



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

APRIL 13, 2017
MAUNDY THURSDAY

LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST

Listen

Exodus 12:1-14; John 13:1-35

I love stories and I enjoy hearing a good storyteller. A year or so ago, I learned about the Moth Radio Hour which broadcasts storytelling sessions that are held throughout the world and featured on Public Radio stations. You can hear them locally on Sunday evenings at 7:00 p.m.

The stories told are by regular folks who are talking without notes in front of a live audience. The topics cover anything that can possibly happen to a human being and then some, so the stories are always interesting. A couple of months ago I heard a story told by Peter Sagal. Some of you will know Mr. Sagal as the host of the Saturday NPR program, *Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me!* which is a quiz show on the week's news featuring a guest panel and listeners.

Peter Sagal told a very personal story about running a marathon. A number of years ago he had started running marathons and was quite proud of his achievements. In fact, it was during a family conversation when he mentioned that his success at running marathons was what he was most proud of in his life that his wife decided that since she and their daughters did not rank that high, they might as well go their separate ways. Understandably, it was a dark and difficult time for him. His friends tried to comfort and encourage him. Several of them quoted Winston Churchill to him who reportedly said, "If you're going through hell, keep going!" So he did.

He had even more time for running marathons and he accepted more and more invitations to travel and speak since there really was no one to go home to anymore. One spring he accepted an invitation to participate in a program which paired him with a blind runner. His job was to run alongside the other person and give verbal clues about what was ahead, when to make a turn, etc. He was excited to be able to run for a good cause, for someone other than himself.

His partner was a man named William Greer, a forty-something year old fellow from Texas who at the age of seventeen had lost most of his sight in an accident. Peter and William met on the third Monday in April to run the

Boston Marathon together. William was a good runner and had completed several races alone since he had some peripheral vision, but he was worried about missing a turn or falling on an unfamiliar course. By running alongside Peter and listening to his observations, he would be able to navigate the Boston course.

It was a beautiful morning when they started running twenty-six miles outside of the city. In this marathon, instead of eventually returning to the starting point, you run from the countryside into downtown Boston. The course begins easy and gets tougher as the run progresses. They ran side-by-side and chatted, getting to know each other, talking about life in general. Just past the halfway mark, the course became tougher. William had stomach and leg cramps which they were able to manage. Then the four famous hills rose before them, not very high hills, but quite challenging in a marathon. They stopped and started and walked part way. Peter kept telling William that no matter what, he had to run the last mile. The last mile is a “canyon of noise” as you make the only two turns on the entire course and run past thousands of people cheering you on to the finish line.

At mile twenty-five, William said he could run no more and would have to walk the rest of the way. Peter said that was fine. But as they made those two turns, William suddenly took off running and got ahead of Peter so that he was not able to give him any directions, especially since William was heading toward the only pothole on the entire course marked by a large orange pylon. Fortunately, William saw it with his peripheral vision at the last moment and swerved to go around it.

Then Peter shouted to him, “William, there is the finish line!” “I can see it!” he answered. “Go!” yelled Peter, and William sprinted away. The crowds were cheering and shouting his name as William crossed the finish line . . . and kept going. “You can stop now,” Peter yelled from behind. “I can?” William yelled in response. “Yes!” Peter answered. And William collapsed in the street as many marathon runners do. Medical personnel rushed over to see if he needed help and got him back to his feet. “Let’s go get your medal,” Peter said. Then there was a loud BOOM! They were about a hundred yards past the finish line. They turned around and saw white smoke rising into the air and ten seconds later another BOOM!

Later that evening when he finally saw videos from the Boston Marathon bombing, Peter noticed that the first bomb went off when the race clock was at 4:09. He and William had crossed the finish line at 4:05. William had kept

running when he did not want to. If he had continued to walk, there is no knowing where they would have been at 4:09. Peter Sagal sums up his story with these words, “I know this: William Greer was going through hell and he kept going.”¹

For three years the disciples had been listening alongside Jesus. They did not always know where they were going or exactly how they would get there. They understood some of what he taught, but not everything. At times they wanted to give up or take a different course or try something else altogether, but Jesus kept encouraging them to stay the course, to pay attention, to listen, and keep going.

One of the disciples—Judas—did not listen. He opted to drop out of the race, to chart his own course, to choose an easier route to what he believed was the goal. He was wrong, of course, and we remember him in a sadly darker way tonight.

The stories we have heard tonight are all about listening. The story of the first Passover is filled with sounds. First there is the sound of God’s voice speaking to Moses and Aaron and then the bleating of lambs and goats, the crackling of fires, and the hissing of fat dripping onto burning embers. There is the soft sound of hands kneading dough and the hurried sounds of packing and eating in a rush. The story of Jesus and his friends celebrating the Passover is also filled with sounds. As the men gathered in the borrowed upper room, we hear sandals slapping on stairs, benches scraping against the floor, and water splashing on dusty feet. There is the convivial laughter of friends sharing a meal, the reassuring harmonies of familiar prayers, and the rising notes of wine filling a cup. There is also the discomfiting sound of coins clinking in Judas’ purse as he abruptly leaves the room and the anxious whispers of the disciples wondering which one of them would betray Jesus.

There is also a sound that we often miss but which is the most important sound of all. Tradition holds that when Jesus told his disciples one of them would betray him, they all began to wonder who it was. John, identified in his own gospel as the disciple “whom Jesus loved,” was seated next to Jesus. Peter told him to ask Jesus who would betray him. Instead of sitting up straight at the table as our mothers taught us to do, people at that time lounged around the table. The image is that John was leaning on Jesus with

¹Peter Sagal, “Keep Going,” *The Moth Radio Hour* (February 10, 2014); accessed online at: <https://themoth.org/stories/keep-going>.

his head on Jesus' chest. The sound he alone heard was the sound of Jesus' heart—the heartbeat of God.

Over the next eighteen or so hours that follow, we will hear a cacophony of sounds that swirl around Jesus: prayers and cries, angry shouts and vile lies, taunts and lashes and hammer blows. At any point he can stop. At every turn he can change course. But he doesn't. He keeps going until we hear a silence that shakes heaven and earth.

If we listen to the sounds heard in the upper room that night, we discover what it means to follow Jesus. In the splashing of the water to wash the disciples' feet, we discover that we are called to serve one another. In the tearing of the bread shared around the table, we learn that we are called to a life of self-sacrifice. In the pouring of the wine into the cup, we discover that we are called to be life-giving in all that we do. And in the sounds we hear from the mock trial, the scourging, the trek to Calvary, and the hanging of Jesus upon the cross, we discover that no matter what happens, even if we are going through hell, we keep going because we are not alone. God in Christ and our sisters and brothers are at our side, offering direction and encouragement and grace. When we listen to the heartbeat of God, we will know how to love one another because God has loved us first. Amen.