

4 Easter Good Shepherd Sunday April 25, 2021.

"I've Come So Far, I Think I Can Run On Just A Little Bit Longer."

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"I've Come So Far, I Think I Can Run On Just A Little Bit Longer."

I can't remember where I first read this quote, but I tried to commit it to memory because I liked how it embodies the practice and value of perseverance. I also liked it because it reminded me of when I used to run long distance and when I'd start to get tired, I'd tell myself if I made it this far, I could run a bit more. This way of thinking helped me finish every training session and every race I started.

Perseverance isn't just for athletics. It's an essential aspect of religion, spirituality, music, academic pursuits, justice, change, and how we will get through challenging times for the better.

My husband knew I felt a connection to the quote, so he gave me a brass disk on a chain with those words stamped on it. Interestingly, the company that made and sold the pendent also provides an explanation of the quote's origin.

According to the company, this phrase was often used by Dr. Dean Thompson when he was at Presbyterian College to inspire students to get through a rough exam, class, semester, year, or the challenges of life. But Dr. Thompson didn't create the phrase. That honor goes to legendary Black gospel singer Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith who adapted it from a line in a gospel song. I had never heard of Mother Smith, so I looked her up and discovered she was a remarkable woman of faith and perseverance who helped shape a musical genre by shepherding some of its greatest contributors.

She was born in Rolling Fork, Mississippi in 1904 and loved to sing from an early age. Over time she became an accomplished gospel singer, but she was against the commercialization of gospel music and chose to tour and perform instead of record songs. She helped train many other gospel singers and encouraged several singers to use their gifts to follow their callings. Some of these singers went on to great success including Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin. She had such a nurturing temperament with everyone she encountered that people called her Mother; a title she received with the same love and gratitude with which it was given.

Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith did more than sing gospel music: she became the first woman to be ordained and to preach in the Lively Stone Apostolic Church in St. Louis where she taught and preached for thirty years. She created the sermonette, a piece of spoken dialog within a gospel song that many successful gospel musicians like Kirk Franklin use today. She wasn't recognized nationally for her own singing until the mid-1980's when she was featured in a documentary about gospel music. In the later years of her life, Mother Smith lived in Tower Village Nursing Home where she continued to preach weekly and met with African American women suffering from anxiety who reported finding peace and relief after talking with Mother Smith. She died in 1994; loved by many who consider her one of the most influential gospel singers of all time. One of the few people who interviewed her wrote of her, "She helped shape gospel music, schooled its next singers, and mothered us all."

What this brief summary of her life leaves out is her strong Christian faith that helped her overcome many challenges, setbacks, disappointments, injustices, and inequalities and still made a significantly positive impact on the lives of so many. Mother Smith was able to persevere because she knew the Holy Spirit was with her and empowering her no matter what. This gave her hope and strength whether she was breaking gender barriers, standing up to corporate greed and the commercialization of the church, or inspiring someone to live into their calling. Like so many shepherds, Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith believed God was with her, and that meant change would happen, not because she wanted it to, not in one grand swoop; but slowly, one step at a time, because she believed she was a small part in the resurrection life God is bringing into the world.

In the story of her life, Mother Smith points us to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which is why I am mentioning her today on Good Shepherd Sunday. Some of you might remember the fourth Sunday in the season of Easter is always the day we have Bible readings that refer to Jesus the Good Shepherd. Because our parish is named Church of the Good Shepherd, that makes this Sunday special for us, sort of like a celebration of our patron saint.

We might wonder why Jesus is referred to as a shepherd. Biblical scholars and historians tell us shepherds are frequently mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps because the audience was familiar with shepherds and their essential role in ancient economies and societies. Like all things, there were nuances around shepherding, and not all shepherds did their job the same way. Shepherds were caretakers of flocks of animals like sheep or goats. Shepherds didn't just watch over the flocks; they were invested in the animals. Shepherds did everything from assisting to birthing babies, giving medical attention to the animals, looking for the animals who got lost or separated, and guiding them to safe places to eat, drink, and sleep. While some shepherds saw the animals in their care for their monetary value only, there were other shepherds who believed the entire lives of the animals were what gave them value. Even before Jesus' time anyone could tell the difference between the shepherd who only cared for what a flock was worth and the shepherd who cared for the lives of the animals in their flock. The later wasn't in it for the short-term dividend but was committed to be with each sheep for its entire life. That type of shepherd was called good.

That is why we call Jesus the Good Shepherd, because Jesus is committed to sharing the whole journey of life with us, even to death and back. That is an essential part of resurrection life and why we do not need to fear death. Jesus has already made that journey and will walk with us through any pain or suffering into resurrection life.

When the Church is at our best, we help people from all walks of life look for and recognize Jesus present in the world through our worship, ministries, studies, and presence in our community. Sometimes, however, when we aren't at our best, we can make the mistake of thinking shepherd is code for leader instead of one who is present through all things. That can lead to the mistake of thinking we are the Good Shepherds, or our clergy are the good shepherds instead of Jesus. That is usually when the church fails, when we care far more about attendance, prestige, power, and doing things the way we've always done them because they bring us comfort instead of reflecting on how we engage in healing the hurt and divisions in society or working to change unjust

systems both inside and outside the church to make room for people of all walks of life. We can forget growth means growing closer to the Kingdom of God instead of getting bigger and wealthier and more popular.

That is why we need shepherds like Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith to show us by word and example we are meant to lift up and nurture each other, to see the potential in each other, to praise God, and to persevere through difficult times of suffering because God can and does work through those painful times to create new and better life - resurrection life. In the readings for today, one theme that is consistent in all of them is how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, perseveres in loving us through all circumstances. In the beautiful words from Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd isn't only present when the pastures and water are good. The Good Shepherd is with us through difficulties, even setting a grand table for us in the midst of our enemies and walking with us through the valley of the shadow of death. In John's Gospel, the author reminds us when other shepherds like conspiracy theories, political leaders, businesses, and others who claim to care for us can't hang in there with us through the tough times, because they only care about our value as consumers, Jesus is still with us. And the readings from John's letter and the Acts of the Apostles inspire us that while there is only one Good Shepherd, we can help people see and connect to Jesus when we attempt to embody that same sacrificial love of God in the world, like Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith.

This means her quote about running on a bit longer not because the end is in sight, but because of how far we've come, is a wonderful gift for Good Shepherd Sunday this year. When we aren't at our best, we can rush forward toward a goal or a finish line without considering what is behind us. When we make that mistake, we don't necessarily make progress toward resurrection life, because we don't realize how we got to where we are. I sometimes see this tendency when someone claims racism or sexism no longer exist because they mistake one move forward such as making new laws that are more equal or inclusive, or court cases that uphold those laws, or electing people of color and women leaders as indicators that racism or sexism are only the stuff of history. However, the truth is far more complex, and living into deep resurrection change like racial justice and environmental justice will take time and endurance. That is why persistence is an important trait of the Good Shepherd and all those who follow Jesus.

The same is true for the pandemic. Many people mistake the development of the vaccine as the end of the pandemic. But COVID-19 can't be turned off like a switch, and we'd all be making a grave error if we tried to go back to what was without taking into consideration all we've been learning, observing, and even what we've lost during the pandemic. One of the lessons we learn from the Good Shepherd is Jesus isn't only walking with us through difficult times of suffering like a pandemic or systemic racism, he is leading us through the suffering into to a better day. One that is closer to God's Kingdom here on earth, where medical care like vaccines is available to all people regardless of age or where they live so no one has to wait their turn or drive to different towns in order to be treated. Where opportunities aren't limited by skin color, race, gender, mobility, age, or where you went to school. And where we recognize our connection to the earth is one of caretaker not over consumption of its resources.

Mother Smith's quote about persevering is more than a source of inspiration for me. It grounds me in the faith and life of following Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and connects me to her and all that company of heaven who have gone before me, all of whom have

served as shepherds nurturing me in that faith. The quote also gives me perspective to what the past year has revealed: the racial injustice some thought was behind us, the economic disparity in access to health care, continued gender inequalities, instability of the economy and carelessness of many businesses remind me there is great suffering in the world, some of which I share. That's why Mother Smith's words are such a gift. They remind us there is another way to look at the past, one that sees progress as building blocks, not finish lines. The progress we've made in the past is never for naught, even when it looks like it is being undone. The quote also reminds me struggle and suffering is not a waste if we realize it's source and seek to eliminate it. It reminds us if we got this far, we could go a little farther. And then a little farther. One step at a time, even when those steps feel weary, they will take us not backward, but forward, closer to God's Kingdom. We are not alone. The Good Shepherd is right here with us. Calling us, nurturing us through shepherds he sends to us, to good, green pastures, beside cool, clear water, through dangerous places deep into the loving heart of God where we are all at home.