

Though we don't always think about it, one of the things we should do at various points in our lives is hit the pause button and look at ourselves, and ask ourselves where are we going, where are we running to, or in some cases, what are we running from. And what we might find is when we encounter John the Baptist, the messenger of God in the desert who preaches this message that we need to clear out things in our lives and make changes, that we see with clarity where it is we need to go.

Mitchell Hollis, who is a Christian and a runner, discovered this one day when he went to give a talk on running and faith.

He remembers thinking: "There I stood in a small classroom at church, about to make a fool of myself. I was supposed to be teaching a class about running and faith, a class I'd organized. But I had no idea what to tell the people who'd signed up.

He didn't know much about what the Bible had to say about exercise. He also didn't know much about the Bible, period.

He was a runner, yes. But that didn't qualify him to teach this class. Running was his spiritual problem. He actually ran too much. He focused on it to the exclusion of everything else. Up to now, running seemed to be leading him away from God, not toward him.

So, he wondered, what was I doing here? Why had he organized this class, and what could he possibly say that would help these good people spiritually?

Great questions. And he wished he had answers. Stalling for time, he started the class by asking a question of his own.

"What brings you here?" He asked the dozen or so people facing him. "What do you hope to get out of this class?"

What happened next changed the course of his life.

At that point in his story, he backs up and tells the reader how he got to that moment.

Mitchell is not a professional runner. He wasn't even a particularly athletic kid. He did two sports in high school: golf and bull riding. Really, he just liked to have fun.

His dad built homes. His mom sold insurance. Financially his parents did okay, but his dad had an alcohol problem, which slowly cost him his marriage, his profession and ultimately his home. Disorder and dysfunction were two words he knew well growing up.

Maybe that's why he took to running in his twenties. It started with a joke. Some buddies and Mike dared each other to enter the annual Peachtree Road Race, an 10K race in Atlanta on July 4. They say it's the largest 10K in the world, with about 60,000 runners.

None of the friends was in shape or had any idea how to train for a race. It was a painful 10 kilometers. But something indescribable happened as Mike ran the course. The feelings of anxiety and inadequacy he'd carried from his childhood seemed to fade with each kilometer. An uncanny serenity and focus came over him. Was this what they called the runner's high? Well Mike wanted more of it.

And so, he began running every day. He completed his first marathon in January 2008, just six months after the Peachtree race. Soon he was doing triathlons, then Ironman triathlons, grueling events that combine a 2.4-mile swim with a 112-mile bicycle ride and a 26.2-mile run.

Along the way, he settled into a career building homes just like his dad, married a wonderful woman named Holly and had two boys, Lane and Landon.

You'd never have known about those other parts of his life from talking to him, though. All he cared or talked about was running and triathlons. A typical conversation went like this:

"How're you doing, Mitch?"

"Great, I just beat my personal best time at the triathlon last weekend. Now I'm training for..." Blah, blah, blah.

His day was planned around workouts. The minute Mitch finished a race, he began prepping for the next one. He researched exercise and nutrition techniques to get faster. He was obsessed.

One day, Mitch was chatting with a friend after church. H.R. was 30 years older than him and a runner. Mitch liked that he ran, but what he really admired was H.R.'s faith. He was a plainspoken believer who lived with integrity and called things as he saw them.

Mitch was bragging about his son, who'd just completed his first triathlon at age six.

Suddenly H.R. stopped him.

"Mitch, don't let this become your God," he said.

Mitch stared at him. What was he talking about? What right did he have to meddle in my faith, he wondered. Irritated, Mitch wrapped up the conversation, found Holly and the kids and headed home.

He tried to brush off H.R.'s words. Yet each morning, when he laced up and headed out for a run, that simple phrase—don't let this become your God—wouldn't leave him alone.

Was there something wrong with his approach to exercise?

He had to admit, his life centered on running. And no amount of racking his brain turned up any obvious connection between improving his time in a marathon and growing closer to God. He thought about running more than he thought about God. Way more.

Why did I love running so much anyway, he asked himself. What was I running toward?

Maybe the better question though he says was, What was I running away from?

Exercise instilled discipline and gave him a feeling of accomplishment, two things in short supply during his dysfunctional childhood.

But if he craved structure and a sense of self-worth, shouldn't he be getting those things from God, he wondered? Maybe H.R. was right. Maybe exercise was taking God's place in my life.

Mitch knew what he had to do. Give up this sport he loved or give it to God.

You hear that a lot, he says from pastors and such: "Just give it to God." How was he supposed to put it into practice?

A couple days later, he remembered something. Years ago, when he was starting out as a runner, he'd been doodling during a church service. He drew a funny-looking stick figure running. Next to the stick figure he wrote, "Run for God." He stuck the paper in his Bible and for some reason filed it in a drawer at home.

Mitch rummaged through his files and found the drawing. He took it to a print shop and had it printed on a dozen T-shirts. He pictured himself wearing the shirt and being forced to explain to people what it meant to run for God.

People did ask about the shirt, especially at church. He told them his story and what H.R. had said to him, that running had become his idol.

"I'm trying to do this thing I love for God instead of myself," he said.

"Sounds like a subject for a class at church," someone said.

"Definitely," Mitch said. "I would take that class."

"No, I meant you should teach it."

Me—teach a class he thought? The guy who doodled in church? I didn't know enough about the Bible to teach anyone about faith!

People kept asking. Finally he went to his pastor for confirmation that he was not qualified. "Sounds like a great class," he said instead. "When do you want to start?"

Mitch couldn't argue with that. Holly and he prayed about it. He put up a few signs and talked to some church friends. He tried to make a lesson plan, but all he came up with were vague ideas about the relationship between faith and endurance.

That's why he stalled for time by asking everyone why they were in class.

A woman named Gaye Coker raised her hand. Mitch braced for a biblical question he was unprepared to answer.

"My husband and I need this class," she said. "We're in a rut. We're both overweight. All we do is work, come home, eat, watch TV and go to bed. We've had some parenting challenges, and we're depressed. We don't think we can run, but maybe this class will kickstart something."

Other people told similar stories. No one asked a theological question. Everyone had a spiritual need that they thought exercise might help with.

Mitch realized he didn't have to be an expert. These people probably knew more about the Bible than he did. All he had to do was be himself, share his story and guide people to a level of exercise they could manage. They would pray and explore Scripture together.

They would run for God.

God can do amazing things when you let him lead.

What happened with that class? First, everyone took up running. They started with walking, then slowly built up to running three times a week. By the time the class was finished, everyone was ready to run a 5K race.

They discovered the Bible actually has quite a lot to say about running. As the book of Hebrews puts it, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." There's more where that came from.

People at their church heard about the class and asked for another one. Other churches in the area soon did the same. Mitch was asked to write a curriculum that other churches could use. He published the curriculum, and soon he had a nonprofit ministry called Run for God that was helping thousands of people around the country learn to run and deepen their faith.

Gaye Coker works for the non profit. She went on to run half-marathons, and her husband became a marathoner.

"Running changed my life," she tells people who sign up for their groups.

Mitch closes by reflecting It changed his. Or maybe it's better to say God changed his life when I turned his love for running over to his care.

Today Run for God has been taught in more than 6,500 communities around the world to more than 200,000 people. The organization's small team (Mitch's wife, Holly; Gaye; local running legend Dean Thompson; and him) offers programs from beginner to marathon. They are passionate about sharing God's love through fitness. He points out how a life of faith is indeed a life of endurance. Some days they may find the incredible serenity and focus he remembers feeling during the first 10K he ran. Other days, they might struggle to take another step. But with God leading the way, he says we are sure to finish the race that has been set before us.

A good question for us to ask is who is our God. Like Mitch who was a believer long before he met the older runner who cautioned him to not make running his god if you think about it can't we at times in life be running the race not for the crown of eternal life but for the crown of leaves that withers and fades? Sometimes we put our energy into things that are sinful and ruining our souls. Or, we can put our energy into the career, into school, into money; other times people raise their kids to do the same so the child doesn't even enjoy childhood, but thinks the perfect college and being in as many activities as possible is what matters most. For others ego and honor are their god. Advent gives us a chance to encounter our own H.R. if you will like Mitch met, namely John the Baptist.

We know John as this kind of wild man in the desert who eats locusts and honey; he preaches a message that cuts to the chase. He urges people to repent; he sees the Pharisees and Sadducees who fancy themselves as very holy and he calls them a "brood of vipers" who have presumed that all is well in their lives. But he warns "even now the ax lies at the root of the trees" and 'every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'

The Gospel should make us a little uncomfortable in that we should not doubt the love and mercy of God. But we also need to get a bit introspective and ask ourselves who or what we are living for. We should want to grow in holiness and grace as life goes on.

And so a great thing to do this Advent is to think about how we too can maybe meet John the Baptist in the desert, and ask ourselves the hard questions. Consider turning off the TV and the phone for a little bit; maybe it's just a little time at the end of the day, or you come into the church here for some meditation or go for a walk. Listen to your conscience and think about what is going right and what isn't going right. And use this sacred time to make the changes.

Start with what needs to go. A tree in order to bear good fruit needs to be pruned; a garden to have flowers grow needs weeds removed. You don't just plant and leave; and that is why we as Catholics don't say we are "saved" just because we believe in God. We work. And the starting point is maybe there is something in your life that is preventing the growth that is sinful. Listen to your conscience. Don't ignore it and think

well this is OK or not a big deal; because it'll just get worse, and the weeds will grow and grow. Go to confession. Make things right. Learn from what you've been doing and take the steps to run with God and find the path to true happiness and holiness. It's not easy - for sin brings pleasure - and much like training for a marathon you will fall again and need to reach out and take God's hand - but with work you'll find you are much happier.

Then, look at how you spend your time and how your life is ordered. Having hobbies and being active is great - remember Martha is a saint too. But are you running around in circles? Are you really happy? Or are you making things more important than they should be? If you find you have little time for God, work Him into your schedule. Maybe you find you are so busy you aren't connecting as a family like you should; make time to talk - actually talk at a dinner table vs. texting - or spend time having a family game night or just being with one another knowing time is such a precious commodity. Or maybe you listen to your conscience and realize you need to just let certain things go or make a change in your life because they've become too important, occupying the place God should. When we keep God first and serve Him, as Mitch said God will do amazing things when you let Him lead.

And then help others to run the race like Mitch. Be their John the Baptist. Remind people what matters most. Help them to find God. Whether you are teaching your kids that faith matters by praying each night and coming to Mass together and living that out through works or love and mercy, or being a sounding board for someone who needs advice and counsel, each one of us has the ability to help other see what matters most in life.

So much of what we put our energy into we find, when we look back, may have been good but wasn't what mattered most. With that in mind, may we on this 2nd Sunday of Advent let John the Baptist into our lives and go into the desert regularly with him so that we can experience true spiritual growth and happiness, and run the race of life with God to its completion.