

## LET US RUN THE RACE

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

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### Hebrews 11:32-12:2

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

<sup>12</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>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.

The author of Hebrews says: “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

The Christian life is often portrayed in scripture as a race. Some of us have been running a long while, some are just beginning the race, and some are in the middle. Some of us are tired, some are now walking, some are just starting to get their second wind, some are sprinting. All of us are called to run the race with perseverance.

Speed is not the issue here, endurance is. The image here is not of a sprint but of a marathon. Endurance is not often emphasized as a Christian virtue in our time. Today we value spontaneity, pizzazz, emotion. Yet it is endurance that is highlighted all throughout the epistle to the Hebrews. Endurance running. Persevering in the faith. The Christian life is portrayed as a long-distance race, a marathon.

Hebrews 11, that great chapter some have called the “faith hall of fame” is about people in the Old Testament who persisted, who persevered, who endured in the faith in spite of adversity. We focused on that chapter last Sunday.

One of my favorite parts of the chapter is the summary paragraph at the end which reads in part: *“time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness...Others were tortured...Others suffering mocking and flogging...They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two...They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground”* (11:32-34, 38).

These words conclude a marvelous chapter of all the saints who have persevered in their faith. This is the great cloud of witnesses that chapter 12 refers to: *“since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”*

The great cloud of witnesses. A cloud is a crowd. It's not just one or two who have been faithful, but a huge crowd, a vast multitude of God's people.

The image here is of the many who have already run the race of their life, finished, and now watch us run, cheering us on. We may think of parents or grandparents or friends or mentors who give us encouragement by the way they lived their lives. We might think of many in the congregations that we have been a part of. Of those who have gone before us in this congregation. Or we may think of the many believers in church history which have enriched us by their legacy. They now sit in the stands of the stadium or stand by the road cheering us on.

The cloud of witnesses is the church, which supports and inspires us as we run. Can you picture some of the faces in this great cloud of witnesses? Can you see them in your mind?

Those who have gone before us are not simply spectators, of course. They are witnesses. They ran their race before us. They were tired at times too, worn out. They may have despaired at times. They are witnesses to God and the strength that God gives us to help make it through life. They bear witness to God's faithfulness.

The first time I realized this was when I was in seminary. I was going through an especially discouraging time. Every night I read from a book on the history of Christianity. It dawned on me through my reading that it wasn't just me. I wasn't alone. But others had faced discouragement, difficulties, and weariness. These individuals had faced far, far greater obstacles than I had. And yet they persevered. Reading about these witnesses gave me such perspective, helped me see the big picture, and I found myself strangely encouraged by their lives and their faith. Thus began a journey of enrichment that has lasted for over 30 years for me, being encouraged and informed and challenged by the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

The early church spoke of two forms of the church: the church triumphant and the church militant. The church triumphant are those who have finished their race and worship and serve

the living God in eternity. The cloud of witnesses is the church triumphant, which supports and encourages us as we run. We, on the other hand, are the church militant- still active, still serving, still running.

We have been enriched by the legacy of all these witnesses, but for what purpose? What is our role? What is our task? What does all this history mean for us?

The author of Hebrews answers those questions. After the eloquent and powerful “Hall of Faith” in chapter 11, the author makes a pivotal turn. “*Therefore*”, chapter 12 begins. “*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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*”

We are grateful for the race that they have run. We appreciate their faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel over many years. And now they have passed the baton on to us. And now it’s our turn to run. We can’t rest on our laurels. It’s not enough to applaud those who have finished the race. “*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*”

It’s important to clarify what running means. I have been misunderstood when I’ve preached on this text in the past. Running the race does not refer to busyness or level of activity. It is easy to confuse these two. Running the race refers to how we’re living the Christian life- how we’re loving God and loving people, the quality of our worship, the ways we’re growing in our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Some people hear that we are to run and off they go- getting active and busy in the life of the church. That’s a different race than the one Hebrews is talking about. Our activity level will naturally vary from year to year and month to month. After all, one of the essentials of long-distance running is pacing yourself. The race we are about is following Christ. That’s true for all of us.

The author of Hebrews goes on to mention two essentials in our running, in our living of the Christian life. One runs best, first of all, by laying “*aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely*”. One can not run freely if we’re weighed down with weights. One can’t run the race if there are many distractions. One translation, in fact, translates that phrase this way “the sin that so easily distracts.” Distractions will take the runner out of the race. If there are too many irons in the fire or too many dissipating interests or too many good things but not enough of the best things- we will be distracted in our running.

The author of Hebrews raises the question for us as individuals and as a church: What is it that slows you up, hampers or hinders your life as a Christian? What is it that distracts us as a church from the “main thing” of loving God and loving people? Reformer John Calvin

described those distractions this way in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: “There are all kinds of burdens which delay and impede our spiritual race, such as the love of this present life, the pleasures of the world, the desires of the flesh, earthly cares, riches and honours, and everything else of this kind (Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter p. 187).

One runs best by laying “*aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely*”. Secondly, according to Hebrews 12, one runs best by “*looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy set before him endured the cross.*”

We look ahead to the front-runner of everyone, Jesus Christ. The cloud of witnesses followed him. Why are we to look to him? Because he knows what it’s like to run the race. Jesus knows from experience what it’s really like to live this life. Sometimes we think he didn’t really run, he just floated along above the ground, it was easier after all because he was God. That’s not what Hebrews says. In essence, Hebrews says, that Jesus felt the burning pain in his lungs; his legs felt like lead at times too, he wondered if he would ever finish.

When we’re tired, when we can’t muster another ounce of strength, think of the race that was set before Jesus, a race that he endured. It is sometimes painful to run, sometimes it requires great sacrifice. Sometimes we grow weary and lose heart.

Jesus is the one who teaches us about the race. One learns to run well by keeping our eyes on the front-runner. One learns to live the Christian life by watching Christ. He is the one who shows us how to run: how to handle the long hills, how to run with perseverance, how to press toward the tape.

Our vision is focused on this one, Jesus. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. I love the way that Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses in *The Message*: “*Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*”

Many of you will remember this baton. This is the same one I used during our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary worship service on June 13, 2004. It sits in my office (for 6+ years now) as a constant reminder of our task. We are to run the race with perseverance. Think of the race as a relay race. We are called by God to be faithful in running our leg of that relay race.

We are not the first leg of the race. There are many who have gone before us to create a great heritage, the cloud of witnesses. We are not the last leg of the race. There are many who will come after us to create a great future. We are somewhere in the middle. We, you and I, are called to run one of the middle legs of the race.

The task of the middle legs of the race is to receive the baton, run as well as we can, and hand off the gospel baton to the next runner cleanly and efficiently. That I believe, is what we are called to do in our Christian lives and as a church.

This church has a great heritage. We have accomplished much in God's name over these 156 years. Two thousand nine hundred forty-three members have heard God's word proclaimed, baptized children, partaken of the Lord's Supper, seen couples join together in marriage, and gathered at funerals to give thanks for a member's life. We celebrate and rejoice in the great heritage that God has blessed us with in this church. We open our hands and receive the baton from the saints who have gone before us.

We are grateful for the race that they have run. We remember and celebrate their labor and service. We appreciate their faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel over these many years. And now they have passed the gospel baton on to us. And now it's our turn to run. It's not enough to appreciate the runner who ran the first leg. It's not enough in a relay race to admire the first runner's scorching turn of the track. We can't rest on our laurels. We can't. It's not enough to applaud those who have finished the race.

No, now it's our turn to run. We have received the hand-off. And there is a runner around the track who is waiting for us to make a hand-off to them. You saw some of those runners in the Children's Moment this morning. It's our turn to run. The future awaits us.

This church has a great heritage. It also has a great future. We are strategically placed here in Georgetown to reach out with the good news and to help people grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. God has brought together in this place the people, the resources, and the leadership to enable us to make a positive impact for Jesus Christ.

Our vision is focused on this one, Jesus. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He is the one upon whom our faith depends from start to finish. He preceded the founding of this church, he goes before us into the future, and he remains head of the church in the present. He is the one who we trust and follow.

