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The Triumphal Entry of Our Lord

Hebrews 12:1-3

RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE THE RACE OF FAITH

The Spring Track season has begun in most schools already. Athletes are perfecting the baton hand-off, learning their hurdles technique, and in general just getting into shape. Perhaps Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday could be compared to the starting blocks of this final and most painful stretch of His work of redemption that we call Holy Week. The portion of God's Word we are meditating on today from Hebrews chapter 12 also compares our faith in Jesus to a running race.

We need to be clear. The point of comparison is not that faith is some sort of effort we must exert. To the contrary, faith is not doing. Faith is trust. We trust in Jesus who exerted Himself to do everything necessary to save us. But now that by God's grace we do trust in Jesus, Hebrews 12 encourages us to persevere in that faith. Fellow Christians, let us run with perseverance the race of faith.

There is a lot to unpack in this Scripture reading. You may wish to follow along using the printed words of Hebrews 12 in the worship folder. You may even wish to use a pen or pencil to circle phrases as we go.

In verse one we read, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses* – go ahead and circle “great cloud of witnesses.” Run with perseverance the race of faith because of the great cloud of witnesses who have run it before you. You see, chapter 11 of Hebrews is often dubbed the “Hall of Faith” chapter because it lists so many believers who came before us – Abraham, Joseph, Rahab. They trusted that God's promises were true even when it didn't look or feel like God's promises were true. They did not receive the temporary and fading glories of this world. They received the everlasting glory and joy that God has promised beyond this life. They can verify that God is true. As you and I consider them, we are like a high school boy staring at a glass case filled with sports trophies in the school hall thinking, “Some day my name is going to be on one of those trophies.”

One reason I love so many of our hymns is that they were composed by fellow believers who have carried trauma, who suffered want, persecution even, who were burdened with anxiety and sorrows, who struggled with sin and yet with their hymns they are a great

cloud of witnesses to us declaring, “Fellow believer, I have experienced and can verify to you that God is true. He keeps His promises. Persevere, fellow believer, persevere!” (That is the opposite of today when so much Christian contemporary music is written for profit. They wrote music, not for money, but out of faith.)

The next phrase to circle from this reading is “the race that is laid out for us.” The verse goes, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us.* Run with perseverance the race of faith because the course is already laid out for you. A high school Cross Country meet may take place in a county park. The course is often marked out by arrows spraypainted on the grass. God has marked out your course. In fact, Psalm 139 says, *Every day ordained for me was written in your book before one of them came to be.* There is comfort – especially when things get hard – to know that God has laid out your course. In a sense, you are just a spectator waiting to see what comes next as you trust in Him for all things.

Our individual courses may each be unique, but they all have something in common. Without exception, our paths lead us through suffering before we receive the glory of heaven. Jesus even said, *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.* So as not to lose hope and to persevere in our faith we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus for several reasons. First, circle the words “the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.” I’ll read from verse two: *Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.* It is the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son that gave birth to your faith in Jesus in Baptism. It is the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son that keeps you trusting in Jesus. I’m reminded of the man who said to Jesus, *Lord, I do believe, help me in my unbelief!*

The only way we can persevere in the race of faith is if Jesus keeps us trusting in Him. So let’s stay focused on Him as He presents Himself to us in His Word and in Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper.

Another reason to fix your eyes on Jesus is that he endured the cross. Still in verse two, you can circle the words “he endured the cross” in this verse: *In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.* Jesus knows what it’s like to suffer. In fact, He suffered beyond measure as He took on Himself the punishment for our sins before His heavenly Father. There is a big difference between Christ’s sufferings and our sufferings though. Only Christ’s sufferings have atoned for our sins. Only Christ’s sufferings have redeemed us to God. But in the same way that Jesus looked beyond the suffering to the joy of salvation completed, you and I can also look beyond our suffering to the joy of heaven so that we persevere in the race of faith.

There is another thing we want to keep in mind as we suffer – Christ has ascended into heaven to the right hand of God where He thoroughly governs everything that happens. Still in verse two, you can circle the phrase “right hand of God’s throne.” I’ll read that verse again, *In view of the joy set before him , he endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of God’s throne.* Even as God has laid out your course for you, you can be confident that every detail along the way is managed by Jesus. That’s what it means that He is at God’s right hand. Run the race of faith with perseverance because you are never adrift without your Lord’s careful attention.

It helps to persevere, to stay in the race, if you know you are running alongside the team captain. You don’t have to circle it but verse 3 reads: *Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.* If you run in a cross country meet there may be literally hundreds of other runners from opposing teams. You can feel kind of small and alone. It’s intimidating. It helps if you find your captain and run alongside him. If you trust in Jesus, you instantly have the world as your enemy. Jesus once said to the Twelve: *In this world you will have many troubles, but take heart, I have overcome the world. Yes, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.*

If we are running with perseverance the race of faith, there is one more phrase from this Scripture reading that we can’t leave out. Let’s jump back up to verse 1 in the middle where it says “let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us.” You can circle “sin that so easily ensnares.” Another way to translate that phrase is “sin that fits like a glove.” Each one of us has a sin like that – one that we easily slide back into because we’re so comfortable in it. That should truly scare us. Sin that comes so naturally to us is like a beartrap on the path to heaven. It would truly be a shame to let ourselves get snapped down by the very thing Jesus has laid a path for us to be free of. Let us repent of our sins and run away from them to Jesus who has redeemed us from sin, and to His forgiveness which restores us and then on to the glory He has won for us.

This whole sermon, encouraging you to run with perseverance the race of faith, would be a complete waste of time if the way were dubious or the outcome vague. But throughout this week you will witness once again how Jesus has made it a sure thing by His death and resurrection. His path is your path. Therefore there is no reason to give up hope. There is every reason to persevere in this race of faith. Let us keep trusting in Christ until we cross the finish line and receive the trophy that Christ has won for us.