

Fourth Lenten Midweek – We Preach Christ Crucified

March 22, 2017

Hebrews 12:1-3

The Reason to Endure

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Dearly loved by God in Christ Jesus our Savior,

The unknown but inspired writer of the letter to the Hebrews must have been familiar with the athletic competitions of his day. He compared our living as Christians to running a race. Both require clear focus and perseverance. A foot race is a good analogy of the Christian holding the course of faithfulness by not losing sight of Jesus. This is why “We Preach Christ Crucified” “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” and “who endured such opposition from sinful men.”

Jesus achieved his ultimate goal by enduring the cross and its shame. He ended up seated at “the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus stands before us victorious over his opposition as the energy for our successful run, “so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” That is why as we run our race we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is the one who has created all we believe in that saves us. Jesus is the one who gets us to the goal of our faith. Jesus is “the author and perfecter of our faith.”

Let’s look a bit at the runner and the race as the analogy of our Christian struggle in light of Christ crucified.

A race requires training. In the Isthmian games of ancient Greece, all competitors took a solemn oath that they had trained for at least ten months prior. Our daily training is drowning our Old Adam in the water of our Holy Baptism, and rising to new life in God’s baptismal grace. It is the daily exercise of contrition for sin and trust in our forgiveness. It is saying no to the temptation to sin and yes to walking as a child of the light.

A runner carefully chooses the right equipment and clothing. Shoes must be well made for the long haul. He or she wants nothing cumbersome or heavy to obstruct the arms and legs. We Christians put on the whole armor of God for our race; truth, righteousness, readiness from the gospel, and salvation. That may seem contradictory, wearing armor and running well. But the armor Paul speaks about fits just as the armor the Roman legions wore. It did not get in the way of the fight but protected the soldier, as well as allowed him to move and run easily and swiftly. His sword and shield were always at the ready as well; for us that is the Word of God and faith.

The Christian race is not a sprint but a marathon, you may have heard. Throughout such a long race there is the internal test of wills. Part of the runner wants to stop and rest. Another part of the runner wants to continue on and finish. This is especially true in first timers or other new marathoners. I know it would be for me.

The recipients of this letter were Jewish Christians new to the faith. Others were tempting them to stop believing in Jesus, give up faith in Christ and return to the Old Testament life and worship under the burden of the law. How much simpler it would have seemed to give in to that. They would not have to incur the wrath of their family and friends. They were basking in the radiance of the new start of their race of faith in Christ, but now were experiencing the persecution down the stretch that was sapping their spiritual energy.

What does the writer exhort, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...consider him so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Look and see how Jesus

bore the cross and its shame. Look at all he did for you to redeem you from the old life of darkness and death for a new life of light and life.

Haven't we from time to time experienced what they did in our marathon race as Christians? Maybe you are tempted to give up Christ because following him is just too hard. Perhaps you have veered of the race course God has marked out for you and want to take a different course, a seemingly easier course though one that leads away from God. This is what Jesus' disciples chose to do when they all forsook him in Gethsemane. This is what Peter chose to do around the fire in the courtyard. This is what we choose to do when we let things distract us and entangle us and get us off course. This is why we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on his cross where he was crucified for our salvation.

We have great hope because we are not alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in both sin and in faith. "Therefore" take us back to the previous words of chapter 11 about the believers who have gone before us. They were there in the race. They have recorded and are recorded about their race. "Therefore, since we have 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."

Think of a stadium filled with former runners surrounding a race track cheering on the runners down on the track. They know what it is about. They know what it is like. They have been there. On the sidelines of our race are Abel, the first martyr. There is Noah who in holy fear built the ark in obedience to God's Word with faith in the promise. Abraham whose faith God credited for righteousness is there. The list goes on from Isaac through Moses to David and many others. "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised."

We are running after seeing Christ crucified. They are urging us on, "We made it with faith that looked ahead to the cross. You will make it, too, as your faith looks back. Behold the cross on which the prince of glory died." They are rooting us on from the pages of the Holy Scripture not to grow weary and give up. So, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and on his cross.

These blessed saints want us to listen to their words and follow their examples. Yet they do not want us to fix our eyes on them. They were weak sinners just like us. They won their races by focusing on Jesus and the finish line of life with him forever in the better country. No winning runner takes his eyes of the prize to look out at the crowd. He keeps looking ahead. Even as we look back to Calvary's cross, we are looking ahead to the prize in the race of God has marked out for us.

Jesus went through his race that led to the cross and shame because he knew great joy awaited him at the right hand of the throne of God. He endured the opposition of his enemies to give us the fuel of the gospel to keep us going with superhuman strength. Consider this, meditate on his holy passion. The race can be long, hard to put one foot in front of the other. But listen to the saints who have gone before. Keep looking to Jesus for victory when you break the tape. Amen.

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