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Date: November 8, 2020
Sermon: "Disappointments"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Pastor: Sustain me, my God . . . do not let my hope be dashed!
Psalm. 119:116

People: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.*
Proverbs 3:5

Pastor: I waited patiently for the Lord. God lifted me out of the mud and mire, he set my feet on a firm place to stand. Psalm 40:1-2

People: *Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary.*
Isaiah 40

Pastor: For our momentary troubles and present sufferings are achieving an eternal glory.
2 Corinthians 4:17

People: *Let all who are discouraged take heart. Let us praise God together.*
Psalm 34:1

Pastor: My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.
2 Corinthians 12:9

People: *So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time God will lift you up in honor.*
1 Peter 5:6

All: We can rejoice when we run into problems, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character. And character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And hope will not lead to disappointment. Romans 5:3-5

Have you ever had disappointment? That's a rhetorical question! Two weeks ago I preached a pre-election sermon and mentioned the obvious: that in every

competition—election, sports, you name it—in every competition, at least 50 percent don't get what they wanted. Which invariably leads to disappointment. It's true of frivolous things like who wins the Super Bowl, and of consequential things, like who wins an election.

Remember college basketball's "March Madness"? I used to watch it as a casual fan until I married Alida, the number-one, most intense, craziest University of Virginia basketball fan. For those of you in the know, that means two years ago, March 2018, I watched Alida as she watched Virginia, the No. 1 seed, lose to the No. 16 seed. The first No. 1 team to lose to No. 16 in all of history. That was an ugly day at the Parsonage . . . I mean *month*. It also means a year ago, March 2019, I watched Alida as Virginia won the whole thing, the National Championship! The bitter and the sweet. The agony and the ecstasy. Disappointment and joy. And that's just about college basketball!

All of our lives we experience disappointment. Some things we wanted, some things hoped for, or worked for, planned, needed, believed in, even prayed for. And it didn't happen. From health crises to college admissions, from Presidential elections to job searches, from wanting good weather to smooth travel to personal success. And sometimes it works out the way we wanted, and sometimes we are disappointed. Some of those times we are disappointed in people, even in ourselves; sometimes in events, outcomes.

The Bible is a roadmap to lots of things. First there's a lot of history there. In the Old Testament there's the history of the Jewish people, the nation of Israel, and the Jewish religion, Judaism. In the New Testament, there is the history of Jesus and the history of the beginnings of the Christian religion and the Church. All that history is probably half the Bible. The other half is a roadmap to life: how to live life fully, spiritually, practically, ethically, socially.

Just off the top of my head, there is advice in there on being industrious, fair, productive, creative, wise, patient, honest . . . you get the idea. And a lot of that advice is about overcoming disappointment.

From Adam and Eve at the front of the Bible to St. Paul near the back, there's one person after another facing life's greatest dilemmas and crossroads when things didn't work out the way they'd hoped.

Look at Adam and Eve. They start life in Paradise, the Garden of Eden. And they lose it all: Paradise, immortality, perfection, just to pursue their selfish silliness. That's disappointing. And St. Paul. He gives up everything to follow Christ, to serve Christ, and he ends up beaten, jailed, probably executed, just for following his conscience.

David, the Biblical one, he literally saves his nation and his king. And his reward? In a jealous rage, the king chases him out of the country, makes him a pariah, tries to kill him. Living in a cave, on the run, don't you think David got down, looking at his disappointment?

Look at the prophets: Jeremiah, Elijah, Amos—the whole bunch. They did their best to help their nation to obey God, and they end up ridiculed, hunted, ignored, or persecuted. All through the Bible there are people who get cheated, mistreated, deprived, every form of disappointment imaginable. And yet, the people we think about 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 years later, the people we remember, hung in there, bounced back, persevered, succeeded.

Think about the people in your own life who have taught you a thing or two, inspired you, helped you. I'll bet there's not a whiner in the bunch. Not a finger-pointer or blame-thrower. The people who have helped us along life's way are people who have known disappointment, often bitter disappointment, and risen above it. Those are the folks worth watching.

What got me thinking about this was the front page of Monday's Sports section of *The New York Times*. It was about Des Linden, a 37-year-old woman from Michigan, a pretty good marathon runner, who had her heart set on running this year's New York City Marathon. Running a marathon requires a lot of training, a lot of preparation, a lot of planning. And to run in one of the big ones, New York or Boston, or the Marine one in D.C., you start months, even years ahead, building up to that one day.

That's what Des Linden was doing when this year's NYC Marathon was canceled, eventually turning her disappointment into quite an accomplishment. With the New York Marathon canceled, she decided to do a "calendar run" for October. Each day she ran the distance of the day on the calendar. So October 1, she ran one mile; October 10, 10 miles. October 17, 17 miles. You get into the 20s: October 23, 25, 27, etc., you're doing a marathon every day! Then she came to October 31, the Saturday before what should've been the 50th annual New York City Marathon. The 31st, that meant 31 miles. So she flew from Michigan to New York, got up early, ran five miles to the Tavern on the Green, took a deep breath, and kept on going, running 26 miles in loops through Central Park; five plus 26 equals, yep, 31! She did it, including running the New York City Marathon!

(Fetterman, Matthew. "On Marathon Weekend, Des Linden Ran 26.2 Miles, and Then Some, in New York." *The New York Times*. Nov. 2, 2020, p. D1)

O.K., no hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers cheering her on all throughout the five boroughs from Staten Island to Broadway, no crowds as she entered Central Park, no laurel wreath, no pre-marathon carb dinner the night before, no big celebrations the night after at a Midtown Irish bar. But no matter.

I like this story because it's as though she looked disappointment right in the face and said, "O.K., you're not taking over my life. I'll run you into the ground!"

That's why I love today's selection of Scriptures. We started purposely with everybody's prayer, Psalm 119, "Do not let my hopes be dashed." We live on hope: for ourselves, our loved ones, our nation, our dreams.

But disappointment comes when hopes seem dashed. A relationship falls apart. A job falls through. A plan doesn't come together. Our health fails. Friends fail us. We fail ourselves. Yes, hope seems dashed.

That's when the Bible kicks in to overdrive. "Trust in the Lord," the Bible tells us, "lean not on your own understanding." That's a tough one because our own understanding . . . that's the one we know. We say, I know, I need, I want, I think. Me, me, me, me, I, I, I, I. that's what we're comfortable with. "Our own understanding."

But faith says, "Maybe God has a better plan for you than you do." Open up your eyes, your mind, your perspective . . . to other possibilities. The Scriptures go on: "God will lift you up out of the mud and mire, set your feet on firmer ground, renew your strength." And before you know it, "you will soar like an eagle." Or, like Des Linden, "You'll run and not be weary," leaving disappointment behind.

Our Scriptures built to a crescendo of confidence, and that's key because the Bible's answer to disappointment is twofold: trust and confidence. *Trust and confidence*. In God. In yourself. In a plan and an outcome that maybe you can't see right now, but it's there for the taking.

The Scripture we ended with says it all: "We can rejoice when we run into problems." All right, that's got our attention. Now, look at the construct Paul builds from that. "Rejoice when we run into problems. Because problems help us develop endurance. Endurance develops character. Character develops hope. And hope will not lead to disappointment." (Romans 5:3-5)

That's the story of every great person put in Biblical language. And when I say "great," I don't mean big or famous. I mean someone we want to be like, someone we admire, or would follow.

The *New York Post* last week had a very interesting article—a book review actually—written by the author. Julie Gray tells about her new book—and listen to the title: *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev: Rascal. Holocaust Survivor. Optimist*. Rascal. Holocaust survivor. And then that last word: optimist. The author takes you on the journey of Gidon's life. A child in Czechoslovakia, family's escape to

Prague as World War II erupts; as Jews they were sent to a concentration camp. After the war, Gidon lived a life of ups and downs, personal tragedies, health crises. A lifetime of a million disappointments, I'm sure.

The author writes, "When I met Gidon, I fell in love. And I also found a master teacher of the practice of hope. For him, sadness, loss, and suffering are unavoidable facts of life that are layered between other life facts like joy, adventure, laughter, and change. Gidon sees what is in front of him, whatever set of circumstances, as a challenge he might be able to overcome or a pleasure that he will probably enjoy. To him, hope, laughter, and gratitude are old-fashioned good habits like exercise and brushing your teeth. They take practice and repetition. When Gidon was a child, the whole world was ending, over and over, every hour of every day. Hope was the only thing that could not be taken away." *Hope was the only thing that could not be taken away.* (Gray, Julie. "How a Holocaust Survivor Helped Me Find Love—and Hope During the Pandemic." *New York Post*. Oct. 25, p.32)

That's Biblical advice wrapped around a personal story. Disappointments come in every direction, every shape and size and situation. We can wallow in it, whine about it. Or we can embrace hope. And the way to hope is straight through our disappointments. Look at them, hard, each and every disappointment, square in the face, with brutal honesty and learn what we can. There is your "endurance," St. Paul says, "that will build character, and your character will strengthen hope, and hope will not disappoint."

Now, St. Paul was a deep theological thinker, and no doubt he's talking about hope leading to heaven, to eternal salvation. And that's a great thing. Having just done a funeral on Thursday for some very brokenhearted people, hope for eternal life is a really big thing. But Paul was also thinking practically in this life. Paul faced disappointment in every aspect of his life, every step he took included major disappointment. Yet he kept going on, kept moving forward, he called it "keeping the faith," and he did. You see, disappointment is just the nature of things, how life goes. But despair is not.

At the lowest point in my life, a wise man told me, "David, you're in a raging, swirling, river, about to drown. Look to the shore. What's on that shore whose pull is stronger than the raging river?"

He was right. The raging river, that's our disappointments. On the shore? Those are our hopes. The hopes that will save us.

Are you ready? Start swimming.