

## Sermon for March 23, 2024 - Palm Sunday

Hebrews 12:1-3 EHV

### Theme: Fix your eyes on Jesus

- 1) As He endured the cross for the joy of saving you.
- 2) To find the strength you need to finish your race.

*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. <sup>2</sup>Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. 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. <sup>3</sup>Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.*

It doesn't matter if you're a hockey goalie, soccer striker, or judo fighter; dedicated athletes understand the importance of carefully watching recordings of "greats" that have gone before them. Why? To learn and be inspired by them as they face their own challenging competitions.

Your Christian life on this evil earth can be compared to a marathon. Many pressures from within and without are trying to get you to give up your faith. The race is long. Where do you find the strength to endure? You find it in Jesus and what he did to save you.

I have often compared Palm Sunday to the pregame pageantry before a big sporting event. Jesus was about to square off against the devil in the battle of the ages. He was about to run the most arduous ultra-marathon through the scorching deserts of sin, death, and hell. But because he did this in the past, we know the outcome: he won! Therefore, let this Palm Sunday encourage you to "look at the tapes" of what Jesus did during Holy Week. Why? To find in him the inspiration and strength you need to endure your spiritual marathon. Yes, **fix your eyes on Jesus...** 1) As He endured the cross for the joy of saving you. 2) To find the strength you need to finish your race.

### Part One: Fix your eyes on Jesus as He endured the cross for the joy of saving you.

Our sermon text follows the great "Heroes of Faith" chapter of Hebrews 11 that describes the extraordinary trials Old Testament believers endured as they held on to God's promise of salvation through the coming Christ. Now, don't imagine these Old Testament believers were better than you - possessing some innate talent that enabled them to persevere through hardships you wouldn't have been able to handle. All these heroes of faith were just as flawed and sinful as us - possessing no power in and of themselves to accomplish anything. Take the great prophet Elijah, for example, through whom the LORD performed many incredible miracles. The book of James states: *Elijah was a man just like us.*<sup>i</sup>

So, how did these saints endure the extraordinary trials God allowed in their lives? By keeping focused on God's promises, holding on to them in faith, and letting them guide their actions.

Therefore, God granted the souls of all these believers and countless more like them rest. But that's not the end goal for them. He will also raise their bodies into everlasting glory. The only thing holding him back from doing that now is us and the many believers like us who are still running our earthly race of faith in Christ. However, once all his chosen ones have finished the course he set out for them, he will raise our bodies on the last day and deliver all of us at the same time to our forever home with him in paradise.<sup>ii</sup>

*Therefore, the author of Hebrews writes, 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.*

Even though you don't know what triumphs and trials await you in the future, God knows. Not only that, but he planned the course of your life for the glory of his name. And here is what God wants you to know about your Christian life: it's not a sprint; it's a marathon. And marathons are hard. Why? Because they take endurance. But just as you would have a crowd of people supporting you if you were to run Ottawa's Tamarack/Tartan marathon, so you have a great, uncountable crowd of saints encouraging you to keep going as you run the course of your Christian life that God set out for you. How do they inspire you? Through their example, which cries out: "Look, just as we made it by holding on to Christ in everything, you will make it too. Keep your eyes and heart focused on him in everything, and he will carry you through – just as he did for us."

Yes, their examples encourage us to keep persevering in our faith as we run the course the LORD has laid out for our lives – getting *rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us*.

Modern runners wear skimpy, tight-fitting clothing. In the ancient world, they wore nothing at all. Why? Because the runner doesn't want anything to trip him up or slow him down. He will try to lose as much weight as possible - understanding that every gram of excess hinders him in the long run. And what is true of runners is also true of us as Christians. Get rid of all the things weighing you down and tying you to this world. Don't try to hold on to your pet sins that keep tripping you up from pursuing Christ. Strip off everything through repentance – trusting God's promise to forgive you for Christ's sake. Then you will be able to run more freely and happily without the feelings of guilt and shame weighing you down.

"But how do I do that?" you might ask. By fixing your heart on Jesus, as the following verse of our sermon text states: <sup>2</sup>*Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.*

Do you notice how Jesus is described? "*The author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.*" You see, a person's faith is only as strong as the object or person he puts it in. For example, it doesn't matter how much I believe a cardboard box can support my weight; I will fall flat on my back if I step on it. Jesus, however, is not some cardboard box. He is the almighty God in the flesh. We can trust him completely because he is the author of our faith; that is to say, he is the one who designed our salvation from eternity together with the Father and Holy Spirit. Not only that, but He is the one who brought our faith to its goal by living the perfect life we failed to live, dying on the cross in payment for our sins, and rising from the grave victorious over all our enemies. Jesus is the one who sent the Holy Spirit to us through the Gospel to awaken faith in our hearts. He

intercedes with the Father on our behalf, works in everything for our good, and will come again to bring us home to heaven. Yes, from beginning to end, Jesus is the reason we are saved.

The crowds rightly called out “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday, a word that means “please save us now.” And we join that crowd this holy week as we review precisely how Jesus answered that short prayer: how, *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.*

What gave Jesus the determination to endure the shame of humanity's sins being laid upon him and the pain of being forsaken by God for every single one of them? The joy that God set before him. What was that joy? Our salvation. Yes, Jesus looked forward to winning our salvation more than a pregnant mother looks forward to meeting the child to whom she is about to give birth. And as a pregnant woman is willing to endure the pain of childbirth for the sheer joy of holding her child, so Jesus looked forward to holding us in his arms in heaven.

Just think: you are the reason Jesus went to the cross. The thought of saving you from your sins and welcoming you to his side in heaven is what gave him the determination to endure everything he endured. When it was over, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand, where he rules over all creation for your benefit. From there, he is coming to judge the living and the dead. He is coming to take us, who hold on to him in faith, home with him to the everlasting paradise he will create for us on the Last Day.

Yes, fix your eyes on Jesus – not just as an example to follow, but as the author of your faith and the one who brings it to its goal. He is your everything who has accomplished everything for you. In Him, you will find the strength you need to finish your race, as the next verse indicates:

Part Two: Fix your eyes on Jesus to find the strength you need to finish your race.

<sup>3</sup>*Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.*

The course God set for our Christian lives is a witness to the world. But here is the problem: the world doesn’t want to hear our witness. So, what will people do? They will talk behind our backs, tell us to be quiet, mock us, threaten us, and, as is the case in many places around the world, even persecute us. When we see the way our Western society is going, it’s easy to become discouraged.

Whenever we feel like this, look to Jesus. Did he give up in the face of all the hostility he endured? No. Why not? Because he knew all that hostility was temporary. He looked forward to the goal of his suffering: his Father’s glory and our salvation. That is why he pressed on. And after it was all done, he regained the glory he had before his birth – paving the path to heaven for us as we follow him in faith.

Jesus once told his disciples: *“In this world you are going to have trouble. But be courageous! I have overcome the world.”*<sup>iii</sup> Yes, we certainly do have all sorts of trouble in the world. But that is precisely why we need to focus on Jesus and the salvation he won for us. His strength is our

strength to endure because he has overcome the world for us. Not only that, but he has also promised to send us the Holy Spirit to guide, help, and strengthen us through His Word and Sacraments. And to whom does the Holy Spirit point us through these means of grace? To Jesus alone. The more we bask in what he has done for us, the more we want to thank him – keeping his commandments and confessing his Gospel to those around us – even if they hate us for it. Yes, we patiently endure the trials God allows in our lives by focusing on Jesus – trusting his promise that *our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.*<sup>iv</sup>

Have you ever heard the term “GOAT” refer to an athlete? It’s an acronym meaning “Greatest of all time.” GOATs are athletes who can make the worst team seem like one of the best. Jesus is like such an athlete – wanting us to trust him to win our salvation for us. More than that, he invites us to assist him in proclaiming the Gospel to the world. Even though he doesn’t need us – being able to deke out the devil and world better than Wayne Gretzky deked out defensive players in his prime - he nevertheless chooses us to skate on his team so we can share in his joy of saving souls. And regardless of how hard our time on the ice of this earth is with him, Jesus wants us to focus on him – seeing how he endures and scores again and again and again. We are on his team. Let that thought move you to endure the exhaustion and hard body checks that come your way with joy because the opposing team can’t take away the victory that is already yours in Him.

Yes, brothers and sisters in Christ, as we get ready to celebrate another Holy Week, ask the Holy Spirit to help you be like a dedicated hockey player studying recordings of the great one. Fix your eyes on Jesus as He endured the cross for the joy of saving you. Fix your eyes on Jesus to find the strength you need to finish your race in joy. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> James 5:17a EHV

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Hebrew 11:39-40

<sup>iii</sup> John 16:33 EHV

<sup>iv</sup> Romans 8:18 EHV