

## **“Let’s Run the Race” - Part 4: “The Anticipatory Church”**

**2 Timothy 4:6-8; Matthew 24:42-44**

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Both scripture readings today concern the future. When we expect something in the future we feel anticipation. Most of the time a sense of anticipation reflects a positive mindset. Anticipation for Christians is like leaning into God’s future on tiptoe.

As we come to the end of this preaching series with the overarching theme “Let’s Run the Race,” we reaffirm that the church’s nature and mission is not unlike that of an athlete running a marathon. “Let’s Run the Race.” Remember, we said that the “race” compares to the mission of the church, and “running the race” compares to our mission partnership with God in the world.

The apostle Paul, writing in the role of coach or mentor to his trainee, Timothy, in the Second Letter to Timothy, is feeling positive as he anticipates receiving the crown of righteousness. Paul declares that he has done his best. He has completed the race. He has kept the faith. Like a runner, the apostle has stayed in the race when his body and mind were exhausted. He has been a partner with God in God’s mission. With anticipation and a sense of triumph he announces: *And now the prize of victory is waiting for me, the crown of righteousness which the Lord ... will give me on that Day.* Any good coach is going to teach his players that they must finish what they start. The apostle wants his reader, Timothy, to teach the church to be an anticipatory church – to be eager to keep the faith, to do its best, and to run the full distance. Paul is teaching that the church willing to run the race without quitting should anticipate being awarded the prize of victory.

In Matthew’s gospel, chapter 24, the evangelist recorded Jesus’ teaching about the future, and more specifically, what we call the “Second Coming” of Jesus. *Watch out, then, because you do not know what day your Lord will come ... you must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.* Matthew was reminding his readers in the early church that Jesus said they should anticipate the return of the Son of Man. In the verses following our text Matthew communicates the teaching of Jesus that this would be a time of triumph for those who remained faithful in the face of persecution and hardship. This was a

word of encouragement. It was an exhortation to be an anticipatory church – always expecting the coming of the Lord among them. They should anticipate rewards for being good stewards of the gospel.

Three points about the anticipatory church: first, it anticipates finishing what it started; second, it anticipates finishing strong; and third, it anticipates winning, not losing.

Memorial United Methodist Church is an anticipatory church. **First, it anticipates finishing what it started.** Memorial started to run the race at this particular location on Randolph Street approximately 60 years ago. It has been an athletic church: showing endurance during tough times of socio-economic transition in this city of Thomasville . . . calling forth full participation of all God’s people in ministry . . . and faithfully proclaiming the focal point of our mission, namely, Jesus Christ. Memorial is also an agile church: always striving to be flexible, inclusive, open to change, moving with the times, and finding all possible methods to persuade people to follow Jesus Christ.

In recent times Memorial Church has needed to be an accelerating church, responding to a need to minister to more people, especially young families and children, by employing a minister of children and families, by placing an LED sign on our property, installing a state-of-the-art playground, and, under Bishop Goodpaster’s guidance, adopting an annual vision and challenge for numerical and spiritual growth, and to be a servant church to all God’s people after the example of the servant Lord Jesus Christ. Memorial Church has developed a greater sense of urgency, and a deeper awareness that what we are about is the most important work in the world: God’s mission in God’s world. But, like all marathon runners, Memorial is also an agonizing church, moved with compassion, taking in the pain and suffering and human need around it . . . being the hands and heart of the servant Lord.

Now Memorial is an anticipatory church; it anticipates finishing the race . . . the “race” being the calling to be partners with the servant Lord in a servant ministry in Thomasville. Let’s listen to Coach Paul! Let’s not underestimate our unrealized athletic potential. Let no one drop out of the race when the best lap is still ahead. Let’s recognize that each of us has incredible potential to offer: a life of great service and blessing to the Lord. Let’s not allow bad habits and attitudes and selfishness to slow us down. Let’s work hard at this, and at the end of the day when we finish the race and it’s time to close the books, we’ll have the joy of a job well

done. Let Memorial anticipate finishing what it has started and do it with dignity and integrity. Let's recognize that it is not only important to start right, but it is imperative to end well. Let's be ready for the Lord's return – that time when all running the race will cross the finishing line and attend an award ceremony.

Memorial is an anticipatory church. It not only anticipates finishing what it has started, but **secondly, it anticipates finishing strong.** The apostle Paul tells Timothy quite unabashedly that he had kept the faith and was finishing strong. While the winning athlete in his day had a laurel of olive leaves placed on the head, Paul pictured himself wearing a crown of righteousness. This is how he expressed his motivation to stay faithful to the end.

The anticipatory church pictures where it wants to be and never stops pushing toward it. In order to finish strong, let's think about what lies ahead and anticipate our outcome. Let's focus on the finish line. Let's see every member having a strong sense of God's call to ministry, and by that I mean ministry in the broad sense, be it a ministry of encouragement, a healing ministry, a ministry of praying for others, a giving ministry, or a social justice ministry. Let's picture Memorial Church strong in twenty years time, and in fifty years time. Let it become the kind of servant church God wants it to be.

This principle of finishing strong applies to each individual as well as the church. Perhaps there is someone here today who is struggling to get through school. If you want to finish strong, focus on graduating. Picture yourself crossing the stage to receive your hard-earned diploma. There are those among us who are raising small people with sticky fingers and runny noses! Take your focus off the grape-jelly handprints on your couch and put it on the end product: mature adults who love God, who work hard, who are responsible citizens, and who are capable of handing down their faith to the next generation.

There may be those here who feel depressed about their relationship with a significant other. Picture yourself, hand-in-hand, walking along the beach with a life-partner who has weathered the storms alongside you and been there every step of the way. Perhaps your life has become completely dominated by alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or money. Picture yourself, sober, happy, joy-filled, content, loving your family without guilt and doing things with your time and resources that are changing people's lives. Perhaps you are highly successful in a professional vocation. Envision how you can use your position and influence to improve the quality and

standard of living of the poor, and what more you can do to generously support and further Memorial's mission to draw people to follow Jesus, make disciples, and transform the world.

We're talking about the finish line: always keeping the finish line in sight; always picturing ourselves as the best that we can be in all of life's goals, but especially in our Christian walk; always anticipating that we will finish strong. These are faith-sized statements. They apply to the anticipatory church and individual. They apply to Memorial Church; they apply to your life and to mine as we lean into God's future on tiptoe.

Memorial is an anticipatory church. **Thirdly, it anticipates winning, not losing.** Though there are many reasons why athletes run marathons, one obvious reason is to win. Runners are rewarded when they complete the race: rewarded with the applause of the crowds, rewarded with a sense of accomplishment and pride, rewarded by receiving a trophy or some other prize. An athlete anticipates finishing the course and winning the prize. Her anticipatory feelings egg her on, keep her outlook positive, and help to maintain her determination to end the race as a winner, not a loser.

"Quitting" is not in the vocabulary of the anticipatory church that is running to win . . . that is a partner with God in God's mission. Quitters never win. Winners never quit. The anticipatory church will never stop telling the story of God's love to the world because it believes in the end that divine love will triumph over evil. Because it anticipates winning the church will never quit standing for peace, justice, liberty, and equality.

Memorial is an anticipatory church. We believe that we are winning, not losing. That is why we will always present a face to the world that reflects the love of Jesus Christ. That is why our faces will always reflect the true hope that we have in Jesus Christ. Because we anticipate winning, not losing, we truly believe that God is in full control of everything on this planet and beyond. This belief sustains our hope daily as we keep running the race.

As an anticipatory church – a winning church – Memorial Church, and each one of us as individuals, can draw strength from the faith and conviction that God is going to have the last word in the affairs of our world. No president, dictator, nation, ideology, war, or horrible disaster will have the final say. God is the Alpha and Omega. God is weaving a great tapestry, using history and individuals to bring about God's divine will. Knowing the future is in the hands of God is a strong and continuing source of assurance and hope.

It is the privilege and responsibility of the anticipatory church to hold before others the great purpose that we have in Christ. Remember that “running the race” refers to being partners with God in God’s mission to the world. Only as we understand *the importance and urgency of this great mission* will we experience great joy and great victory. The anticipatory church is the winning church as long as it keeps renewing its response to God’s call to participate in God’s mission by serving with the servant Jesus in the world in which we live. This is the greatest work we could ever do.

We have the greatest news and we must share it. We must stay the course. It will not always be an easy road. We should keep listening to the Coach. We should look forward to the crown. We should finish what we started. We should finish strong. We should anticipate winning. As long as we are partners with Jesus Christ, we will be victorious. Let’s keep running the race with the anticipation that God’s best for all people is yet to come. Let’s tell **this** story to the nations! Let’s keep leaning into God’s future on tiptoe, and in the words of a dedicated missionary, J. Hudson Taylor, “expect great things from God, and attempt great things for God.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.