when his teacher asked for his name, he told her J. C. But with his strong Southern accent, she thought he said 'Jesse.' The new name stuck and he would be known as Jesse Owens for the rest of his life.

The movie, "Race," currently in the theaters, focuses on Jesse Owens as a young adult, as he moves toward and competes in the 1936 Olympic Games. These were the summer Olympics that took place in Berlin during the Nazi party's rise to power. Adolf Hitler delighted in the opportunity for what he hoped would be a demonstration that the Aryan race was superior to all others. But on August 3, Jesse Owens won the gold medal in the 100 meter race. On August 4, he won the gold medal in the long jump competition. On August 5, he won the gold in the 200 meter race. A few days later, he added to his gold collection through a win in the 4 by 100 meter sprint relay. Jesse wasn't just competing for himself – each victory put a dent in the racist world view of Nazism. And frankly, Jesse Owens' accomplishments weren't fully appreciated in some quarters when he got back to the United States. He never did get an invitation to the White House or even a letter from it as an expression of congratulations from President Roosevelt.¹ The gold medals were a great achievement for Jesse, but there were larger purposes for which he was running.

The Apostle Paul compares himself to a runner in a race in our passage from his letter to the Church in Philippi. His language is vivid, pressing, stretching, and straining. As one writer described it, "in those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls."² Paul is writing this letter from prison, having been put there because of the gospel he proclaimed. But still he pushes ahead. He had been instrumental in establishing churches in major cities in many parts of the Roman Empire, but he was nowhere near ready to rest on his laurels. I feel like someone needed to tell Paul to take a break. He had been traveling all over, survived numerous ship wrecks, had been arrested and even flogged many times. Work with certain and uncertain congregations was regularly as contentious as were his relations with the Roman government. What sounds like a driven-ness makes me wonder whether Paul would have been diagnosed as an obsessive compulsive personality today. Even from his jail cell, he finds a way to race ahead. He kept his eyes on the prize, continuing to proclaim the good news that came to him through someone else with the initials J. C.

In a figurative sense, when people are running, sometimes they are running away from what is behind them. They are running away from what frightens them or what angers them. In our world today, there are huge numbers of refugees who understandably are running away from war and from situations where their basic needs cannot be met. But Paul was not running away from anything. He valued what laid behind him, the richness of his Jewish faith. But God was doing something new and he was not going to miss the opportunity to be a part of what God was doing.

When our passage from Isaiah was written, it was addressed to Hebrews held in exile in Babylon. They knew the story of God's great deliverance of Hebrew slaves from the great world power of Egypt centuries before. They were drawn to that narrative. They would have loved to run back to that experience to have it play out in their

lives. And yet they needed to let go of the idea that the exodus story was the only way that God could deliver people from an experience of oppression so that they could be open to the new thing that God was bringing about.

At times we may not be inclined to go through the stress and strain Paul is talking about. We're o.k. with where we are. Or we're a bit tired and we're ready to take it easy. Or we begin to think God's not going to do anything new that we need to be moving toward. There are times we might be inclined to just kick up our feet and relax a bit. But there is every indication in scripture and in other ways that God isn't through with us yet. I don't think we have arrived at our spiritual destination just yet.

Jesus, our ultimate faith model, throughout his life and ministry, he kept pressing on toward the goal of God's calling. He ran quite a race, pressing on in the early days of his ministry in his own home town of Nazareth, where his own neighbors and family didn't recognize him for who he was. He pressed on through villages preaching and teaching and answering every challenge that was brought to him. "Why don't your disciples wash their hands, who are you to forgive sins, why are you healing on the Sabbath? What's this talk about loving enemies and bringing outcasts into the center of our communities?" He pressed on to the streets of Jerusalem where some cheered his name and shouted, "Hosanna," as others grumbled about the dangers of his movement. He pressed on even though there were some who tried to trap him and discredit him. He pressed on to an upper room to dine with a betrayer, pressed on to a garden where his closest followers couldn't watch with him and where he struggled within himself about where God's will would lead. He pressed on through his arrest and a mock trial that led to a flogging and a crucifixion. He strained for breath to be able to pray aloud, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He pressed on all the way to his life's end, where death's hold was ultimately broken and a new resurrection life was offered to all including to you and me.

That's why the race we run can be a joyful one. We're not seeking a gold medal. We run with purpose provided by God, we run with hope provided by God, we run with energy provided by God. We run moving toward the new life God is offering us, one that is still full of surprises and vibrancy, one that is full of individual and communal growth. Do we get tired? Yes. Do we get discouraged at times? That too! There was an old civil rights song that began with these words: "Paul and Silas, bound in jail, had no money for to go their bail. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on."³ There are voices of hatred to be countered. There is a new peace to be forged. There is divine love to be shared. There is something enticing about the new thing God wants to do within and through us. There is a race to be run. So on your mark, get set, go.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesse_Owens

² Fred Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation Series*, p. 62, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985.

³ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/saragroves/eyesontheprize.html>