

“Marathons & Mountaintops”

2nd Sunday of Lent [B]

Gn 22:1-2, 9-13; Ps 116:10, 15-19; Rom 8:31B-34; Mt 17:5; Mk 9:2-10

It was about 8-9 years ago, that I ran my first (and hopefully last!) marathon.

It was the Marine Corps Marathon, and JDW had a team

- supporting the archdiocese in their annual *Run for Vocations* fundraiser.

People sometimes ask, “The marathon... that’s the 26-miler, right?”

- To which I reply, “No, it’s actually 26.2 miles..!”
 - cause trust me when I say, you feel *every* painful inch
 - of that last “point 2”!

Regarding marathons, most of us I’m sure have heard about something called “the wall.”

- It’s a point generally somewhere around 18-20 miles,
 - where, especially for the novice marathoner,
 - your body simply runs out of gas...

My marathon experience would be no different...

- Right about the 20-mile mark, that ol’ wall was waiting for me, as advertised.
- My body had been aching for a while, but now every single step was truly painful and required focus. And 6.2 miles remained...

Quitting was not an option,

- so I was trudging along in a bit of a haze trying to ignore the pain when,
 - as I approached the top of a hill,
 - I began to hear some festive music...
 - And as I crested that hill, in the distance I could see:
 - the finish line!
 - I still had quite a ways to go, but what a sight it was to behold!
 - I could see grandstands along the final stretch,
 - faster runners already crossing the finish line,
 - Where there was rest & nourishment...
 - Where there was great happiness,
 - for the grueling race was finally over.

- This was no mirage in my marathon desert,
 - it was a foretaste of what awaited me
 - if I could only persevere...
- Before long I was heading down the backside of that hill...
 - And I soon lost sight of the finish line,
 - the sounds of the music started to fade...
 - But I carried that scene in my heart and it spurred me on!
 - That little glimpse from the hilltop
 - gave me great encouragement
 - which helped carry me to the finish line...

We see today, on this 2nd Sunday of Lent, our Scripture readings offer some

- beautiful spiritual metaphors -- “typology” as we call them

In our first reading from Genesis

- Abraham is prepared
 - to offer his beloved and only begotten son Isaac
 - in sacrifice on Mt. Moriah
- Just as God the Father would later
 - offer His beloved and only begotten son Jesus
 - in sacrifice on a hill called Calvary
- Abraham’s son Isaac even carried the wood for the sacrificial fire
 - just as Jesus would also carry the wooden cross for His sacrifice...
- One notable difference though:
 - God stopped Abraham from taking his son’s life
 - presenting him with a ram to sacrifice instead.
 - But as Paul reminds us in our reading from Romans
 - God *“did not spare his own Son, but handed him over for us...”*
(Rom 8:32)
 - Jesus was the Sacrificial Lamb.

In our gospel reading, this great sacrifice of Christ

- has not yet occurred, but it’s coming...

In the verses leading up to today's Gospel, we're told that six days prior:

- Jesus had begun explaining to His disciples
 - that in this spiritual marathon of life, they would soon be encountering "the wall..."
 - They will journey to Jerusalem
 - where Jesus must suffer greatly,
 - be rejected and killed before being raised on the 3rd day.
- To say the least, this little revelation made no sense to His disciples:
 - Jesus who had healed the sick, cast out demons,
 - fed the 5,000 then the 4,000
 - walked on water, etc...
 - Jesus: this great rabbi, this great prophet, this Messiah
 - who might even be the one to liberate them from Roman oppression...
- No, this makes no sense to the disciples and after Peter tells Him as much
 - Jesus chastised them for thinking like humans do and not like God...
- Jesus had plans to liberate them alright,
 - but from something far more oppressive than Roman occupation –
 - Christ came to free them -- and all of humanity
 - from the chains of Sin & Death itself!
- Then Jesus threw down the gauntlet: Oh by the way:
 - If you are to come after Me, you must take up your cross and follow me... You all have your own races to run too...

These were tough, confusing, even frightening words

- but this was necessary training as Jesus needed to prepare them
 - for the incredible challenges they would soon be facing...

So Jesus let them soak in those words for six long days...

- days where I imagine they were somewhat bewildered,
 - apprehensive, or maybe even depressed...

Then, as we read today: Jesus led Peter, James & John to the mountaintop,

- where they were given a glimpse of... "the finish line"

- There on the mountaintop
 - they see the Son of Man in all His glory,
 - conversing with Moses who had given them the Law,
 - and Elijah their greatest prophet,
 - and they hear the voice of God the Father saying:
 - *“This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him.”*

What a powerful experience this must have been for them..!

And as they head back down the mountain,

- their road ahead is no less difficult,
- the events that will unfold in Jerusalem will be no less frightening,
- but this first-hand glimpse of the glory of our Lord in the Transfiguration,
 - will help carry them to their finish line...

Our spiritual journey can in many ways feel like a marathon, amen?

- Times of great joy and enthusiasm, but also
 - times of trial and hardship
 - times where we simply run out of gas and hit “the wall”
 - times we are tempted to quit.

We draw encouragement even today from Christ’s Transfiguration

- just as Peter, James & John did 2,000 years ago,
- but there are other key ways we are strengthened in our spiritual marathon:

First and foremost we draw strength from our Faith in Jesus Christ.

- Because Christ successfully faced his “wall” – His Passion & Death
 - and crossed the “finish line” – His Resurrection
- the spiritual victory has already been won
 - a triumph we celebrate with great joy
 - five weeks from now at Easter.

Secondly, we are nourished by the Sacraments: our spiritual energy drinks that help sustain us along the way

- *especially* the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist

- Skimp on these at your spiritual peril!
- If you want to become even stronger
 - try adding a Daily Mass to your weekly routine
 - and Confession once a month or so.
 - You cannot help but grow if you do that!

Thirdly, we draw strength from each other – even if it is thru shared suffering.

- We each have our own race to run, but we do not run alone...

I'll never forget one of my longer training runs in preparation for the marathon. It was in the middle of the dog-days of summer, so I took off well before sunrise on a Saturday morning so I could be finished before the sun came up.

This particular run was a good 15 miles or so,

- and a few miles into it I began seeing lightening in the distance
 - followed by long, rolling thunder.
- It was getting closer, so I concluded I might be having some rain to cool me on my run.

Boy was that an understatement...

What hit was no mere rain shower... and I am not exaggerating when I say

- it was an absolute gully washer!

Within minutes I was literally slopping thru a couple of inches of water on the road,

- lightening flashing, thunder booming, it was quite the spectacle
 - and I was miles from home on a dark lonely road.

But I pressed onward to my turnaround point and began slogging back, amazed at the downpour,

- when I noticed some movement ahead on the other side of the road...

I strained my eyes thru the pouring rain and realized it was another runner, heading in the opposite direction!

- I thought, “Well that poor sap sure picked the wrong morning for a run!” (To which I immediately had to acknowledge the obvious that I was an equally poor sap..!).

A few more steps and I realized, hey I know that guy –

- that's Tab Warlitner – Tab a fellow parishioner was out training for the same marathon!

Neither of us stopped running, but we simply smiled across the road and shouted thru the storm something like, "Nice day for a run!"

We each still had our own race to finish:

- the road was still long and the weather was still challenging,
- but that moment of shared suffering gave each of us a little boost,
 - a bit of encouragement from another runner
 - out there on the road of life

Of course, Satan knows all of this very well – how we draw strength from our Faith, the Sacraments, and each other... So he does what he can:

- to undermine our foundation of Faith
- to keep us away from our nurturing Sacraments,
- And he seeks to divide us...
 - and I want to spend just a moment on that today...

We see divisiveness in the highest levels of governance, which is sad enough.

But what saddens me more is when I see division at our grass roots:

- in our local community, in our families; and we can be oh so stubborn...

And to this division, Jesus Christ himself says in Mt ch 5:

If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt 5:23-24)

Leave the altar and go reconcile with your brother... these are strong words from our Lord

- yet we're more inclined to wait for our brother
 - to leave his altar to come reconcile with us...
- Jesus didn't say: merely remember your brother in prayer

- He didn't say: go reconcile (unless they started it)
- And He didn't say: it's easy!
- He simply said: get out there and reconcile...

Indeed, our Catechism teaches that

- the Lord's Prayer (the Our Father) that we pray at every Mass
 - cannot be prayed truthfully if reconciliation with your neighbor is not pursued... (CCC 2792)

Today's message is one of mountaintops...

- Sometimes God will lead us up a mountain
 - to test us, like He did Abraham
- Other times He leads us up the mountain
 - to give us encouragement to help us thru the tough times

(In fact our RCIA & RCIC classes will have a mountaintop experience of sorts this afternoon

- as they go to the Shrine for the Rite of Election...
- making final preparations to enter the Church at Easter Vigil.)

Sometimes our spiritual journey can indeed feel like a marathon:

- the Reality is that Christianity is a religion of the Cross,
- but Reality is also that there is a finish line where *Jesus Christ himself* awaits us...
 - Draw strength from that knowledge.
 - Draw strength from our God and His Sacraments.
 - Draw strength from each other.

And as Hebrews ch 12 extols us:

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us! (Heb 12:1)

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