

The Rev. Shelley Ryan  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky  
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8) June 25 & 26, 2016  
Luke 9:51-62

The first Saturday in March of each year marks the Iditarod, which is an intensely demanding sled dog race from Anchorage to Nome Alaska. Some of you may be familiar with the race, or at least heard of it, as it has taken place since 1973. Many people refer to the race as 'The Last Great Race on Earth.' A reporter who was covering the event coined the race as such because he expressed that he believed that it was "the only great race left."

The route of the Iditarod race is not a direct course by any means of the imagination. The mushers and sled dogs must travel 1,150 miles to cover the 650 miles of the actual course. The musher and his or her team, which consists of anywhere from 16-21 sled dogs cover the distance in 9-15 days, or more. The teams race through blizzards causing white-out conditions, sub-zero temperatures and gale force winds, which can often cause the wind-chill to reach -100 degrees Fahrenheit. The trail takes the teams through harsh landscapes of tundra and forests, and over hills and mountain passes, and across rivers. There are 26-27 check points along the way, where the mushers must sign in, and there are also facilities for the teams to rest. Some of the teams take advantage of the warm, hospitable facilities, while others, after signing in, continue on the journey electing to camp along the trail in the remote wild. The race is the ultimate test of endurance, strength, persistence, and will power. When mushers have been asked the question "Why do you do it?" Many have responded "because we love the dogs, the sport and Alaska", while others have said "We do it because of the history, it's tradition – It's important!"

These folks are on a mission. It's not about achieving recognition, or having their name engraved on a trophy, or even the money they are awarded, though I'm sure this is all appreciated. The greatest significance is the utter unwavering commitment to finish the race. Ultimately, in the case of the Iditerod, there is only one winner, and that is the first person who reaches the finish line in Nome. However, each individual who achieves the goal of completing the race will forever know that they pressed through no matter what the obstacle. They were fearless. Fearless.

When we walk with God, we too are in a race, of sorts. As the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God, Christ Jesus" Phil.3:13-14 (NRSV). It's so easy for us to 'look back' to get caught up in what has been, to worry. But when we look back we are at risk of straying off of the path, and sometimes this can be dangerous. If the mushers of the sled dogs were to look back, he or she would veer off the path, only to find themselves in extreme situations. As Jesus walked with his sights set on his mission with his face to ward Jerusalem, he would not be hindered. When the man said to him "I will follow you Lord, but let me first say farewell to my home." Jesus replies "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." These words seem harsh, and especially for Jesus. But, Jesus was on a mission to Jerusalem. He knew what He was to do and nothing would stop him from this mission. He stayed the course, as we too must stay the course. When Jesus says "follow me" we may say "Okay, Jesus, I will follow you, but first I need to... get my affairs in order, become more financially stable, accomplish this one more goal... and on and on and on. We just like for things to be a certain way do we not?"

When we truly step out in faith and follow Jesus, whatever that may look like for you, and only you are able to truly discern this. Like the mushers of the Iditerod – we must be fearless to continue, or for many of us to begin to walk with God. In spite of harsh conditions, in spite of unexpected storms, in spite of obstacles, we are called to be fearless. Yes, there will be times when we will face tribulation, this goes without saying, but Jesus gives of His assurance of peace as is recorded in the Gospel of John “In me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage I have conquered the world.” John 16:33 NRSV. Peace is a deterrent to adversity.

Bestselling author, writer, and preacher Max Lucado authored a book that I read several years ago, entitled “*FEARLESS*.” Here is an excerpt from his book that I hope you will find to be inspiring as you move forward in your walk of faith with Christ Jesus.

“Fear never wrote a symphony or poem, negotiated a peace treaty, or cured a disease. Fear never pulled a family out of poverty, or a country out of bigotry. Fear never saved a marriage or a business. Courage did that. People who refused to consult or cower to their timidities did that. But fear itself? Fear herds us into a prison and slams the doors. Wouldn’t it be great to walk out?” – “Feed your fears and your faith will starve. Feed your faith and your fears will.” Max Lucado (Fearless)

