

A Cloud of Witnesses

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Hebrews 12:1-2

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.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Every word in this passage is important, ... even the conjunction that begins our lesson for today, “therefore.” The Greek word is stronger than our translation. It is a formal word indicating an important conclusion.

Remember, the book of Hebrews is basically a sermon. And so this verse is when the preacher leans forward and says, “If you don’t remember anything else, remember this.”

So what does this preacher want us to remember above all else? First, he wants us to remember that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

We talked about this last week.

The faithful are those people who were willing to leave the old life behind and follow God’s leading.

They didn’t know exactly where they were going, but they trusted God to lead them home.

They trusted God with their life because they believed that the Creator was a gracious God.

This is the definition of faith, trusting in the goodness of God for our future.

The 11th chapter of Hebrews lists many of these faithful witnesses who not only laid down their lips but also laid down their lives as a sign of their faith in God.

But, the author of Hebrews is making an even bigger claim in this passage. The faithful people mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures are just the tip of the iceberg.

Yes, faith is bolstered by faith of our spiritual fathers and mothers.

But, today, here and now, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

There are people in this very building who are powerful witnesses to the grace of God.

Now I know that's hard to believe.

We know many of the people here today.

We all fall far short of what we should be.

We are so flawed in many ways.

We know this.

But, remember that was also true of our forefathers and foremothers in the faith.

And yet they were justified not by works but by faith.

It was their desire to know God and please God that set them apart.

We are gathered here today because we too believe in the goodness of God.

We too seek to go to that place where God is leading us.

And that is the definition of faith.

You might not think of yourself as a faithful person, but if you are trying to find God's will for your life, you are a person of faith. If you want to know the heart and mind of God, then you are a person of faith.

You are on a journey toward God.

Look around.

You are surrounded by fellow travelers on the road to faith.

You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses!

You are surrounded by many people who are also seeking the will of God for their lives.

To put it another way, the purpose of the Christian community is to be a witness.

We are called to be real life, workaday examples of what it means to follow Jesus.

And we surround and support each other with that common purpose.

CHEERED ON BY A COMMON PURPOSE

We are not only surrounded by fellow travelers on the road to faith in this time and place.

We are also joined in spirit by the people of faith from all generations who have sought to do the will of God.

This past week many of us have watched the Summer Olympics.

And a big part of the Olympics is not only the performance of amazing athletes but also the encouragement of the crowd.

Those of us who have played sports know how exciting it is to have the crowd cheering us on as we compete. In some cases the cheering of the crowd enables athletes to perform at a level that they didn't think was possible.

And the common purpose of supporting a particular team can create a tight knit community. There is an almost religious quality to those who are Gator fans or Seminole fans or whatever. The fans are part of a larger community and that gives a sense of purpose.

I can still remember raising my "bear claw" and singing that Good Old Baylor line after every football game like it was a some sort of hymn.

We said that we'd "fling or green and gold afar to light the ways of time."

Now that's a really big claim!
And we believed it ... sort of.

That's the power of a community united in a common purpose.
I still bear witness to my college community on Saturdays as I live and die
with the fortunes of the Bears.

Well, the author of Hebrews is saying that the life of faith is like that.

But, in this case it's not hyperbole.
It's the real deal.

We really are part of something that is greater.
We really are a part of something that will "light the ways of time."

We are a part of the community of faith.

TRAVELING LIGHT

And since we are a part of that community, we are encouraged to live in a
different way.

We are to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and ...
run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Once again it's great to preach this sermon while the Olympics are going
on because they offer the perfect example.

We love to watch these athletes perform, but it's also important to appreci-
ate how much they have sacrificed in order to excel at their sport.

Families have had to pay for training and support these young people in
their quest to be the best. Athletes have to do their part. They have to
train hard every day.

And even when they do all that they can to excel, there is no guarantee that
they will win or even make their country's team. The Olympic Games at
their best is about the joy of competition and the striving for excellence.

It is about sportsmanship and the coming together of the world.

It is about a higher ideal.

And the author of Hebrews tells us,

“This is what it’s like to live the life of faith.

In response to this great cloud of witnesses who have sacrificed so much in faith, we too are called to sacrifice in order to be a part of the race.”

According to this passage, in order to run the race, we have to “lay aside every weight.”

Have you picked up a running shoe lately?

If you’re not a runner already, the next time you’re at the mall, pick one up ... not just a walking shoe but one of those shoes that are designed for running.

They are amazingly lightweight.

And the same is true of running shorts and shirts.

Technology has reduced the weight.

And less weight makes it possible to run the race faster.

The same principle is true when it comes to the race of faith. We have to travel light.

We have to discard those things that weigh us down.

So, what is it that weighs us down in the race of faith? What prevents us from going to that place that God would have us go?

Anything that distracts us from following God’s will is a weight that slows us down.

Have you seen that TV show about people who are building tiny homes? Why do they do that?

They want to simplify their life .. so they are building homes that are very, very small.

But, of course, if your house is going to be that tiny, you have to give up a lot of stuff.

And that's the point. It's this giving up of stuff that many find attractive.

They want to live more simply in order to simply live.

Last week we noted that Abraham was the original tiny home dweller. He lived in a tent in order to be on the move for God.

Now, not all of us can live in tents ... or even a tiny home. But, we can reevaluate our priorities in life. If something, even something that is good is keeping us from running our race, we need to let it go.

Runners for Jesus don't need to run the race with too much weight.

THE SIN THAT CLINGS

We can be weighed down by too much stuff. Sometimes even good things can weigh us down.

But, there are some things that must be avoided at all costs. These things we call sin.

Sin is the hardest weight of all to lay down. In fact the author of Hebrews tells us that sin "clings" to us. Sin is like a monkey on our back.

I read this week about a man who was deserted on a small Pacific island.

A passing ship prepared to rescue him, but he would not go.

It seems he had acquired a pet monkey on that island, and he loved it so much he could not leave it behind.

But, since the ship's regulations would not allow the monkey to come aboard, the man would not allow himself to be rescued.

Sin is like a monkey on our back. It clings.

All of us pick up bad habits along the way.

We know that those habits complicate life for us.
We know they keep us from running the race of faith.

But, still we hang on to the old way of life.

It's like running a race on one leg.
We might be able to move forward, but our pace is considerably slowed by the sin that clings so closely.

We could also translate the word translated "clings" as "distracting."

Sin is distracting.

We cannot win the race of discipleship on one leg.

We have to lighten the load.
We have to get that monkey off our back so that we can be rescued.
We have to eliminate the distractions so that we can focus on what is most important.

PERSEVERANCE

And we need one more thing to be successful in the race of faith.

We must run the race of faith with perseverance.

The word translated perseverance can also be translated endurance, constancy or steadfastness.

The race of faith is not a 100 yard sprint.
It is a marathon.

When I was young my teacher had us learn a made up word, "stick-to-it-ness".

"Stick-to-it-ness" she said was the key to getting a good education.

Her point was well taken.
Much success in education and in life comes from just keeping on keeping on.

In the early church and indeed throughout the history of the church perseverance has been an important characteristic of faith.

In the letters of Paul we learn that early on many fell away from the faith.

Some succumbed to moral failure.
Some succumbed to the love of money.
Some succumbed to their fears.

They did not run their race with perseverance.

Faith is a journey that requires us to keep moving.
Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have to follow the cloud by day and the pillar of fire at night.

Each day we must learn to trust God for our daily bread.

We are on the way to the Promised Land.
And at times we have seen those places where heaven touches earth and God's will is done.

But, we have not arrived.
Faith requires us to be patient because we're not there yet.

That's perseverance.

All successful athletes face those days when training is just too boring or the muscles ache too much. And on those days there's the temptation to give in ... to just quit and go home.

But, if an athlete has too many of those days pretty soon he or she won't be an athlete any more .. at least not one who will win the race.

Annika Sorenstam grew up idolizing the great Swedish tennis player Bjorn Borg. It was his example that encouraged her to take up golf seriously at age 12.

And her road to the top of the golfing world was influenced greatly by an experience she had early on.

She went to the driving range to practice. And after a long day of practice it began to rain. And she thought, "This is not fun. I'm going to call my father and go home."

Her father came and as they were driving off they noticed that quite a few young golfers were still on the range ... hitting balls in the rain and the dwindling light.

And Annika's father said, "You know Annika, there are no shortcuts to success."

Annika said that she often thought about her father's words whenever she was down, or tired or feeling sorry for herself. If she wanted to be the best she would have to work harder than anyone else.

Sometimes when we speak of faith we make it sound like every day will be a day filled with happiness. But, of course that's not true.

There are many days when it rains on our course and we have to make a choice.

Will I persevere or will I quit?

Will I keep on following Jesus or will I go another way?

EYES ON JESUS

Annika was encouraged to persevere as a golfer by the example of a great tennis player and the words of her father.

We are encouraged to persevere as a people of faith by the example and words of Jesus. In our lesson for today we learn to persevere by looking to Jesus who is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

In my seminary days I took a year's internship at a church in Wilmington, NC. And one of the advantages of that job was that the church was only a few miles from the beach!

In those days I often kept in shape by running on the beach. I would park my car at a certain spot, and run to a pier in the distance.

On those days when I was feeling good, it was not a problem.

But, on those days when I had other things on my mind and my muscles ached ... well I sometimes wanted to quit. As long as I kept my eyes focused on the pier, I could do it. I told myself, "Just a little bit more. You're getting closer."

But, if I took my eyes off the pier, if I began to think about what a long walk it would be back to my car, then I sometimes would decide halfway was far enough.

When we run the race of faith we need to keep our eyes on Jesus.

Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.
Jesus is our inspiration and our goal.

If we keep our eyes on Jesus we are more likely to persevere. We won't stop halfway.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is not just any example of faith. Jesus is the perfect example of what it means to run the race of faith.

So, if Jesus is the perfect example, what was it about Jesus that we should follow as we run our race?

JOY AND THE CROSS

First, Jesus like the people of faith who had gone before him had a vision of glory.

Jesus could see the heavens opening and the Kingdom of God coming to earth.

Remember the story of Jesus' baptism?

The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased."

This affirmation and sense of God's calling made Jesus a person who was filled with joy.

And it was this sense of joy that enabled him to endure the cross and disregard its shame.

Indeed, all the gospels tell the same story.

Jesus saw the cross as a way to defeat evil and bring salvation to the world. Heaven touched earth in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And the lives of his disciples would follow the same pattern.

Those who first read the book of Hebrews were facing terrible persecution. The Temple had been destroyed and God's people had once again been scattered all over the world.

How could they persevere?

How could they remain true to their faith in such a difficult time?

The life of Jesus suggested that they should focus on the joy of the Kingdom that comes, and do all they can to help that Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

In other words, we live in an imperfect world by the standards of a perfect savior.

As the old rock and roll song puts it, we don't stop thinking about the future ... but the future we think about is God's future as revealed in Jesus.

It is a future where joy and forgiveness and hope prevail.

It is a future where even the symbols of hate are disarmed by the power of God's love and grace.

OUR RACE

We have an opportunity to be a part of that future.

We have a race to run.

We have a unique role to play as heaven touches and transforms the earth.

But, we are not alone.

We are surrounded and cheered on by a great cloud of witnesses.

And the one who sits on the right hand of the throne also cheers us on.

His Spirit, his presence is with us always.

So let us persevere in good times and bad.
Let us turn our eyes upon Jesus and see the joy of the Kingdom that comes.

Let us run our race.

Let us keep on keeping on.
The finish line is in sight.

Amen.