

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Midweek Lent – March 10th, 2010

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Dear brothers and sisters of Christ through the grace of our heavenly Father, Amen

Whoever the divine author of the letter to the Hebrews was, he was well versed in the Olympics of the day. He compared Christians to runners in the ancient Isthmian games in Greece. Just as there was only one winner, the Christian must make every effort to reach the goal without distraction, or he will leave in shame. Coming in second or third is not the point. There is only one who is awarded the crown of laurels. So we must make every effort not to lose the crown that is ours through the merits of Jesus, our Savior.

A foot race is a good analogy of the Christian's struggle to hold the course, keep the faith, and receive the prize. People who run in long-distance foot races — even for fun — must put a great deal of preparation into it. First of all, you don't enter a race until you have trained for it. In the Isthmian games, all competitors took a solemn oath that they had trained at least ten months before the games. Without training, you might be able to take off like a shot. Perhaps you could even stay up with the marathoners for the first one hundred yards. But before long your lungs would be burning, your legs would be like Jello, and your heart would be talking to you in no uncertain terms. We Christians are trained by daily putting to death our sinful nature and rising in our baptismal grace. We ought to be well practiced in letting Christ's forgiveness move us to say no to temptation and yes to holy living.

Second, the runner carefully selects the right equipment. His or her shoes must be comfortable and broken in for the long haul. As for clothes: nothing long and flowing to obstruct the legs or arms. Nothing heavy. The runner must wear something that is light and that breathes easily. It seems that the Hebrew Christians addressed in this epistle were becoming entangled in worldly thinking that threatened a successful finish to their race.

Third, a runner must be prepared for the ultimate test of wills in order to endure. A track coach pointed this out when he recalled a race he ran during his college days. He was shoulder to shoulder with another contender in a distance contest. He felt like he was sprinting just to keep up. Although his brow was burning up and his heart was pounding, he tried to appear as cool and composed as possible to his opponent. Then he said in as cheery a voice as he could muster, "Doesn't this feel great?" Gradually his opponent dropped back and gave him the victory. Spoken or unspoken, for better or worse, that is the sort of dialogue that goes on in a runner's head. Similarly, the voice of our sinful flesh reasons with us that the race is much too taxing to finish. Our adversary, the devil, taunts us with all our weaknesses and sins. In this way he makes our heavenward race a grueling soul-struggle. But our theme for today will point out that:

Theme: Jesus Gives Us The Endurance To Run The Race

- 1. Sometimes we lose the endurance.**
- 2. Fellow Christians can encourage us**
- 3. Jesus' patient endurance restores us**

Those who received the letter to the Hebrews were in terrible danger of falling away from their newfound faith in the crucified Christ. They were tempted to return to the Old Testament worship of a

Messiah-yet-to-come. Life would be so much simpler and trouble free not to have to explain to hostile people the story of a crucified God. If they turned from the cross to their old Jewish faith, they would not incur the wrath of their blood relatives. For a moment they had tasted the heavenly gift. For a short time their eyes were enlightened to see Jesus of Nazareth as their Savior. But the noonday heat of persecution and the thorns and thistles of the cares of this world seemed too much for their faith. They were in danger of crucifying Jesus anew and putting him to public disgrace by their desertion.

We don't need to look far to see that many today are no different. At one time God called them into his kingdom through his Word and Baptism. In the school of the Holy Spirit, they went into strict training. They joyfully accepted the fact that Jesus' cross was their cross. And, by God's grace, they embraced it. It was their native breath to say, Lord, have mercy! The Word of forgiveness was the oxygen they inhaled as they strode, one foot in front of the other, on the path to their heavenly goal.

All too sadly, this is the common plight of many today: they believe for a while and then fall away from the faith. How did they lose it? Did their parents drop the ball? Did they contract it from the people around them who talked the talk but didn't walk the walk? Did they sense somewhere in their childhood or adolescence that going through the words and actions for an hour each week was the ticket? At confirmation were they duped into thinking that what they did with the rest of their lives really didn't matter?

Perhaps their delusion was, "I can always repent tomorrow." They thought to themselves, "Jesus is important. But I am a young man—and healthy. When the time is right, I will follow him. Perhaps when I get married, settle down, and have a family." Did they say to themselves, "First I need to get an advanced degree and raise a family. I'll wait 'til I have my degree and life settles down a bit"? There are middle-aged people who are just recovering from helping their children through college and weddings who think, "As soon as I retire, I'll get serious about Christianity." And healthy retirees say, "Finally, I have the leisure to relax and enjoy life. When my health begins to fail—*then* I'll get down on my knees and earnestly follow Jesus!"

Is it any wonder that the writer of this epistle to the Hebrews has such an urgent tone throughout? He sees the soul-destroying double deception in all of this. How easily we can be set off course by a thousand tasks of life (some less worthy than others) that distract us from God's Word and sacrament! **"You fool!"** God said to the one who could only think of his worldly business, **"This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"** (Lk 12:20).

God will not hold out his hands forever. **"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation"** (2 Co 6:2). Only when the Word is being spoken do we experience the day of salvation. Only then do we know that the Holy Spirit is present with his saving power. We don't know if he will still be speaking to us tomorrow. In fact, we don't even know if there will be a tomorrow. If we despise him today and do not listen to him when he can be heard, we are in danger of pushing him away forever. But to presume to convert ourselves is to presume to do the work that only God, the Holy Spirit, can do. If someone has spent a lifetime devising excuses for despising the means of grace, how will that person suddenly change this addiction at the eleventh hour?

And so those who think the righteousness of their past—or of their parents—will save them grow fat and flabby—unfit for the race. When asked how they would fare if a full-fledged persecution of Christians took place, they usually say something like, "Oh, when the time comes, we'll rise to the occasion." My friends, if you cannot even run a lap now, what makes you think that tomorrow you will be able to turn up your courage and summon enough stamina to run a marathon? If you can't bear the little crosses for Jesus today, what delusion leads you to believe that you will remain firm when the Devil attacks with all his power? With such deception and mind games at every turn, who can hope to endure to the day of our Lord's return? There is hope for those who earnestly ask that question.

2. Fellow Christians can encourage us

See how lovingly and encouragingly the apostle urges the Hebrews and us to endure: **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . ."** The word "Therefore" would have us

look at the chapter that went before (Hebrews 11). On the sidelines of your heavenward race are the likes of faithful people such as Abel—the first one to suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ. There is Noah who, in holy fear, built an ark and saved his family. There you see 75-year-old Abraham who believed God’s promise that Sarah and he would have the son of promise in their old age. Likewise and against enormous odds, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses clung to the deliverance of God in a yet unseen Messiah. They endured much persecution and many trials for their faith and were not disappointed. There were judges, King David, the prophets, and God-fearing women—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and, by faith in Jesus, received their dead back. All these and many more call to us from the stands: **“Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and . . . run with perseverance the race marked out for [you].”** Even as the souls of those who were slain for the Word of God pray from under the altar: **“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”** (Rev 6:9,10).

Your track is lined with that great cloud of faithful witnesses—all the blessed departed—saying, “By the grace of God, we made it! By his grace, so can you!” They were where we are now—sinner-saints struggling to keep the course. But now they are where we, if we persevere, will be: covered with white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are living evidence that if we run the race with an undivided heart, we will finally receive the crown of life.

3. Jesus’ patient endurance restores us

Though the saints throughout the ages encourage you, they would not have you look at them. They all point you to our common Savior: **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”** As we strain for the finish line, we see our Savior there. He began our faith and brings it to completion. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts using the Word and water of Baptism. Even now Jesus allows only those trials into our lives that keep us looking straight ahead at what he patiently endured for our salvation: **“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”** (Heb 5:7-9). In our heavenly race, we are urged to fix our eyes on Jesus, particularly on the suffering Jesus.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, he offered up prayers and petitions to his heavenly Father, who could save him from death. So horrible were the pangs of hell he would have to bear for us that he prayed, **“My Father, if it is not possible for this cup [of suffering] to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done”** (Mt 26:42). And we remember the loud cries of Jesus from the cross as he drank that cup to the bitter dregs: **“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ — which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”** (Mt 27:46). The Father had, indeed, forsaken his only-begotten Son. All because he wanted you to be free of sin and stay with him for eternity. But notice how Jesus addressed the one who forsook him! Through patient endurance and the comfort of God’s Holy Word, Jesus called him **“My Father”** in the garden and **“My God”** with his dying breath. Through all of this suffering, he patiently endured and clung to the hope of the resurrection. As we know, on resurrection morning, Jesus’ Father did not let him down. Nor will the Father refuse his Son’s prayer and petitions for our forgiveness.

Unlike us, he was sinless, which qualified him to bear the punishment of your sins and mine. As so often seems to happen to us, what Jesus initially asked was denied. Fix your eyes on our suffering Savior! Jesus was still heard by his Father. Instead of removing the suffering, his Father’s will was done. Jesus’ suffering paid for our sins. It was the only way God’s justice against us was satisfied. Because of it we have life eternal.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, who was not distracted by the joys of heaven or the fading glories earth offered. In your heavenly race, fix your eyes on Jesus, **“who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** Amen.