

BEATING THE ODDS

Psalm 139: 13-18, Philippians 4: 4-7

Recently two young girls from California were visiting their grandparents here in Albuquerque. Everyone in the family went on an outing by car to Santa Fe. Coming back the grandfather pointed out the extinct volcanoes on the West Mesa. The older granddaughter asked what an extinct volcano was. He said, "It won't erupt for another 340,000 years; either that or it's going to erupt next Tuesday." The younger granddaughter then whispered to her sister, "I'm glad we're going home Monday."

All of us want to beat the odds, don't we? Especially the odds associated with failing health. Several years ago, Forrest Church, a pastor and theologian, son of former U.S. Senator Frank Church of Idaho, was diagnosed with a savage form of esophageal cancer. His experience with this disease can be found in his book, *Love & Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. Odds were, said the doctor, he had only months to live. Forrest entered all his variables into relevant actuarial tables: the odds were 20 to 1 against him.

We have talked about cancer through the years in terms of beating the odds. When one of my cousins came down with cancer, she asked the doctor how long she had. The doctor said, "Odds are two years." My cousin said

she wanted four. The doctor thought four years most unrealistic. My cousin said, “Watch me!” and she did make it three and a half. Forrest Church didn’t disagree with his doctors, still, his odds of survival changed. His esophageal cancer did not metastasize. A surgeon removed his esophagus, replacing it with his stomach, and the post-op pathology yielded new odds.

The odds were now 3 to 1 that he was cured, which gave him more opportunity to jot down his thoughts. And what he wrote was that when something really bad happens to us, say we receive a scary diagnosis, we tend to say, “What did I ever do to deserve this?” We mimic Job in the Bible. Bemoan our situation. But do we ever stop to ask ourselves, “What did I ever do to deserve being born?” E.g., before we become absorbed by the terrible thing that has happened to us, the bad news, do we ever stop and think about what a miracle it is that we even have a life?

Forrest Church urges us to take a time out before we get busy trying to beat the odds; urges us to stop and think about the incredible odds we’ve already beaten. To be here today the one sperm that fertilized the one egg that has become each of us had to occur at precisely the right moment. No other moment would do. Our first scripture reading says, “I praise you, for I am awesomely and wonderfully made,” and let’s not overlook timely.

Timely is part and parcel of the awesomeness. And conception is just a part of beating the odds.

Forrest Church did the math, and did you know that since the year 1100 a.d. and no further back than that, each of us has had more than a million direct ancestors? Think about it. Through centuries of incredibly low life expectancy, each one of us has had more than a million direct ancestors who lived long enough to procreate. You think it's hard getting a doctor's appointment now; you should have tried it back in the Middle Ages. And, as he says, if you have blood lines from Europe, this means that none of your ancestors died as children during the bubonic plague, which claimed half of Europe.

If we want to talk miracles, the miracle is that we're even here. Think about all the possible persons who never came into existence, and tell me, what did you do to deserve being born? We can say that we did nothing to deserve our bad news, say, a scary diagnosis, but cannot we also say that we did nothing to deserve the incredible gift of life? I'll leave it to you to determine whether or not being healed of a disease is a greater miracle than your birth; but even the people Jesus healed in the gospels eventually died. Their healing just postponed it. Death is inevitable given the miracle of our birth.

Our second scripture reading says, “Do not be anxious about anything, say death, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Maybe the thanksgiving that we bring to prayer whenever we face daunting odds, should include thanks for the miracle of our births. Thanking God that we're even here might better set the stage for the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds. We had absolutely nothing to do with our being born, yet, here we are. God kept our ancestors alive long enough to procreate. Similarly, whatever happens to us after we die is in God's hands. What can we do other than concern ourselves with how we live our lives, including how we cross the finish line of our lives regardless of where that finish line turns out to be posted, concern ourselves with living more fully however much of this incredible odds-beating life we have left. As Paul says, “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” He doesn't set a time limit for doing good.

One of my favorite movies is “The Straight Story.” It is based on a true story, that of a crusty WWII veteran named Alvin Straight. Alvin is a bit

different. Should he have cancer or a heart condition, he doesn't even want to know. To get him to see a doctor is almost impossible. He has to keel over and be unconscious before they can get him to a clinic, and even then, he won't eliminate his bad habits. I don't think God would hold up Alvin as a model of how we should deal with our health. He's an illustration of disaster. Yet, what is admirable about Alvin, from Jesus' point of view, is that he's going to be living his life as fully as he can whenever he rolls across the finish line.

What's important to Alvin is re-establishing a relationship with his brother after ten years of not speaking to each other. That's much more important to him than how long he might live. And we see people making such choices all the time do we not? They're not willing to go through radiation or chemo of questionable benefit, as opposed to likely benefit, if it makes them so sick that they lose the ability to enjoy whatever time they have left. Again, the miracle of miracles is that we were even born. Given this incredible, odds-beating gift of life, death is inevitable. How are we going to spend the time we have, how are we going to live the miracle?

Alvin Straight didn't have a driver's license – they took it away. He didn't trust bus drivers for some reason, he was in no shape to go anywhere; yet, he got on a riding lawnmower and headed to his brother's house, 240

miles away across most of Iowa and part of Wisconsin, in the hopes of reconciliation. Again, what does Paul say? *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable.... Keep on doing these things....* Even if they seem crazy. And Alvin and his brother were reconciled.

Forrest Church went to the doctor one day. He was diagnosed with an extremely savage form of esophageal cancer. Could he beat the odds, which were 20-1 against him? He had a good doctor, and after surgery, as well as treatment, the odds were 3-1 that he was cured. Forrest Church, though, wasn't interested in the odds. He says that as a boy, his dad took him one year to the Kentucky Derby. He gave Forrest some money and the opportunity to make even more money by placing a variety of bets on all the races that day, but Forrest wasn't interested. All that interested him about horse racing was a horse running in the Kentucky Derby that year named Silky Sullivan. He placed all the money he had had on Silky.

The thing about Silky Sullivan was that he was a crowd pleaser. "He stopped hearts in every race he entered. Halfway around the track, with the leaders throwing up a great cloud of dust two city blocks ahead of him, Silky Sullivan loped along in solitary splendor, quixotic, and by every dint of

racing logic, doomed,” so far behind there was no way he could win. “Then, to the amazement of all and the delight of anyone who dared to dream, with a burst of awe-inspiring speed he would close in on the pack, catch it at the final turn, pull up beside the leader, and win by a nose.”

Silky Sullivan was what interested a young Forrest Church, not horse racing per se, his young heart telling him that day, “Win or lose, this is a horse worth every cent of my money. True to form, Silky ambled out of the gate and immediately spotted a quarter furlong to the competition, prancing along nonchalantly until, like magic and flying like the wind, he closed the gap, dancing through the pack toward the flag. He’s going to win, Forrest screamed!” But his prophecy proved premature. Three horses crossed the finish line together, valiant Silky closing in on them, but just close enough to come in fourth. Silky Sullivan that day couldn’t overcome the odds of being that far behind; still, just to watch him run was what thrilled Forrest Church.

Forrest Church’s cancer returned. The 3-1 odds that he was cured weren’t enough, and he died. But again, in his opinion, which I think is a sturdy witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, beating the odds was not his greatest concern. He beat the odds some sixty years earlier when he was born. Death is inescapable given one’s birth, and rather than worry unduly about where the finish line is going to be placed, what was important was

how he crossed it, that he fully lived the miracle. Forrest wanted to cross it like Silky Sullivan, with a valiant run in the home stretch, the sort of run that, win or lose, made his heart and the hearts of those who loved him beat fast with excitement. Amen