

Hebrews 12:1-4

Heb. 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Heb. 12:3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

RUNNING A MARATHON

Imagine that you are running a marathon.
(I know. Some of you are not athletic and have no desire to run anywhere, not even to the fridge. But, this is a fantasy. Go with me on this one. Pretend that you are runner.)

You didn't think you could run over 26 miles but after years of training and preparation you have done

it. You have made yourself into a first class marathon runner.

The race is almost over, and as you enter the gigantic stadium for the final few laps you are about to collapse. Every nerve and muscle in your body tells you to quit. You are afraid that if you take one more step you will fall flat on your face.

But, for some reason you press on. You enter the stadium and the people in the stands jump to their feet and cheer wildly. It is hard to believe that they are cheering for you, but they are.

Their cheers send a charge of electricity through your body and somehow you find the will to go on. In fact you do more than just go on. You do what you thought was physically impossible to do. You run faster.

As you run the last laps of your race you find yourself looking up into the stands and are shocked at what you see. There is your father. It can't be. He's been dead for years.

And then you see your grandfather and your grandmother right beside him. Surely you're hallucinating. Your grandparents have been gone

even longer. But, there they are. They are cheering wildly.

And there are others as well. Many of them are physically scarred, and some are even missing limbs, but oddly they do not seem to be disabled. They also are on their feet and cheering at the top of their lungs.

And somehow you know them. You know all of them. It is as if they had been a part of your life from the very beginning. In fact almost everyone in the stands seems like a long lost brother or sister.

What is going on here?

You begin to wonder if you are dreaming. Maybe you are hallucinating because of a lack of oxygen. All of sudden you come to the finish line and fall into the warm embrace of those who are waiting to catch you.

And then, for the first time in your life you see clearly.

They were with you all along. They were cheering you as you ran every step of the race. The power of so much good will is overwhelming. And you know that you have made it home.

You have run the race that God has set out for you. And now you are no longer a part of those who run their race here on earth, what we call the church militant.

Now you have joined the host of heaven, what we call the church triumphant. Now you have joined the chorus of voices that cheer others on as they run the race that God has set out for them.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

That's what the writer of the book of Hebrews is talking about this morning. It is a breathtaking image of hope and triumph.

It is what we mean when we say each week in the Apostle's Creed. "I believe ... in the communion of saints." We are not just talking about church suppers in the fellowship hall. We are talking about our connection with the church triumphant, that heavenly band of believers who cheer us on.

I have preached many funeral sermons on this passage. And toward the end of that sermon I always say, "Now one more voice has been added to that

great cloud of witnesses. One more voice cheers us on as we run the race that is set out before us.”

This image, this glimpse of glory has cheered me on many times in my life.

A STORY OF FAILURE

My career in the ministry almost ended before it even started. I was overconfident when I entered the ministry. After all I made good grades in school. I had been successful in a prior profession as a psychologist. I was ready to run the race set out before me.

At least I thought I was ready to run the race.

But, I had a lot of baggage, a lot of weight that I needed to get rid of. I didn't understand the complex emotional dynamics of congregational life. And I said some things and did some things that got me into hot water.

So, after two short years I found myself moving to a new church.

The people in this new church were wonderful. But, there were very few of them. There had been a split

in this church before my arrival, and sometimes I wondered why I had spent four years in seminary in order to preach to 10 people on Sunday morning.

I began to feel very lonely and isolated. To top it off about this time there was tragedy in my personal life. My father died unexpectedly.

THE MESSAGE OF HOPE

And it was during this time that I began to study the 11th and 12th chapters of Hebrews. It was just the message that I needed to hear. God hadn't called me to be successful. God had called me to take the journey. God had called me to take the next step. And I wasn't alone on the journey.

I can specifically remember taking a long walk one night, and as I looked up into the sky I thought about Abraham loading up his family and going wherever God decided to take him. He lived in tents for the rest of his life, but he was happy because he knew that God was with him every step of the way.

Somehow that night Abraham's story became my story. For the first time in my life I was at peace with the idea that I couldn't control a thing. My journey

through life would take many twists and turns, and all I could do ... all I should do is take the next step.

And as I looked at the countless stars in the sky I thought about my recent personal loss.

And it occurred to me. One more star had been added to that heavenly host. One more voice had been added to the chorus of heaven. And that great cloud of witnesses was cheering me on.

It's been many years since that long walk underneath the dark sky, but I still remember it. And it gives me strength.

DON'T QUIT THE RACE

Now don't misunderstand. I still get discouraged and often I want to just quit running. Almost every day I am confronted by failure and my insensitive and often unfaithful ways.

But, this experience has taught me to keep putting one foot in front of the other, to run my race with perseverance. This experience taught me that my life is not defined by what I do but by the call of God.

That's true for me, and that's true for you as well. According to this passage God has set out a race for you to run as well.

Your race will be different from mine. But, both our races have one thing in common. God in Christ and the heavenly host cheer us on as we run. And they encourage us to keep a sense of perspective.

THE WEIGHT OF IDOLATRY

In today's lesson we read that since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses we should "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely".

Have you ever noticed what the marathon runners wear?

Actually, a better question might be, "Have you ever noticed what the marathon runners don't wear?! When you're running a long way you have to strip down to the bare essentials.

Shoes, socks, shorts and skimpy top are all you need. Today these items have been specially designed to be as light as possible. The slightest amount of extra weight can keep a runner from winning the race.

And in the same way we too need to travel light when it comes to the race of faith.

While I was writing this very portion of the sermon Jeff Portman sent me an email. It was a Hagar the Horrible cartoon. In that cartoon Hagar went to the mountaintop to consult with the wise one.

Hagar asked, “How can I eliminate stress and frustration from my life? How can I achieve inner peace and tranquility?”

And the wise one on the mountaintop thought for a while and said, “The answer is simple my son.”

Hagar replied, “Please O wise one tell me the answer.”

And the wise man replied, “Sell your golf clubs.”

Now that might not be the right answer for all of us, but it could be the right answer for some of us. We fill our lives with diversions and hobbies of all sorts that can sometimes bring us more anxiety than happiness.

Now I'm not against sports or hobbies. But, sometimes we go too far. Sometimes we put too much emphasis on things that are not that important. We make our leisure activities into an idol.

When we do that, those beloved activities don't bring us happiness. They bring us anxiety.

Even the good things in your life can become a weight that slows you down. It is all a matter of perspective.

This is also true of our relationships with family and friends, our business dealings or any activity in our lives. If we give our ultimate allegiance to anything other than the call of God, then that thing or person has become an idol.

THE SIN THAT CLINGS

In order to run our race we have to lay aside the weight of idolatry and the "sin that clings so closely."

Sin is disobedience to the will of God. And all of us are disobedient in some way. All of us commit sins that slow us down in some way.

I have no idea where you need to change, what sin you need to leave behind.

But, you know.

And the neat thing about the Christian faith is that you don't have to hide your sin. You can openly confess your sin and receive forgiveness.

When I was in college I used to play tournament tennis. Carrollyn said that was the only time in my life that I ever moved fast!

But I did. I wanted to win. I was very competitive.

And I perspired heavily. In fact my tennis shirt was often filled with perspiration to the point that my shirt would literally cling to my body.

One day I was watching a long tennis match on TV and the players were changing their shirts in the middle of a long match. The commentator said, "That's a good move. Sometimes a shirt filled with perspiration can weigh as much as five or six pounds."

From that time on when I played a competitive tennis match, I made sure that I had extra shirts in the bag.

And it made a difference. I wasn't slowed down by a shirt soaked with sweat.

In the same way we have the opportunity to confess our sins and then leave them behind.

Do you realize what a heavy weight you carry when you carry around your sins?

And it's not necessary. When God in Christ asks us to move on in faith He also asks us to leave our sins behind. Though our sins soak our clothes with a scarlet stain, the forgiveness of God in Christ makes them as white as snow.

TURN YOU EYES UPON JESUS

According to this passage the key to leaving the past behind is to instead focus our hearts and minds on Jesus.

Jesus is the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith. In other words Jesus is the original and perfect example of faith.

What is it about Jesus that enables us to run our race with perseverance?

According to this passage, Jesus did not let the threat of the cross deter him from doing God's will and going God's way. Jesus looked beyond the pain of the present moment and embraced the joy of the final outcome.

Jesus is the ultimate example of faith. Even when the people he came to save were crucifying him he did not curse them. On the contrary he asked His heavenly Father to forgive them.

Of course that kind of heroic faith seems above and beyond us.

The writer of Hebrews told his audience that in their struggle against sin they had not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood.

And that's true of us as well.

There is a big difference between the sacrifice of Christ and our struggle to be faithful in a hostile world.

And yet when we turn our eyes upon Jesus, when we consider all that he endured for the sins of the world and our salvation, when we consider how He has graciously forgiven our sins and made redemption

possible in our lives, then we too are changed in a significant way.

THE EXERCISE OF FAITH

The grace of God as revealed in Jesus can make us into gracious people. We can learn to forgive the debts of others because we know God in Christ has forgiven an even greater debt in us.

We persevere in the life of faith today because in the death and resurrection of Jesus we have an example of a greater hope.

Most weekdays I begin my day with at least an hour of vigorous exercise.

Do I do this because I like to huff and puff?

Not really. I often would prefer to be doing other things. But, I know that in the long run the exercise is beneficial to my health.

In the same way sometimes we would prefer not to do the things that faith in Christ requires ... things like loving our enemies and doing good to those that persecute us ... and so forth.

But, the example of Christ suggests that though these activities are hard to do in the short run; in the long run they produce the fruit of joy and a race well run.

FOCUS ON THE GOAL

I remember when I used to run on the beach. There was a pier up the coastline that was almost two miles away. But, it didn't look that far.

As I ran I kept my focus on the goal, that pier. As long as I kept my focus on the goal, I found it easy to keep on going.

In the same way when we keep our focus on Jesus, it will be easier for us run our race.

The struggles we face are nothing compared to the sacrifice he made on our behalf. And the hope he gives us is not only for this life but also for the life to come.

So, let us run with perseverance the race that is set out for us. The saints surround us and cheer us on. And at the finish line of faith we see our Savior who waits to welcome us home.

Amen.