It’s an iconic moment in adventure movie history in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Indy’s father lies ill as his son faces three tests to get to the last brother who fought to protect the Holy Grail. In the first test, he must internalize humility, as only the penitent shall pass. He kneels just in the nick of time as the boobytrapped sword and wheel strike above his head. In the second, he must follow the path of the word of God. He steps on the stones that spell out the name of God—JEHOVAH, but crucially with an I for the J in Latin. Finally, he comes to a great chasm that he cannot cross. It will take a leap of faith if he is to pass.

In the beautiful direction of the movie, we see in each case his father—played impeccably by the late Sean Connery (a moment of silence, please)—whisper the words that Indy seems to hear in his head and repeat as he makes his way. It’s a hint toward trinitarian theology: the father speaks, the spirit communicates the words to the son, and the son obeys the word. First, *Only the penitent shall pass.* Then, *Walk the word of God.* And finally, the father says, *Only believe, boy, only believe.* And with that, Indy steps off the ledge into the void and his foot lands on an invisible bridge that comes suddenly into view. He is able to walk across safely.

The spiritual journey is one test of faith after another. It’s a way of life in which we have to take the risk of trusting God to be faithful. And sometimes the path itself does not become clear until we commit to it.

We have come to the third and final sermon in our three-week stewardship series I have called *Start to Finish*. The life of faith begins by making a start—committing ourselves to a course that God is calling us to. It continues by fighting through the challenges of the in-between times along the way. And it concludes with perseverance to the end, wherein we will be saved.

It would be nice to find that things would get easier the further you get in the spiritual journey, that starting is the
The hardest part. But alas, it turns out the challenges get greater as we get stronger. Of course, the good news is that we will have banked experiences of God’s faithfulness to help us finish.

We have used the story of the children of Israel to guide us. The first week we saw them make a start as they trusted God to lead them out of slavery in Egypt and God parted the waters of the Reed Sea—what we normally call the Red Sea. Last week we saw how God provided quail and manna in the wilderness when the people ran out of food. They learned they could trust God to see them through when things got tough.

Now, this week we see them at another body of water, the Jordan River. On the other side is the Promised Land. It’s flood tide. The waters are high, and they cannot cross. The priests are told to carry the ark of the covenant into the waters, and when they do, the waters recede and stand up from their source, forming a wall of water on one side as the waters did when they left Egypt 40 years earlier. The people have to believe that the waters will hold. They step into the waters on dry land and cross safely, only after their leaders have stepped out before them as God commanded.

Where do you find yourself in your spiritual journey with God? Maybe you’re just starting out, because you are young and just becoming aware of the call of God and the claim of Christ upon your life. Or you got a late start, and you are still learning what it means to be a Jesus follower. You are just doing the next right thing as Princess Anna says in Frozen 2. Or maybe you find yourself in the middle of your life with Christ. You’ve made a start, maybe you’ve joined our church and are trying to find your way around. It could be that the challenges of family or finances, work or health have you struggling to trust God in this in-between stage when disillusionment sets in and it all feels so hard. Could be that our COVID restrictions have you feeling cut off. Or, maybe you have come a long way in your Christian life, and you are looking at the finish line and the temptation to pull back and play it safe is ever present. You have tried to do the right thing along the way, and you wonder if it’s time to look out for yourself, to limit your engagement with others, to save instead of give.
That last point is tough for many of us. While financial stewardship is only one aspect of our spiritual journey, it is inseparable from it. What you and I do with our money is a clear indicator of the condition of our hearts before God.

In 2 Corinthians 8, a passage we have looked to each week now for how to think about our giving, we see that the Christians in Corinth had made a start in collecting an offering for famine relief of fellow Christians in Jerusalem. We don’t know what got them stalled out, but as the apostle put it: *It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.*

I know some of you look forward to these sermons every year about as much as a root canal, but apparently even the early church needed reminding to give. So, you’re in good company, don’t you know?!

There are two aspects to this: the personal and the congregational. It doesn’t matter what is going on the world, whether we are in a time of woe or weal, as they say, of poverty or prosperity: we have to give generously because the health of soul requires it. Our relationship to God depends upon whether we prove that we are depending upon God. When we give, we make room for God to prove God’s faithfulness to us.

The other aspect is congregational. We live in covenant together to fulfill God’s mission through our church. The church doesn’t receive money from some Baptist headquarters or some Baptist hedge fund. We only have the church we decide to have by the level of our giving. Every year it’s an act of faith. You and I do what we feel spiritually compelled to do. And when we add it up at the end of the year and take away our costs, we hope to break even. It’s a race to the finish every year. And during COVID, the stakes could not be higher.

Finishing a race brings back a painful personal memory for me. I have run one marathon in my life—the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D. C. This body wasn’t meant for long-distance running. Sorry to state the obvious. I was 50-years old and probably trying to prove
something to myself, especially since the year before I had my second heart procedure in five years. I trained the best I could. And I did fine for about the first 10 miles. By mile 19 I was on my knees throwing up my guts. I thought I had nothing left. But my training partner was running with me, along with her son who was a Marine. They slowed down to coax me along, sacrificing their own better times to see me finish. Kim, Rhett, Cameron and her husband Garrett were there too, following along and shouting encouragement.

There was no way I was going to quit, no way I was going to disappoint them or myself. When I crossed the finish line and ended up on a cot in a tent with cramps in my calves and a bruised ego to boot, I mostly felt let down by the experience. I had hoped it would be a boost for the second half of my life. But looking back, it wasn’t the time on the clock that mattered so much as the fact that I overcame defeat and finished. And it was unlikely that I would have finished if it weren’t for the fact that I had a community of support alongside.

Friends, some of you have started to give and stalled along the way. You may feel spent, embarrassed and defeated by not having done what you set out to do. Some of you made a plan last year to give a certain amount to the Unified Budget and to help us finish the Pathways Endowment Fund goal that will keep our residency program going in the years ahead. Let me channel the Apostle Paul for a moment with you: finish what you started. Don’t focus on where you’ve been or where you are. Keep your eyes on the finish line. Know that we are cheering you on. You can do it.

I heard a speaker this week at the fall convocation of Perkins School of Theology at SMU, which was put on by our own Priscilla Pope-Levison. The poet David Whyte was transitioning from one secure job to being a fulltime poet and he confessed to a Benedictine monk how tired he was doing both jobs at once. Brother David Steindl-Rast said these important words to him: “The opposite of exhaustion is not rest; it is wholeheartedness.”

I would remind you of the same in your Christian life and in your Christian stewardship. Don’t seek relief through rest, set your whole heart on finishing what
you have started.

You can’t finish if you never start. So, start to finish. You can’t finish if you quit sometime after you start. So, start to finish. You can’t finish if you don’t finish. So, today I urge you to start to FINISH. Amen.