

CLOUDBURST!

I was a runner for twelve years. Ten years ago I developed sciatica and had to give it up, but for twelve wonderful years I was a runner. Five or six days a week I would lace up my shoes and head out the door and run four or five miles down neighborhood streets and through local parks. I never was very fast, but I was persistent. I worked at lowering my times, keeping careful records of how far I'd run each day, and how long it had taken me. I read *Runners World* magazine each month, searching for hints that could improve my performance. And three or four times a year, I would enter a 10K road race to motivate my training.

I never won such a race. Not even in my age category. In fact, I never even came close. I was never last; but usually I finished in the bottom 25%. I was often surrounded by older men, and women who were out of shape. I remember being beaten once by a one-armed man—we challenged each other for a couple of miles, but in the end he won. It was like something straight out of *The Fugitive*.

Still, even for those of us in the back of the pack, the promise of a finish line, with its table laden with snacks and water, not to mention the souvenir t-shirts, was a strong incentive. And even more helpful, were the folks who stood along the race course, cheering us on. I especially appreciated those who had already finished the race, who stood near the finish chute, shouting words of encouragement, "Looking good!" "Go for it!" I appreciated it so much that I made sure when I finished; I did the same for those behind me. I knew first hand how hard it was to pump out those last steps, and I knew how much it meant to have someone notice your effort, even if you were one of those at the very end of the line.

It is that kind of experience that the writer of Hebrews uses to illustrate his point in today's scripture reading.

First, the author goes through a long list of faithful men and women from the past. He mentions many whose names we recognize, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, his parents, the prostitute Rahab. He speaks of David and Samuel and the prophets. And then he tells of those whose names we may not even know, who persevered even in the face of great adversity and persecution: "Others," he writes, "were tortured . . . suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death . . . sawn in two . . . They wandered in deserts and mountains . . ." (11:35-38) And they were able to do these things, face these trials, because of their faith in God. They endured so much, and were able to do so, because they believed that God stood with them, and by them. They faced great challenges, because of their love for the Holy One.

What an example they provide for us, says the author. They are role models, mentors, forerunners in the faith! And while they may have gone before us, they are with us every day, and all the time. In fact, says the author, "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses!"

And while it is true, they have already finished this race called life, they are still standing at the finish line with Jesus, the great champion of the race, cheering us on. “Looking good!” “Go for it!”

“So,” he says, “let us set aside every weight . . . and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . .” (12:1-2a)

One scholar sums it up this way: “God has already or confirmed their faithfulness, and they now gather around us for whom the race is not finished. They are spectators whose presence exercises a strong positive influence on the runners.” (Fred Craddock, *New Interpreters Bible*, XII: 148)

I don’t know about you, but I find this enormously encouraging. I find it heartening to think that folks like Julian of Norwich and Martin Luther King and my grandmother Sue Sherwood, are watching me as I sometimes struggle to run this race. I am challenged to do better, to run harder, by the idea that I am being cheered on by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Francis of Assisi and wonderful parishioners who have passed on like Bill Strouts and Jennifer Fialko and Ed Mitchell. I am strengthened in my efforts to pick up my feet and run by the notion that the saints of old and the saints of my own experience are shouting words of encouragement and inspiration. It does me a world of good knowing that I am surrounded, *surrounded*, by such a great cloud of witnesses!

Kent Hughes tells a true story about Lou Little who was the football coach at Georgetown University some eighty years ago. At the time, Georgetown’s biggest rival was Fordham. One of Little’s players was a kid who had no great talent for the game. A bench warmer. But Little kept him on the team any way. He especially admired the young man’s close relationship to his father. He could even be seen walking arm-in-arm with his dad on campus when parents would come to visit.

One day Little got a call from the young man’s mother. Her husband had died suddenly of a heart attack, and she wanted Coach Little to be the one to tell her son.

The broken-hearted boy went home for the services, and then returned three days later. Right before the Fordham game.

“Coach,” he asked, “would you put me in the game on Saturday? It would have made my Dad so proud!”

The coach thought about it, and then promised that he would—but only for a play or two.

Saturday came and the coach kept his promise. But once the kid went in, he never took him out. He played as he had never played before! His running, his blocking, were phenomenal.

After the game, Coach Little approached the young man to find out why he had been so transformed.

“Most people don’t know it,” he said, “but my father was totally blind. Today was the first time he ever saw me play.” (*Men of Integrity*, January/February, 2001)

That young man was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and one in particular, who cheered him on, who gave him the stamina, the courage, the wherewithal to play as he had never played before.

I ran 10K races, about 6.2 miles. But there are other runners who go for much longer distances. Most folks know about marathons, those 26.2 mile endurance tests, but have you ever heard of ultra marathons? They can range in distance, but one of them, the Marathon Des Sables, is 150 miles long. More significant than the distance is the fact that it crosses the Sahara Desert over a period of days.

One runner recently in that race was a man named Joey Lee. Lee had a particularly rough go of it. Some eighty miles into the race, Lee’s running shoes, with their special air pockets built into the soles, blew out. There was nothing left between his feet and the sand and rocks of the desert, but a thin layer of rubber--and he didn’t have a second pair. But he kept on running. For miles and miles, for several days, it was nothing but sweat and sun and sand. But he kept at it. And in time he finished.

The secret to his success? Lee was running the ultra marathon to raise funds for the American Cancer Society, in memory of his recently deceased wife, who had died of the dread disease. “I just thought about Allison a lot,” he said later, “This is nothing compared to what she went through.” (Source: www.clarionledger.com, 4-18-04)

Lee too was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, including his wife, and they cheered him on. And because of that he had the ability to take on even the desert itself!

Sisters and brothers, you too are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. There are thousands, even millions, some known to you, most not, who stand by the side of Jesus, waiting at the finish line, cheering you on. No doubt there are some familiar faces in that crowd. A friend, a spouse, maybe even a child. And they are calling out your name, and applauding your every courageous step! They wince when you trip and fall, and cheer when you get back up and go on. They know the course you’re running, and while there may be sweat pouring down your face, or tears filling your eyes, while you may not be able to see the way clearly, they can. And so they urge you on. They offer you hope and encouragement. They stand ready to inspire your every stride. They are indeed a great cloud of witnesses, and like a cloudburst on a hot August night, they pour down refreshing rain. But not a rain of water that can evaporate or trickle away, rather a rain of eternal joy.

For twelve years I was a runner in the literal sense of the word. But in truth, like each and every one of you, I am a runner every day of my life. And some days this ultra marathon looks like its crossing an endless desert. But neither I nor you ever run it alone. Even if you can’t see anyone coming up from behind, even if you see no one out ahead, you are not alone. And if you look up, figuratively speaking, you’ll see them there. That great cloud of witnesses. Always and forever. Those folks who’ve gone before you. Those saints of old

and of our day, who've run the course, who've finished the race. They are standing there with Jesus—and they are chanting your name, cheering your every step.

Might their presence give you comfort, courage and hope. Might their presence empower you to lace up your shoes, and run the race of life with a joy-filled heart.

**Amen
John H. Danner**