



STAYING THE Course

The determination of a racing pigeon taught our family that when we are faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, we can still choose to have hope.

By Kerry Griffin Smith

Sometimes Heavenly Father teaches us through His creations, and we are reminded that even the smallest creature is of value to Him (see Matthew 10:29). A few years ago, one special bird taught our family an ever-important lesson in a time of great need—stay the course and persevere, no matter the odds.

My brother, Kelly, raises racing pigeons. A few years ago he had a unique bird that competed in a race that turned out to be unusually challenging, one that many other pigeons failed to complete. But my brother's bird didn't give up. During that same time frame, my cousin Jason was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The prospects were grim, but family support and his will to live were strong. He began chemotherapy treatments despite terrible odds for survival. His race for an extended life had begun; the outcome of the pigeon's race would inspire him.

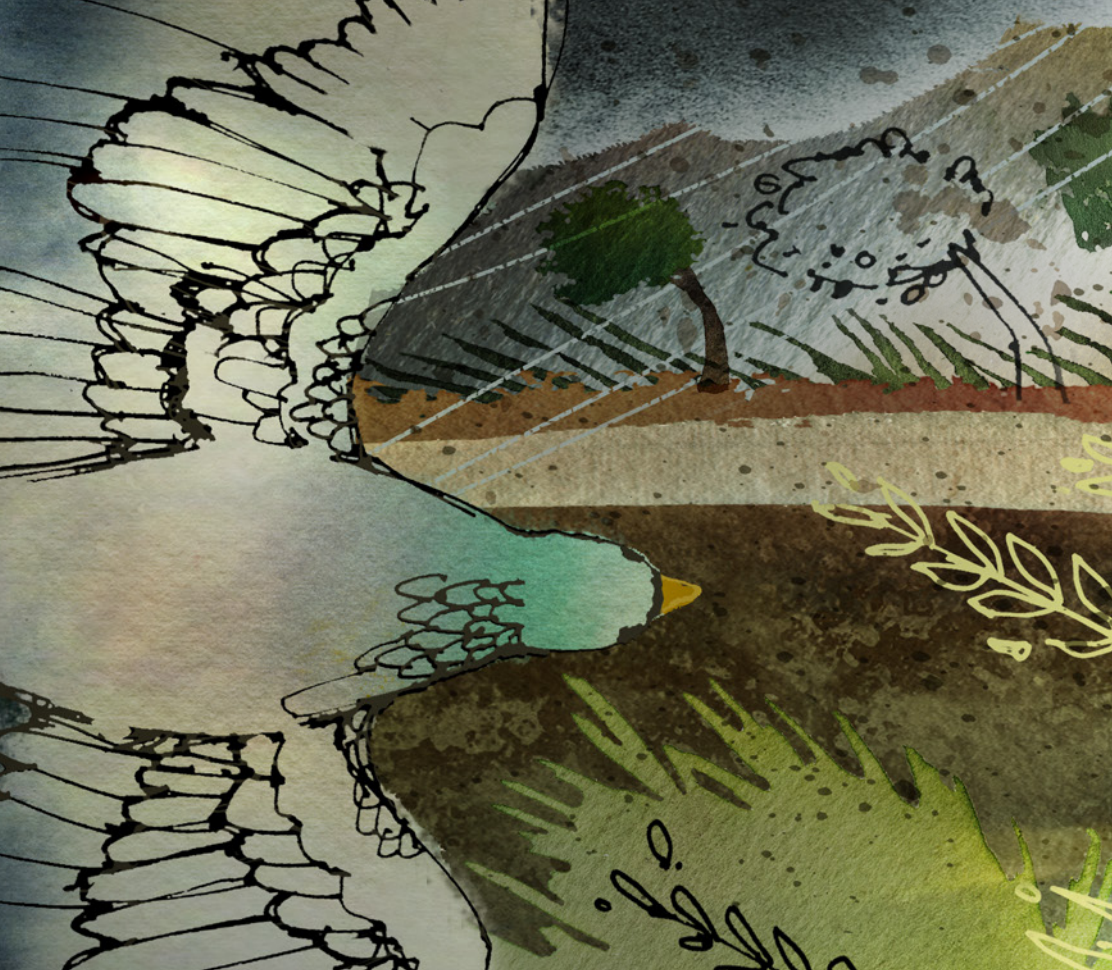
Our Special Pigeon

For those who know about racing pigeons, they are essentially aviary athletes. Hours of practice flights and a strict, specially formulated diet are required for racing

preparation. Our special bird, one of my brother's best racing pigeons, came from a lineage of prized competitors. He was bred to race, but his inner determination is what made him special, pushing him to finish—no matter what. During practice flights, he wasn't necessarily the fastest, but he always finished near the top with a respectable time. He was consistently a solid competitor.

His constant drive to finish with his personal best time paid off in one particular 300-mile race, a challenging journey but usually a doable distance for race-ready birds. With an innate GPS system, racing pigeons can be expected to cover this distance in about six hours. But that didn't happen in this race. Owners waited and waited for the birds to return home. Stressful weather conditions caused many of the 700-plus birds in the competition to lose their way. Some returned to their lofts days off schedule. Others were found way off course and were shipped back to their owners, and some never made it back at all.

But my brother's pigeon stayed the course. Upon returning home, he flew directly into the loft and landed



A HERITAGE OF HOPE

“When you choose whether to make or keep a covenant with God, you choose whether you will leave an inheritance of hope to those who might follow your example.”

President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, “A Priceless Heritage of Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 22.

on the computerized race pad. The chip on his leg band recorded the official time. It wasn't his best time by a long shot. He, too, had been delayed in the race. But because so many other birds had given up during the flight, his time placed him in a top slot. He ranked 35th—a respectable finish, given the circumstances.

For our pigeon's efforts in the race, he was awarded a cash prize that my brother donated to help Jason pay for ongoing expenses during his cancer treatments.

Our extended family gathered at Thanksgiving that year to also offer emotional and financial support. Jason learned about our pigeon's inspiring story then; it touched us all.

Our Messenger of Hope

And how did Jason's race against cancer go? In a rare twist of fate, he beat the odds. Incredibly, after he had endured four rounds of chemotherapy, his doctors discovered they had misdiagnosed the cancer. Instead, he had another condition that was treatable. Several years later he still enjoys life, and the story of our special pigeon continues to inspire him. We are grateful that Jason's earthly life has been extended but realize that other patients in similar circumstances are often called to their eternal home. In accepting God's will and doing their mortal best, they, too, stayed the course and finished their individual races with honor.

When we are faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, we can still choose to have hope. We do all that we can to prepare for life's challenges, but ultimately we must have faith in our Heavenly Father's plan for us. Along our journey, He sends us encouraging reminders of His love. We just have to look for them. For our family, His messenger was a prize-winning pigeon. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.