**Palm Sunday – Year C – March 24, 2013 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Hebrews 12:1-3 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“Run Your Race with Perseverance”**

*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, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

The Derby Festival Marathon runs April 27th. The race begins downtown near the river in Louisville and travels south. You actually run through Churchill Downs, down through Iroquois Park, and back up toward the river. The race is 26.2 miles… so, what do you think. You want to run it? It may be too late. Training for a marathon begins 3-4months prior to the race. How long to run that race, you ask? The world-class, elite runners will finish in just over 2hours, while walkers can finish it in 8hours. The average finishing time in United States for marathons is 4.5hours. That’s a long time to run and a long way to go…

We’ll see in our lesson today from Hebrews that running a marathon is much like your Christian life and not so much a 100-yard dash. It is a marathon because it is a very difficult, agonizing race. At times we may be tempted to give up the race and quit, but the writer to the Hebrews encourages us today, **“Run Your Race with Perseverance.”**

The writer of this letter wrote to Hebrews, Jews who had converted to Christianity and lived in Rome. At this time in history the Roman emperor Nero was persecuting Christians. He was arresting them, throwing them in prison and executing them. Christians were being persecuted because of their allegiance to Jesus, an inferior “god” in the eyes of the emperor, who himself claimed to be a deity. But the Romans were not persecuting Jews. So the Jewish Christians were tempted to revert back to Judaism. When they were arrested they would claim to be Jews. Thus, they abandoned their faith and allegiance to Jesus.

The writer points these Christians to the great heroes of faith who endured these same persecutions and faced these same temptations. If you read the previous chapter, chapter 11, the writer walks through the hall of fame of the Bible, and as he walks the halls he points out people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Daniel in the lions’ den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into the fiery furnace, the prophets and apostles, men and women who were persecuted for their faith in the coming Savior, and he says in vs1, “**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”**

The author placed his readers on a track, in a large Olympic sized amphitheater, and imagines that they are in the middle of running a very long race. In the stands sit these past heroes of the Bible, not as spectators, but as inspiring examples who cheer them on, “Don’t give up! We’ve run this race! You can do it, too!” These men and women faced the same temptations, endured the same type of persecution. But their stories testified to the power of God’s faithfulness to preserve them in faith, even when they were threatened with death because of their allegiance to Christ.

The author reminds his readers that this race is not a 100-yard dash, but a long marathon. Interestingly enough, the Greek word he uses for “race” is where we get our English word “agony.” I haven’t done it, but those I know who have run marathons will admit that 26.2 miles is agonizing. Around mile marker 14 or 15 the body screams, “I can’t do this anymore!” It is a struggle to keep going, to keep moving forward toward the finish line. That is why the author writes, **“Let us continue to keep running the race.**” Running the long agonizing race of faith requires perseverance at all times.

What mile marker are you at in your race? How is your endurance at this stage of the race? It’s agonizing at times, isn’t it? Life in general is difficult, and then add to it the burdens that are unique to Christians. Just like the Jewish Christians in Rome, we are persecuted for our allegiance to Jesus, aren’t we? When you’re accused of being anti-gay, rather than pro-traditional and Biblical marriage, when you’re accused of being closed minded when you defend the rights of the unborn, when you stand firm on the truth that the only way we are saved is by God’s grace through faith in Jesus, when you are different from the rest of the world, when you forgive and love when the rest of the world would seek revenge or take legal action, when you choose to be prudent in your use of alcohol, when you vow to preserve your virginity till marriage, and people mock you for it, that’s persecution against your faith in Jesus. And it’s hard to run a race when other people are constantly throwing things at you.

At times you are tempted to change out of your Christian running clothes into something less obvious. It’s easier to get through life when you’re not constantly bombarded with arguments that contradict Jesus’ Word of truth, that constantly attack your faith. Life would be much easier if it weren’t for persecution.

The problem is that all of this hinders us from running our race with perseverance. We’ve set our sights on something else, ease and peace and no confrontation in this world. Is that our goal in life, or is to reach heaven’s gates? Have we forgotten that the goal of our faith, our race, is to join the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us?

This is exactly what the author was talking about when he said, **“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”** An ancient Greek athlete wore very little clothing. So today, Nike and Adidas and every other athletic company has designed and produced form-fitting running clothes, to cut down on wind resistance. Any extra weight of any kind, whether in body or clothing, will hinder the runner. “Throw off your sins: your unwillingness to persevere, your reluctance to be seen as a Christian, your foot-dragging when it comes to confessing and defending the truths of Scripture.”

Our problem is that when the marathon race of faith gets tough, we often fail to focus on our coach, our trainer, the only one who will truly strengthen us, Jesus Christ. When we fail to focus on Christ, through daily study of his Word, through faithful participation in the Sacraments, we are in danger of quitting the race, of throwing the prize away. At times our legs feel like lead weights, and our feet drag, and our lungs burn, and tears stream down our face and we cry out, “I just can’t do this anymore!”

At the 2008 Big 10 Conference Collegiate Indoor Track Championships, Heather Kampf from the University of Minnesota was running in second place and made a move for the lead with one lap to go in the 600 meter race. She fell hard, falling to last place in a distant fourth. She ended up passing the runner in third place, and then second, and won the race at the last possible moment. “I think it was a touch from God that came at the right time,” said Kampf.

We fall down so many times. God picks us up and points us to Jesus and says, “Keep going!” My dear weary runners, **“Fix your eyes on Jesus, 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men.”**

Look! There he is on the starting blocks, lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem, surrounded by shepherds. There he is running around the first bend as a 12-year old boy, about his Father’s business in the temple. Look! There is he running to the Jordan River, stepping forward as the willing servant. He presents himself as the one to finish the race of salvation as the substitute runner for all humankind. Look! There he is sprinting to the desert. And Satan tries with all his power to disqualify him, but Jesus perseveres! There he is running through Galilee and Judea, but his own people, the Jews, try to eliminate him from the race! But he keeps going. Look! There he is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Do you see the determination in his eyes? He runs to grab hold of the cross, and there he is penalized for your sins and mine. He cries out, “**It is finished**!” and he hangs his head and dies as he crosses the finish line. But he wins! He leaves your sins in the dust. He leaves Satan behind defeated. He could not best our Savior. But then look again at the dead runner! He rises again on Easter Sunday morning! He leaves death behind and runs his victory lap.

My dear fellow marathon runners: do your legs feel tired? Do you ache from running your race? Are you fatigued from all of the baggage that hinders your race? Then throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Repent of your sins. Throw your sins on Christ. Fix your eyes on him and see that he has removed them forever! Find your strength in Jesus. Fix your eyes on him who won the race of salvation as your substitute runner. Run your race with perseverance until you reach the finish line. “**Consider him who endured, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**”

You have a wonderful opportunity to watch Jesus in action on the track this week. You sat in the stands today and watched and he confidently rode into Jerusalem. Return again on Thursday evening and watch Jesus run to the upper room and give us a wonderful meal, the Lord’s Supper, through which he strengthens you as you run your race. Return again on Friday night and watch Jesus run around the final bend, take up his cross and march across the finish line. My friends, all of this puts Easter Sunday into perspective. We must watch Jesus as he runs and endures and perseveres, because Easter Sunday morning, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, proves that his striving and enduring was enough, it was complete, it was satisfactory for us, that it was done on our behalf, truly the race for salvation is finished. Yes, Jesus has won the prize of forgiveness of sins. He has won the prize of eternal life for us.

“Now,” he says, “run your race with perseverance. When you are persecuted and feel you can’t go on, fix your eyes on me and what I have already won for you! Remember, it is not a sprint. It is a marathon, one that lasts much longer than 26.2 miles. Listen to the cloud of witnesses in the stands cheering you on. Read their stories. Be encouraged by the fact that they ran the same kind of race as you did, they faced persecutions, opposition, hardships, but they won the race, just like you will. Listen to their words of encouragement, like these from Paul, who wrote, ‘**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.’ (Romans 8:18)** Listen to Paul who again wrote, ‘**But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**’ (Philippians 3:14-15) Just keep your eyes fixed on me, just as they did, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. And then, it will be my joy to see you at the finish line, and say to you, “Come and take your victory lap, a victory I won for you. Run your race with perseverance!” Amen.