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Proper 28A
Peace, Seattle
November 13, 2011
Psalm 90:1-14

FROM REVENGE TO RESURRECTION

Perspective…we all need it. And this morning, Psalm 90 provides it.

The only psalm assigned to Moses, this deeply reflective poem has a certain gravity to it. It bears the weight of the life of a man who's seen it all, and who places it all—his life, and ours—into the hands of the God who is "our refuge."

The great hymnwriter Isaac Watts took the sentiment of Psalm 90 and transformed it into the stanzas of our opening hymn:

O GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST, OUR HOPE FOR YEARS TO COME,
OUR SHELTER FROM THE STORMY BLAST AND OUR ETERNAL HOME.

On a weekend when we recall the lives and experiences of Veterans past and present, this meditation on God's constancy amid human frailty seems especially fitting.

I'd like to use it as a lens into the remarkable story of one WW 2 veteran. His name: Louis Zamperini.[1]

As a kid growing up in Torrance, California in the 20's and 30's, Louie Zamperini was a troublemaker. He hopped freight trains. He skipped classes. He started picking up discarded cigarette butts and smoking when he was 5 years old. Torrance's police chief, Jerry Calder, knew him as a kid so fast on his feet that he managed to steal beer from bootleggers. Louis' older brother Pete convinced Louis to try another sort of running – on a track. And so he did.

And when he was greeted by supporters cheering his name, his outlook, and his life, turned completely around. He developed a passion for running. In May 1934, at the high school state finals, he unleashed the devastating kick that was becoming his trademark, setting a new national record for the high school mile.

Within a few short years he became the "Torrance tornado," a world-class runner and the youngest American to compete on the U.S. distance team at the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. Though he didn't medal that year, his final lap in the 5,000 meter race so impressed Adolf Hitler that Hitler requested a personal meeting with him.

Anticipating that he would mature into gold medal form by the next Olympics, Louie set his sites on the 1940 games set to be held in Tokyo, Japan. But the rising threat of war, and finally war itself, intervened. There would be no Olympics.

[1] The biographical information which follows has been assembled from several sources: Laura Hillenbrand's book, *Unbroken: A WWII Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption.* (New York: Random House, 2010); from two online articles (edited), one by August Steigmeyer, which appeared in the *Kenyon College Collegian*; and the other by Michael Fleming of Deadline.com. For the full articles, follow these links: http://www.kenyoncollegian.com/mobile/features/laura-hillenbrand-89-discusses-her-new-book-unbroken-1.1997896 and http://www.deadline.com/2011/01/universal-buys-laura-hillenbrand-bestseller-unbroken-for-wwii-pic/. The final source is the film entitled: *The Great Zamperini,* that aired on the final day of the Olympic games in Nagano, Japan, in 1998. The powerful 35 minute film, produced by CBS and narrated by Bob Simon, lives on now on YouTube in four segments: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxPuGQsmVEg&feature=related

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Louie enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force in 1941 and was deployed to Hawaii, where he flew several bombing missions over Japanese-occupied islands in the Pacific, including Wake Island. His plane, nicknamed Super Man, limped back from one mission with 594 gunshot holes in its fuselage.

On May 26, 1943, Zamperini ran a mile in four minutes and 12 seconds. Hours later he and his crew got the call to go out on a rescue mission. During the mission, their B-24 replacement aircraft, the Green Hornet, lost two if its four engines and dropping like a rock, plummeted into the ocean.

Of the 11-man crew, only Zamperini, Russell Phillips, the pilot, and Francis McNamara, the tail gunner, were alive. Zamperini spotted a life raft floating rapidly away from the burning waters. He swam to it, then returned to scoop up Phillips and McNamara. For the next 47 days they floated in that raft, awaiting rescue. But rescue was not to come.

After drifting 2000 miles and surviving hunger, thirst, incessant shark attacks, strafing by a Japanese plane, and the death of their crewmate Mac, Zamperini and Philips found land and the Japanese Navy, and that's when the hardship really began.

They had landed on a hellhole called Execution Island, where every day their captors told them it could be their last. Eventually they were transferred to another POW camp in Japan proper, and Louie was given a chance to be part of Tokyo's propaganda machine by reading anti-American propaganda statements over the radio. But he refused, and because of his refusal, Zamperini was sent to serve hard time.

Starved, subjected to medical experiments, slave labor, and brutal beatings by guards, Zamperini was specifically targeted by a sadistic overseer named Mutsuhiro Watanabe. Called "The Bird" by the POWs, Watanabe made it his mission to break Zamperini's spirit with beatings and mental and physical torture. Zamperini would not break, but the guard kept trying right up until the war ended and the war criminal slipped away and eluded manhunts.

Returning to the States as a heroic survivor, Louie tried to restart his life, but every night he would be confronted by the Bird in nightmares that would not cease. He sought relief in alcohol. He even tried valiantly to re-start his running career, but that was cut short when he aggravated an injury he'd suffered as a POW.

After waking from a dream one night to discover he was choking not the Bird, but his terrified wife, Cynthia, Zamperini became convinced his wholeness depended on one thing: he must return to Japan to face and kill his tormenter. He tried every scheme he could imagine in hopes of making enough money to return to Japan to carry out the plot. Living out his fantasy of revenge was the only pathway Zamperini could imagine toward a future with hope.

But as his life fell apart around him, on the verge of divorce, alcoholism and a total breakdown, Zamperini discovered there was another way.

Dragged by his wife Cyndi to a Los Angeles revival, he heard a young preacher named Billy Graham. The words of Graham's sermon that first night took Louie on an inward journey that seared his soul. Graham spoke of a drowning man and Louie, seeing himself in the image, grew more and more agitated and resistant. Like a caged animal, he was ready to bolt.

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At the end of the night, when some answered Graham's call to embrace Christ, Louie bulled his way out of the tent with Cyndi in tow, and headed home. That night, Louie lay helpless once again as the Bird lashed out at him in his dreams.

The next day, Cynthia tried to coax him into going to hear Graham again, but Louie would have none of it. She refused to let it drop, however, and so finally, after hours of arguing, Louie, worn down, agreed to go, but on one condition: when Graham called for prayer at the end, they would leave.

That night in the revival tent, a light came on in Louie Zamperini; he heard the gospel addressing him as if for the first time, felt it pulling together all the unbidden memories of his story of his survival, captivity and struggle, and God's hidden presence through it all suddenly became clear.

Poised to leave with Cynthia's hand held tight in his own, he experienced the gravity of God pulling and tugging him, and finally, he relinquished. A new chapter was begun.

When he arrived home that evening, Louie went straight to his liquor cache, pulled out every bottle, and poured their contents down the drain. He hurried through the apartment gathering every emblem that was part of his ruined years and heaved it all down the trash chute.

He went to bed in peace, and in the morning, he woke feeling cleansed. For the first time in five years, the Bird had not come into his dreams; and would never come again.

Newly captive to Christ, and his call to "love his enemies," Louie knew that <u>forgiveness</u>, not <u>vengeance</u>, was the pathway that would lead him to wholeness. He decided he must forgive all of his captors, and not simply forgive them <u>verbally</u>, at a distance, but <u>personally</u>, and face to face.

So to Japan he went. And there at Sugamo prison, the former POW prison that after the war became the prison for Japanese war criminals, Louie confronted many of his old prison guards "confounding them with absolution." But Mutsuhiro Watanabe, the Bird, was not among them.

"The most important thing in my Christian life," Louis says, "was to know that I not only forgave them verbally, but to see them face to face."

Years later, when the Bird finally resurfaced, Zamperini returned to Japan and prepared to meet and forgive him, too. But Watanabe refused to see him. Mutsuhiro Watanabe died in 2003.

Louie Zamperini, still alive and well today at age 94, resists people's efforts to make him a hero. The publication of a best-selling biography by Laura Hillenbrand last year is making that job all the more difficult.[2]

And the truth is, the title of the book <u>UNBROKEN</u>, is a misnomer. For in spite of his survival against all odds, in spite of a resilient spirit that refused to die, in spite of the fact that he, unlike many others, came back from war alive, Louie was a thoroughly broken man, well on his way to becoming a victim of the personal devastation that the effects of war exacts upon veterans and their families.

[2] Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A WWII Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption.* (New York: Random House, 2010)

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But God made a way for Louie out of no way. Something in him had to die before the broken man bent on revenge could become whole again. And it did die, and he's been living the resurrection ever since.

> LORD, you have been our refuge from one generation to another.
> Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and earth were born,
> from age to age you are God.
>
> You turn us back to the dust and say, "Turn back, O children of earth."
> For a thousand years in your sight are like a watch in the night.
>
> So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Let us pray:
God, our refuge and our hope, look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; liberate us from the belief that war is an answer; unite us in bonds of love and forgiveness; and, through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth, so that, in your good time, every people and every nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.