

“I Am Doing a New Thing!”

- I. Introduction: My brothers and sisters in Christ, there’s nothing like being hit over the head by a two by four. If we have any question about what the Holy Spirit is saying to us at the Church of the Ascension, we need only to consult our lectionary readings. Certain themes are recurrent and are immediately relevant for us. Don’t look back, keep moving forward, and at all times keep our eye on the prize. Isaiah says it first this morning. Look if you would at the Isaiah reading in your service leaflet. “Thus says the Lord.” That means listen up . . . the imperative from God . . . I am about to say something that is very important. “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Isaiah was speaking to the Jewish exiles, the refugees of Judah in a far away land. “Do not spend your lives yearning for the past. Open your hearts, your minds, your souls, and your bodies to a new life. I will create streams of living water for you in the desert.”
- II. Holy Repetition. But let’s say that the message in Isaiah isn’t quite clear enough for us. I love the way God’s Spirit uses holy repetition to bring the point home for Ascension as we are nearing the end of Lent. In his beautiful Letter to the Philippians, we hear Paul writing from prison to people he loved very much. It is thought that Paul composed this letter shortly before his execution. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul was using the idea of running a race as a metaphor for the Christian life.
- III. So let’s get down to business, you and I. What does it take to run the race well as Christians? I believe it requires three things: to be clear in our purpose, persistent in our effort, and passionate in our spirit.

Do you remember the outstanding film “Chariots of Fire?” For those of you who have never seen this film, I would recommend it to you. This true story depicted the lives of two runners, one of whom was Eric Liddell. Eric was a gifted runner from Scotland whose parents were missionaries to China. He, too, had committed himself to go into foreign missions, but had a dilemma. He loved to run, was as fast as lightning, and had won a number of races. But he was confronted with the question of

whether to give up running in order to complete his missionary training. After considerable prayer, Liddell decided to run for a brief period of time, and then answer God's call to go to China.

Liddell made it onto Britain's 1924 Olympic Team and had high hopes that he would take the gold in the 100 meter race. He trained long and hard for that event and was a good sprinter. It was a shock when Eric learned that the first track event of the Olympics was the 100 meter race and that it was scheduled on a Sunday. He believed very deeply that Sunday was the Lord's Day, and that on the Lord's Day he should not race. Reluctantly he withdrew from this race in spite of the intense pressure that was placed upon him to make an exception just this one time. He did not cave in. Instead of running that Sunday, he followed his conscience and his understanding of Scripture and delivered the sermon at the Scottish Church in Paris. As much as he loved running, his ultimate purpose was to live his life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Those of you who know the rest of this story remember that Liddell did run in the 1924 Olympics and won the gold medal in the 400 meter race. One of his teammates who had already won a gold medal graciously stepped aside so that he could run. He had not been expected to win that race — he hadn't trained for it, and he wasn't a distance runner. But not only did Liddell win, but he broke all previous records by running the race in 47.6 seconds. Spectators reported that he held the lead the whole way and never looked back. His win was stunning. Many believe that he won because of the passion he had about running and the persistence he had in disciplining himself as an athlete.

- IV. But I believe that something else was in play here. Eric Liddell was deeply passionate about Jesus Christ. Like Paul before him, he had experienced a relationship with Christ that had transformed him. Nothing was more important than obeying Christ, and for him, that meant not running on Sunday. Liddell was bringing the same kind of passion and commitment to bear on his spiritual journey that he was in his running career. And all along the way, God was teaching Eric Liddell what he needed to know to run the spiritual race set before him. Liddell was learning to be persistent and passionate despite disappointment

Later, Liddell did follow God's call and entered mission work. When the Japanese invaded China, Liddell sent his family to Canada but remained in China himself. After Pearl Harbor, he was imprisoned in a detention camp where he cared for others and responded to their physical and spiritual needs. He was a light in a very dark place. Just before the end of the war, he died in captivity. And in the end, as Paul wrote, Liddell not only knew Christ through the power of the resurrection, but also by sharing in his suffering. He ran well the spiritual race that was set before him, clear in his purpose, persistent in his effort, and passionate in his spirit.

- V. **Conclusion:** What does Liddell's story suggest to us here at Ascension about running our own spiritual race? Of course we need to look forward, not backwards, and we need to keep our focus on Christ as we do so. We need to be clear about our purpose and, without a doubt, we need to be persistent. And it is critical that we bring unbridled passion to the way we run our race here. Our passion about Christ provides us with fuel if we are running. If we are standing on the side looking and thinking about getting in the race, we need passion to help us get off the curb.

If we further apply the metaphor of the race here at the Church of the Ascension, we are in the process of re-building our team. Some of us are new to the team. Others of us have been on the team but have taken a break, while still others have served on the team for some time and are looking for additional runners to be there next to them. And we are all together here as a part of the Body of Christ. Today's readings remind us that we must be really clear about our purpose or mission together: "To enable ourselves and others to experience God in Christ, to seek and serve Him in others, to grow toward Christ, and to proclaim Him to the world." And we must continue to be persistent in our efforts. We have suffered some losses, but consistent with Paul's mandate, we are forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead. We need people to provide leadership in various programmatic areas and ministries and to give generously in their financial support of Ascension so that the church can be on solid financial ground.

A number of you have talked with me about ways in which you would like to deepen your involvement at the Church of the Ascension. I welcome and appreciate these conversations. We have entered into a time of brainstorming and dialogue. The talent in this church is immense. It is also evident to me that there is a great deal of persistence and passion at Ascension. Thanks be to God. But we are in a spiritual race and there is much to be done. God is doing a new thing here at Ascension. Now together, let us refine, strengthen, and build upon what we are now doing with the extraordinary gifts God has given us. Amen.