

## Holding Fast

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20, Matthew 5: 21-37

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If you only had days or hours or perhaps moments to live, what would you say to those you love? What would you tell them? Have you ever thought about what you would say? Some of us have been in that situation—we've been on the receiving end of last wishes, final thoughts.

"I've had a good run." That's what my uncle told me. "I've had a good run." My uncle had open heart surgery when he was 93. I went to see him just before the surgery. We sat in his living room. Over the years it hadn't changed much—the fireplace beside his easy chair; a small recliner where his wife sat—a couch for guests, a small TV, which had been added sometime after my cousins had finished school, and a built-in gun rack.

My uncle was an avid outdoorsman—he hunted water fowl, caribou and once at least wild game in South America. My uncle was a veteran. He was the commander of an Army Field Hospital and landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day plus two. After the war, he returned home and started a medical practice. In time, he and his partner built a private non-profit hospital.

My uncle learned to fly—had his own plane. He played racket-ball well into his seventies when he took up golf. My uncle was a quiet man, reserved. He could be stern, but as most, age softened him. Though proud of his achievements, he never boasted. When his hospital was bought, the proceeds were used to establish a multi-million dollar non-profit foundation to lend assistance to start-up medical projects like hospice.

My father died when I was 28. He was only 56. My uncle came for the funeral. A few years later, when I earned my doctorate, my aunt and uncle flew from Wilmington to Louisville to attend my graduation along with my mother. About three years later my mother died. She had been sick for a year. Again, my uncle was there. After the funeral, when the house grew quiet, my uncle and I found ourselves alone just outside the kitchen in the garage attached to the house. "She was a rock," my uncle said. And then he looked away as to some far off place. It was the only time I ever saw him cry.

So, twenty years later, we're sitting alone in his living room—the house is quiet and my uncle is days before open heart surgery. "I've had a good run," he said offhandedly, wistfully. I'll never forget that. At the time, I thought it puzzling—"I've had a good run." Maybe I was expecting something more profound, some deeper reflection or insight or wisdom—"I've had a good run." My uncle survived the surgery and lived another seven years. He lived to be 100. "I've had a good run."

Over time I've come to think that my uncle may have been thinking about Paul; who, looking back over his life, concluded: "I've run the race; I've fought the good fight." Life is a race—a run—for some slightly longer; for others shorter—but a run, nonetheless, a race. Runners compete—sometimes with, sometimes against others; sometimes only against the clock—"Time bears all its sons away." Life is also a fight—"I've fought the good fight." Paul's qualifier, "good" reminds us that all fights are not equal; all are not worthy of our time, our energy, our sacrifice. "I have fought the *good* fight." It matters which fights we fight. I think my uncle fought the good fight. He had a "good run." A good run is not without obstacles, setbacks, disappointments, defeats, uphill battles. Yes, there are times when we feel like we can run forever. We catch our second wind. Where does that wind come from? How do we make it up the next hill? How do we stay the course or even find a course when before us lies a dark forest, a wilderness, or an uneven plain.

If you haven't watched the movie *Lincoln*, check it out. There's a great scene in that film about our nation's sixteenth president. Lincoln is trying to secure votes to pass the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment. He is trying to persuade a long-time supporter of abolition to join his effort. The supporter agrees with Lincoln that slavery must be abolished, but disagrees on principles. Lincoln tells the supporter about his time as a surveyor. (And here I paraphrase) "I learned," Lincoln says, "that the compass always points to true

north. That is true. But to reach it; one must often endure the longer route to avoid the swamps and mountains that stand in the way.” Lincoln understood that life is not walk in the park, even with a compass we must endure—none of us gets a straight line. Moses understood that. Standing east of the Promise Land, a land he would not enter, Moses, speaking the word of the Lord, tells the children of Israel,

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances; then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you that you shall perish.

It seems like a simple enough equation: If you obey, then you will live and if you don't obey you will die—a life and death choice. We all wish life was that simple; but life is not an equation: Do this and that will happen. Living, faithful living refuses simple reduction: “Be good and good will come to you. Be bad and bad will come to way.” Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Moses got that, which is why he ends his sermon on Jordan's banks with these words: “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live; loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days . . . .”

Moses does not invite the children of Israel to simply follow a set of rules: “Follow the rules and you will live; no, not at all.” Yes, he invites obedience, but ultimately his last will and testament is this: “Hold fast to the Lord.” Holding fast, loving God is not a matter of clinging to a set of rules, a code, not even a code in stone. We are saved; we live by holding fast to the living God.

Like Moses, Jesus gave us a code to live by. And he raised the bar: “You've heard it said, don't murder, I say don't be angry. You've heard, don't commit adultery, I say don't lust. You've heard don't swear, I say let your Yes be Yes and your No, No; for anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Like Moses, Jesus gave us rules and those rules ought not and may not be taken lightly; but Jesus, also like Moses, invites us to hold fast to God, to hold fast to him: “Follow me.” It would be nice, but life does not come with a handbook. Yes, there are rules, do justice, love kindness. But sometimes rules collide. Sometimes doing justice clashes with kindness; sometimes kindness clashes with doing justice. What do we do when two equally held rules or values or laws or collide? We hold fast; we hold fast to the Lord, which is not the same as “doing the best we can.” With God, all things are possible. With God, even when our best efforts and highest intentions fail—God endures. We hold fast because nothing in all creation ever separates us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

“I've had a good run.”

We have a good run when we hold fast to the Lord. Holding fast gives us freedom to run knowing we are not alone. Holding fast allows us to hold on because we are held fast by the One who refuses to ever let us go—so we run and do not grow weary; we walk and do not faint. Hold fast . . . and have a good run. Amen.