



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

80/81

SCRIPTURE:
Exodus 17:1-7

September 3, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Many of you know I consider myself a runner and I'm aware of how many people think running is terrible, or crazy, or both. This is not a story that will make you think otherwise.

This summer, while on sabbatical, I had ample time to log some running miles. There were some mornings when the weather was perfect for it: low- to mid-60s with the sun just rising. Those are the days when running four or five miles feels too short—like I could just keep going—days when the run doesn't really feel like work.

But then there are other days. We live where we live, so there are also hot, humid summer mornings. We have stretches when, even at the coolest part of the day, it was still 80 degrees. In July my alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. to get my run in before the real heat would set in. I stepped outside to 80 degrees of hot and my phone telling me there was 81% humidity.

After about a mile into the run, I had a thought so many of us have in moments like that: "What am I doing?" I was on sabbatical! A time of rest and renewal! I'm supposed to be spending my time in revitalizing ways when a large part of how I normally spend my time—working here at Village or working elsewhere on behalf of Village or thinking about Village or meeting with people from Village or any number of Village-related commitments—are taken off the board.

But here I was in this 80-degree, 81% humidity day—80/81, if you will—and I start thinking, "During a time when I am able to choose more about how I spend my time, why on earth have I chosen to do this?" And then, on this run that was most definitely work, I was struck by a convicting thought. It was a very sabbatical thought and one that feels very appropriate on Labor Day weekend: "When is the last time I labored for God like I'm laboring to do this

run?" Friends, it turns out, even when you are on sabbatical, God still shows up.

When was the last time I labored for God? When is the next time I anticipate I will labor for God? And I don't mean just something that takes effort. I mean something that is going to be difficult? Like the kind of thing where I am asking God, "What are you thinking? This is going to be so hard!" Or, to put it another way: Have I fallen into the pattern where I'm too cozy with the idea that God doesn't ask much of me, or that my faith doesn't ever require work?

Where did that notion come from? The Bible definitely doesn't support that theory. To read through the Bible is to read story after story about people who labored for God on their journeys. Stories when they had to work for—or through or because of—their faith. Stories of people who were on their own "80/81 run" for God's sake.

Stories like Joseph's, who gets sold by his own brothers into slavery and later spends years in jail wrongly accused. Or Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi who both lose their spouses, which in that time, meant losing their livelihoods and security—ultimately leading Ruth to travel outside the land she knew with nothing more than desperation and hope. There's the group of friends who tore through a roof to lower their paralyzed friend down to Jesus' healing touch. And the woman who bled for 12 years and no one could heal her. A woman whose faithful, trusting heart told her that if she could only touch Jesus' cloak, maybe she still had hope. And then there's Moses.

Moses works with God to free the Israelites. It's a bit of an understatement to say it was a winding road to get God's people out of Pharaoh's grasp. That is a story for another time. Today we meet Moses after he has led the Israelites to the beautiful, scenic, middle of the desert.

Is this situation God's making? In some ways. Is it because of the Israelites themselves? Partly. Is Moses in charge of this bunch—having listened to God and brought them out into this desert? Absolutely.

So they are out there. Lost. With little in the way of food and now they are running out of water, looking for someone to direct their anger toward, and there's Moses—the guy they have been trusting and following. “Where is this promised land?” they ask. “We would have rather been enslaved in Egypt than out here to die in the desert!”

They've complained before—you can read about that in the preceding chapters. But this time, the intensity has increased and Moses, it's fair to say, is afraid of them. He goes to God and says, “These people are going to stone me to death! What am I supposed to do here? How did I get into this situation?”

Many years ago, before smartphones and a zillion accessible internet apps, I was driving from Kansas City to California. I had some time to get there, so on a whim, in the middle of Colorado, I saw a sign for Mt. Princeton and decided I would hike it. The sum total of my research was this: I saw a sign on the road. 14,197 feet. On a whim.

I will quote from the website AllTrails.com and I remind you that this easily accessible research, which takes less than two minutes to do today, was not around at the time: “Proceed cautiously on this out-and-back trail near Nathrop, Colorado. Generally considered a highly challenging route, it takes an average of five hours and 32 minutes to complete and should only be attempted by experienced adventurers.” Y'all, I read the whole article. The phrase “on a whim” does not appear anywhere.

I could tell you about the hike itself, which was dicey in its own right, but what I remember most was the drive to the trailhead. I quote again from AllTrails.com, “The route shown on this page has the hiker starting at a parking area up a dirt, four-wheel road.” What was I driving? A two-wheel drive, manual transmission Honda Element.

From a review posted by Nikki on Aug. 22, 2023, “I would say the road isn't too bad but it's definitely sketchy with a narrow road and tight turns and high drop-off edges, so you want a driver who knows how to handle a mountain!”

I knew none of this as I happily and obliviously

started driving up the road. So, it was a surprise when, a couple miles in, there's a hairpin turn, my wheels lose traction, and my car starts sliding backwards. After some panic, I manage to get the car stopped but now I'm in a horrible situation. I can't seem to go forward, and behind me, I am dangerously close to rolling off the ‘high drop-off edges’ Nikki so descriptively referred to.

It is at this point that I start playing out in my head how quickly I could open the door and launch myself out of the car before it goes over a cliff—ideally without me in it. If you haven't done much hiking, driving to the trailhead should be the easy part! And I'm thinking what Moses thought: “How did I get myself into this?” I'm not thinking that people are going to stone me, but I am thinking about how this mountain of rock is going to be the death of me.

I wonder if there are some conversations between God and Moses that we don't get in the Bible. I wonder if, out there in the desert, on some of the many days when the Israelites were complaining, or after a day of wandering in the heat and sun only to go to sleep in a place that looked about the same as the place where they woke up, Moses would say, “God, this is hard!” And God might say back, “What made you think a journey with me wouldn't include some work?”

There are times when living faithfully can make us feel like we are on a road, ill-equipped, wondering why we are working so hard when it seems like this should be the easy part. Times when I know I have been guilty of looking at the work God might have for me and seeing how hard it was just to get to *this* point and rather than getting out of the car to labor myself uphill step after step, decide instead to just head back down. There have been times I decided a summit God has put before me isn't worth the work. Maybe you have, too. I think that makes us human.

And maybe Moses was on a road like that, feeling like it had been so much work just to get his people away from Pharaoh. And then they're just lost, then they're hungry, and now they are thirsty. Moses is looking at all that and now he says, “I'm going to get stoned to death and that's if they let me off easy, God. And now every rock I see out here is a reminder that what you are asking is difficult.” And what does God say?

God says, “Take some people with you. I’m going to point to one of these rocks—one that reminds you of all this hard work—and then I want you to hit it with your staff.” “Wait, what?”

What do you even say to that? It’s one of those God riddle-responses that doesn’t seem like it’s going to help the situation at all. But Moses shakes his head. Sighs. And goes to work. He picks out some people. He walks into the void. There’s a rock that seems different than the others and he hits it.

And what happens? Water. Relief. Life. He thought those stones would be the death of him, but they contained his salvation and theirs.

Slowly, painstakingly, I white-knuckle maneuver the car to get it turned around. I’m using every trick I can think of: emergency-brake shifting, intentional inches at a time, and prayer.

And, spoiler alert: I live. The car doesn’t roll down the mountain. I calm down. And then I have to decide if I still want to hike this mountain. I wish I could tell you I didn’t sit there very long thinking it over. But I did. I’m glad I can tell you I got out of the car and hiked to the summit—a summit I worked for before I had even stepped out of the car.

I need to note that not all difficult things are meant to be seen through. Just because something takes work doesn’t make it more righteous and it doesn’t mean it’s what God wants. By no means does

suffering always equal God’s will. There are situations where the best, healthiest, good, right and just thing to do is quit or walk away. There’s wisdom in knowing the difference between what is a difficulty that requires persistence and hard work and a difficulty that is foolish or selfish.

But I’m glad I finished that hike. I’m glad I finished that 80/81 run this summer. It was awful. It was miserable. It was maybe the worst run I had this summer. And I’m glad I did it and I’d do it again. Not because I think it was what God wanted but because it reminded me that some things take real work and that sometimes all we are going to see is rocks when God knows there’s life inside.

Some of you are running that 80/81 right now. God’s got something out there and you are working for it. And I’m in awe of you and other people are, too. Keep at it.

And some of us, like me, need to be open to a little more labor in faith. Sometimes God calls us into the heat or the freezing cold, or up the steep hill, or out into the desert—and it’s going to be work.

But laboring for God is something I need to be willing to do. That’s a theory the Bible definitely supports. And who knows what good might come if we are all willing to work for the sake of God’s kingdom—both out in the world and in our own lives? Amen.