**Hebrews 12:1-13** August 14, 2022

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 *Hebrews 12:1 Since we are surrounded by 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. 2Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

 *4In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” 7Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. 9Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! 10Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

 *12Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

**Let Us Run!**

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Before getting to the sermon reading this morning, it is important to call to mind last week’s reading. Today’s reading follows on the heels of last week’s reading. That doesn’t happen every week! That reading centered on this thought: *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”* (v.1) The Bible reading drew us into the life of Abraham. Remember how God commanded Abraham to uproot his life—and a prosperous life at that—and move to a place he would not show him until all his belongings were packed and he was on the road! By faith, Abraham trusted and went. Remember how in spite of disappointments stretching out over 25 years Abraham and his wife Sarah didn’t cash in their chips. They clung to God’s promises. They lived by faith. God spoke; they trusted.

 Last week’s reading summed it up this way, *“They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth… They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God”* (v.14,16). God loves faith.

 As we start today’s reading, you simply *must* have in mind Abraham and Sarah and other heroic believers—and here I read the first verse—***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by 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.”*** The core thought is, ***“Let us run!”***

 When was the last time you ran? I remember my dad surprising me just months short of his 70th birthday. G&G were visiting us, and early one morning he jogged, almost ran, the hundred feet down our driveway. He wasn’t a runner, but something got into him that day. Maybe it was the weather, more likely it was being around the grandkids. I hope I can break into a run like that 20 years in my future.

 But verse one isn’t talking about a jog down a driveway. It’s talking about real running. Huffing and puffing and sweating, aware that you still have five miles to run. Knowing that when you jog into the driveway thirty minutes later you are going to feel the burning in your lungs and your legs. Maybe even a stitch in your side. When was the last time you ran like that?

 Well, if you are like me, it has been decades since running like that, and you have no intention of *ever* running like that again. Yet that sweaty, tiring sort of running is the core thought of God’s word today: ***“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*** He’s talking about the lives of Christians. ***“Let us run!”***

 The Christian life isn’t a bed of roses. It isn’t easy street. It isn’t all unicorns and rainbows—at least not as long as we are on this earth. It wasn’t for these Hebrews and won’t be for you. We are in a contest, a race. We need to be realistic and serious!

 As mentioned last week these Hebrews had been doing a lot of this sort of running. For them, life had become not easier but more difficult because of their Christian faith. They were enduring persecutions. As persecution comes, something else happens. Persecution creates the mental anguish of very hard decisions: “Do I remain true to my core principals? Up to what point? To the point of discomfort? I hope so! To the point of pain? Maybe. To the point of death? Hmmm.” These were real life situations for the Hebrews, not the sort of what-ifs we ask in Sunday morning Bible class. As they went out the door in the morning, they had to make conscious mental decisions about how “Christian” they were going to be, where they would draw the lines, and whether they even wanted to be recognized as Christian any more.

 These Christians were always finding themselves in situations where they needed to decide between Christian conviction on the one hand and comfort, safety and worldly conformity on the other. The Holy Spirit directed the writer of Hebrews to tell them, ***“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*** Stick to it! Stay with it! The first hymn we sang today captured that spirit of Christian determination as we sang, “O Church, Arise!”

 God’s word gives us three tips on how to run the race with determination. **First,** keep your eyes on Jesus. **Second,** understand what God is doing in hardships. **Third,** put in the time.

**I.** The first running tip is obvious, but it needs to be said: ***“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.”***

 You know, we talk a lot about Jesus. In my years of Lutheran grade school, high school, college and seminary, I went to more than a couple religion classes. Good stuff. After ten or fifteen years of it, you get a little bit respectfully silly about it. We would joke that if you ever fell asleep in a Lutheran religion class and your professor woke you up with a question, “Well, Mr. Martin, what’s the answer, hmm?”, just answer, “Jesus!” and you would probably get it right. We do talk a lot about Jesus and so does God’s word!

 He *is* the most important thing to remember in any and every situation: Keep your eyes on Jesus! It really is that simple. God doesn’t want faith to be so complicated that only a theology degree holder can get it right. God wants it to be so simple that little children get it, that people who have never been to a day of school get it, that in a moment you can explain to a dying man or woman all they need to be saved. For Christians striving to run their races through the temptations of life, the number one thing to do is ***“fix our eyes on Jesus.”*** Runners keep their eyes on the finish line; Christians keep their eyes on Jesus their Savior.

 ***“[He is] the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*** The reason to keep your eyes on Jesus is because he is the foundation of our faith. He did the work of saving us. He completed the work of saving us. He did it, not because it was easy or glamorous—quite the opposite—but because he loved us. He gave up all the joys of heaven for you. He lived a life of obedience and a death of agony so that you and I might be presented to God as holy and righteous people—even though we’re not, except that we are because of the righteousness that Jesus has clothed us with.

 You keep your eyes on Jesus by coming back to God’s house every week where the cross of Christ is signed upon God’s people in the first and the last sentence of the worship service—did you ever notice that?—and a couple times in between. Here your eyes are fixed on this big beautiful cross, the instrument of Jesus’ death which is the instrument of our life. Here, every week, God’s Word, both New and Old Testament direct our minds to the centerpiece of the Bible: Jesus, the Christ.

 You keep your eyes on Jesus by praying to him daily, by reading devotions regularly, by singing and listening to Christian songs and hymns. No day should go by in a Christian’s life without mention of Jesus’ name. Continually fixing your gaze on Jesus keeps you running in the right direction.

**II.** The second running tip is not a tip on *how* to run the race, but it explains a great many things that happen to every single Christian running their race. This is something important because it addresses the most common and troubling questions that Christians have. Questions like, “Why did God let so-and-so pass away?” “Why did God let this happen to me?” Christians ask themselves, their pastors, and other Christians these questions. So what do you do with the tough things that happen in life?

 What am I getting at? When we moved to America back in 2014, we were blessed with a very smooth move. We got here safe and sound. Even the dog was none-the-worse for the journey. Four months later, all our belongings, minus one or two boxes of kitchen stuff, made it. In an email back to missionaries on field I remarked that God had certainly blessed our move. To which one of the missionaries replied, “So are you saying that if your move hadn’t gone so well, you wouldn’t have felt blessed by God?” He had a point.

 We do that. We think that when things go our way, we are blessed. And when things don’t go our way, we imagine that God isn’t blessing us. Is it true that every time something we like happens, it’s a blessing from God, and that whenever something unpleasant happens, God isn’t blessing us? There’s a little of that thinking spooking around in all of us.

 There once was a woman who’d endured much suffering. She asked her pastor, “When am I going to get out of these troubles?” He wisely responded, “You should have asked, ‘What am I going to get out of these troubles.’”

 Hebrews twelve says, ***“You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’”***

 Good parents love their children enough to discipline them. God loves us enough to discipline us.

 When we come to that word “discipline,” we remember that there are two directions of discipline, two types. Some discipline builds up, and some discipline tears down, and both, in their way and time, are necessary.

 Sometimes, when we suffer the results of our sins, we forget that the very reason God lets us feel the consequences of our sin, is because he *is* our loving heavenly Father. ***“God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?”*** Our sinful choices sometimes lead to pain or disease or ruined relationships or worse. God allows these things to happens in the measure that he knows is best for his children in Christ Jesus. It is not about paying for our sins. No! Jesus has done that, once and for all. But God disciplines us so that we and others stay away from sin.

 And there is another type of discipline. There is the discipline of having the kids do the dishes, mow the lawn, get a job. Why? What wrong have they done? None at all. Discipline is not only about stopping bad behavior, but also about guiding into good behavior. It is the discipline an athlete, a soldier, a concert musician must go through.

 So it is that God, in his infinite wisdom, chooses to give or not give certain blessings to us, not because of something wrong in our past, but because he knows what is best for our future. ***“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”*** (10-11).

**III.** The third running tip in our reading is the hard work part. Put in the time.

 First of all, we need to work on ourselves: ***“Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.”*** Where are you weak in your faith? What practices of the Christian faith do you neglect? What about you needs to be strengthened? Then strengthen it! Go to the spiritual gym. Isolate those muscles and work on them. Don’t just talk about it like, “Well, I really should read my Bible a little more often.” Athletes who compete don’t just say it, they do it!

 Then there is also the surrounding environment that we need to clean up. ***“Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles… Make level paths for your feet.”*** Get rid of the obstacles and burdens! No one runs a race with a load of lumber on their backs. No runner puts extra obstacles in their own way. Those could be career ending! What in your life gets in the way of you being a Christian? Is there anything you need to unplug? Are there triggers or bait that Satan and your sinful nature use? Do you need to remove something from the desk or house or calendar? Many things we can’t change about the spiritual environment around us. Change those you can.

 In your struggle against sin, run! Keep your eyes on Jesus. Understand God’s loving purpose in both the good and bad he allows into your life. Put in the time strengthening yourself and clearing the path. Amen.