Recently, I watched a great interview with a young woman named Mabinty Bangura – she shared her inspiring story. She was born in 1995, in Sierra Leone, the war-torn African nation. When she was just three years old, her father was killed by rebels and her mother died from starvation. So, Mabinty was placed in an orphanage. Including Mabinty, there were 27 children in this orphanage, an orphanage where the children were ranked. The favorite child was number one and the least favorite child was number 27. Mabinty was number 27. She has a skin pigmentation condition called vitiligo (vit-il-i-go), which causes the loss of skin color in blotches. The women who ran the orphanage believed the white spots on Mabinty’s dark skin were evil, so they called her “the Devil’s Child.” This three year old was told she is “the Devil’s child.” As number 27, she was the last child to receive dinner every night, she was the last to receive clothing; she got the rags. Mabinty had one friend at the orphanage, child number 26. Coincidentally, her name was Mabinty, also. The two Mabinty’s, number 26 and number 27, loved and cared for each other.

One day, Mabinty noticed that an old magazine had blown up against the gate of the orphanage. She took a look and on the cover of the magazine was a ballerina, a white woman, in a pink tutu standing on her toes. Mabinty had no idea what a ballerina is all about, but she saw that the ballerina looked happy and she wanted to be happy. So, she showed the magazine cover to her favorite teacher who then explained to Mabinty was ballet is about. And, now, Mabinty had a dream, to be a ballerina. But, the worse was not over. Right outside the orphanage, a group of rebels attacked this favorite teacher, who was pregnant. Mabinty saw what was happening, she
ran out and tried to save her teacher, but she was just three years old. She was standing right there when the rebels cut open her teacher’s stomach. The rebels had made a bet as to whether the baby was a boy or a girl, and so they decided to find out. One of the rebels turned on Mabinty and sliced her stomach with a machete. A night watchman at the orphanage saw what happened, begged for Mabinty’s life, and saved her. Mabinty was three years old and she wanted to die…such overwhelming sadness at such a young age. Ballet seemed like an impossible dream to her, but the ballerina on the cover of that old magazine was her hope.

Not long after this terrifying experience, Americans came to adopt the children. Mabinty’s friend, number 26, got the good news…she was being adopted by Elaine and Charles DePrince from New Jersey. No one wanted to adopt number 27. However, with some confusion over number 26 and number 27 having the same name, the adoption agency needed to call Elaine and Charles DePrince to confirm which of the two Mabinty’s they were adopting. Elaine then learned that 12 families had refused to take number 27 because of her vitiligo (vit-ih-LIE-go). Elaine said immediately, “We’ll take them both.” Because it would be difficult to have two children named Mabinty, the children were given new names. Number 26 is Mia Mabinty DePrince and number 27 is Michaela Mabinty DePrince.

One of the first things Michaela did was show her new mom the magazine cover. Elaine promised her that she would dance. She registered Michaela for ballet lessons; Michaela was determined and dedicated from day one. Yet, still, there were barriers to cross. Michaela worried about whether a ballerina can have spots on her skin. She was told that she would never make it as a ballerina because she is black. But, she persisted. And, low and behold, at the age of 17, she was dancing with the Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York City and at 18, she was dancing with the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam. Now at 22, she is a soloist. Michaela has this to say,
“It’s not a fairy tale, you know. You have to work hard. There is a lot of loss, a lot of pain. But you know performing? I love it” (Kate Snow, “Against All Odds: Ballerina Michaela DePrince’s Remarkable Journey,” July 18, 2017, www.nbcnews.com).

I am taken by Michaela’s story. As you think about it, you realize that her story is the story of life. Her story encapsulates the world we live in, a world which inflicts pain, but cannot eradicate joy. Why is life a duality, a world of violence and abuse and sorrow and yet, a world of love and compassion and joy? We don’t know – the answer lies in the mystery that is God. We do know that God has given us the ability and the freedom to love and to create and to reason. We are not robots; we are not puppets. Our lives are meaningful precisely because we are able to love and to create and to reason. Unfortunately, there is a dark side to freedom and that is the ability to do harm. So, life is sorrow and joy. Michaela felt hope, sustaining hope, through the ballerina on that old magazine cover that blew up against the gate of the orphanage. Hope is precisely what our faith instills in us.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the tiniest seed that grows into the greatest shrub. The seeds of our faith grow into the knowledge which holds the greatest value in our life; our faith has the greatest impact on how we live and experience life. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that is mixed until all of it is leavened. Our faith is for all. The kingdom of heaven is like the merchant who sells all that he has to buy the single, finest pearl. Our faith is priceless, always worth seeking, always worth nurturing and sharing. Our faith is the hope which nurtures us through heartache and inspires our new beginnings. Jesus suffered and Jesus returned. He suffered, and so empathically understands our suffering. He returned so we would know that nothing can separate us from the love of God – our pain is never too much for him to bear. No matter what the suffering, he does and will continue to comfort us in our pain and heartache. And,
Jesus returned that we would know the hope of new life, the ever-present possibility of new life.

We seem to experience God in the extreme of utter sorrow, when there is seemingly nowhere else to turn, and in the extreme of utter joy, when there is seemingly no other means of expression.

Today, we are invited in the extremes of life, and in every day in between, to rest in hope. Amen.