

The Finish Line Moves?!! [OR Naps and Snacks for Grownups are Biblical]

1 Kings 19:4-8 and John 6:35, 41-51

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on August 8, 2021

The other night Rob and I watched Olympic men's swimming. I gotta say that the 50-meter freestyle is one of my favorites. During the 50-meter freestyle, the swimmers don't take a breath. It's a sprint down the lane as fast as humanly possible for about 20 seconds. Imagine what would happen if the pool was suddenly 60 meters long. Yeah, I know, that's impossible. Just imagine it though. You're swimming and you know how long it takes, how much power to burn, and might even know how many strokes you need. 1...2...3...4... But, the wall isn't there. The pool stretched. The finish line changed. Imagine any race or sport or game when suddenly, the finish line changes. Any shift in the finish line would bring chaos because everything's organized to a set end point.

In the pandemic, on top of the personal loss and grief that some of us have experienced, the shifting finish line causes fatigue and frustration. It's a race against time alright, including plenty of both screaming and encouragement. Although it's a race unlike any that we've encountered in our lifetime. And the finish line keeps moving.

Elijah knew a thing or two about moving finish lines and consuming despair when life is changing fast. Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him, and he fled into the wilderness. Tucking himself into the shade of a broom tree, he prayed that he would die and then he falls asleep. When he woke up from his nap, he ate cake fresh from the hot stones, prepared by the angels. And he took another nap. It's amazing what a snack and a nap can do to adjust perspective and improve the mood. Elijah's situation hadn't changed. Queen Jezebel still wanted him dead, and the finish line was nowhere in sight. Taking a break gave Elijah what he needed to see straight for the next leg of his journey.

It's pretty obvious when a kid needs a nap and a snack – behavior melts down and whining amps up. As grown-ups, we're less likely take advantage of what Elijah discovered about resting and eating when we're tired and stressed out. And we're less likely to encourage each other to get some down time when it's pretty obvious to everyone else that we need it. Human bodies need to rest and eat and many of us stink at one or the other or both. Next time you're melting down and

maybe even whining, see if you can squeeze in a short nap. Perhaps it helps knowing that naps and snacks are biblical and not just for toddlers.

Perhaps it also helps that we're at a rest stop in the 6th chapter of John. We're in the middle of five weeks of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse that happens every three years during the year that we focus on the Gospel of Mark. Mark is a short book and offers the perfect chance to take a break from the urgency in Mark to drift with Jesus around the Sea of Galilee in the 6th chapter of John and talk about bread – actual fish and bread as he feeds 5,000 people, as well as himself as the Bread of Life – hence the name, Bread of Life discourse. Anyway, here we are with Jesus and the crowds and some of the Jews who knew him before he was the miracle man. His message confuses them because they knew him and his parents from the old days.

His message is a simple one. He sets the finish line as being “raised on last day.” It's a simple message that creates complaining not just in the Bible story. Jesus' message creates complaining and arguments aplenty right up through today. Arguments about who gets to be with Jesus after death. Arguments about what “belief” means or doesn't mean. Arguments about what “eternal life” means or doesn't mean. But we're going to take a break from those arguments today too. And we're simply going to rest in Jesus' assurance to his followers that the finish line that he calls “the last day” is promised to us as eternal life because of who he came to be. In the first few verses of John's gospel, we're told that:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”¹

Jesus' promise to us is an unmovable finish line not because of who we are but because of who Jesus came to be from beyond time – for us and for the world. His promise is bigger than we can imagine and includes more people than we can imagine. The Gospels including John, repeatedly describe the grace and inclusion of Jesus' ministry. Over and over again we hear about someone else included in his expanding ministry of grace and truth. The Gospel of John emphasizes the power of God in Jesus. Jesus, who is God. God, who is Jesus. Jesus whose life

¹ John 1:1 and 14

reveals God's love and care for all people regardless of class, gender, or race. Jesus whose ministry of God's unconditional love led to his execution on a cross. Through the suffering of self-sacrificing love, Jesus laid his life down on a cross and, through an empty tomb, he catches death up into God, drawing those who have died into eternal life where suffering is no more, and joy never ends.

Jesus' promise is not meant as escapism. He repeatedly asks his followers to love others as he loved us in the fleshy mess, mystery, and magnificence of this life. The Christian life is not meant to be one of detachment. We're called to deep attachment as Jesus attached with the world as the Word made flesh. But Jesus' promised finish line means, in part, that we can navigate the changes to our shifting earthly finish lines with the resilience and perspective of faith.

I don't know about you, but the second year of the pandemic has been rougher than I imagined. I've gotten to a point in my life where I know, with every fiber of my being, I know better than to say things like, "Things will be easier when this happens; or things will be calmer when that happens." There's no quicker road to despair than to make up a finish line that does not exist. And even though I know better, I've realized that I was making up finish lines without being aware that I was doing so. There is wisdom in holding our imagined finish lines lightly, even as we take seriously the Christian life and ministry that Jesus calls us into.

Jesus' promised finished line on the last day can help us live into the moving parts of life with each other – in the fleshy mess, mystery, and magnificence of this life. As the Bread of Life, he is food for our journey. Food that I don't know what I would do without in the ups and downs of life. And I mean this literally in the experience of Holy Communion where Jesus promises to be present and in worship where Jesus promises to be present when two or more are gathered in his name. Worship is a place of rest and refreshment in ways that are worth discovering. And, just like that, we're back to a nap and a snack overseen by angels. A spiritual nap and snack amounting to an earthly encounter with the eternal and shifting our view just enough to maintain a faithful perspective.

The good news is that Jesus' finish line is constant and unconditional. His promise as the Bread of Life sustains us in our life together, in our individual lives, and in company with all the saints in life eternal. Thanks be to God and amen.