

Sermon – February 21, 2010
“Looking to Jesus”

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Hebrews 12:1-4

¹Therefore, 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, ²**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.** ³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

This past Wednesday we began our journey through the season of Lent. This 40 day period in the church calendar is named after a French term which means “to lengthen” recognizing that our hours of daylight in this time of year are growing longer. This bodes well for the renewal of life from the hibernation of winter, just as the life of Christ upon which we reflect in this Lenten season bodes well for the renewal of our lives! The 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter do not include Sundays as these remain “mini-Easters” remembering the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. These are to be days of remembering the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf as well as days of reflecting on how our lives may more deeply reflect a picture of Christ to others.

Jesus told his disciples “See, we are going up to Jerusalem...” (Mark 10:33). We too, in a spiritual sense, travel the road to Jerusalem with Jesus during Lent, knowing full well, as he did, what we will encounter. We must hear his call to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow him in his confrontation with sin. We are invited and challenged to look to his example and follow his lead, just as today’s passage in Hebrews commends. Through this Lenten season 2010, we will be preaching a series of sermons on the theme

“Looking to Jesus” based on Hebrews 12:2. I hope and pray that our focus on the person and work of Christ for us will lead us forward in faith and ministry for Christ.

These verses begin with the word “Therefore...” reminding us to remember the author’s recounting in Hebrews 11 of some of the great heroes of the faith. This chapter could be called the “Faith Hall of Fame” - just as we have a Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY, and a Football Hall of Fame in Canton, OH, we have a “Faith Hall of Fame” in Hebrews 11. In reading the chapter, we realize there are some pretty shady characters represented! Jacob is included – even though he and his mother, Rachel, conspired to lie and deceive Jacob’s father Isaac and brother Esau in the matter of the birthright passed down in the family. Moses is included in spite of his cold blooded murder of an Egyptian years before his heroic leadership of the people of Israel to the Promised Land. And even Rahab, a prostitute, is found in the Faith Hall of Fame, for she willingly offered to protect those spying out the Promised Land before the Israelites arrived to live in their new home. God is willing and able to accomplish his redemptive work using perfectly human and very flawed vessels – good news for every one of us as we struggle to do God’s will! These heroes are mentioned to offer inspiration to us as we undertake the challenges of faithful living day by day.

I would bet many of you have been watching the Winter Olympics in Vancouver as our family has been during the past week. It is always one of our favorite experiences. How inspiring to watch as Alex Bilodeau won Canada’s first ever gold medal won on Canadian soil as he skied to victory in the freestyle men’s moguls – just watching that event makes my knees and back hurt! Then we heard the story of how his older brother Frederic, who suffers from cerebral palsy, was an ongoing source of inspiration to Alex. This is the stuff that makes the Olympics so special – people facing incredible challenges and doing incredible things!! Then we watched Shaun White soar like a bird in winning the gold medal in the men’s snowboard half-pipe event: amazing! And Evan Lysacek skated the program of his life to win gold in men’s figure skating – what an inspirational performance he provided! And then there is the heartbreak we experienced when hearing of the death of a luger before the Games had even begun or when we watched Lindsey Jacobellis, who lost a gold medal four years ago making a show-off move when she was far ahead in the race, encounter trouble again this time and not even get the chance to compete for a medal. As the saying goes, we see and experience “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat” vicariously through the amazing efforts of these world class athletes!

These efforts, like those in the Faith Hall of Fame, offer inspiration and a challenge to us. We watch these athletes, surrounded by cheering crowds, and we are motivated to think of ways we can achieve greater things in our daily pursuits in life. So also the author of Hebrews wants to challenge us as we consider the lives of faithful people who have lived before us to be inspired to live more faithfully as disciples of Christ, the one who has gone before us. As Ray Stedman has said, however, “The race of course is life itself. Life is not a 100 yard dash but a long and sometimes agonizing marathon.” These people of faith, these Olympic athletes, have followed a long and often painfully sacrificial path to achieve their goals. Read Hebrews 11:33-38 and you will hear the description of what the heroes of the faith experienced – and much of it isn’t pretty!

Ultimately, if we want the inspiration and motivation we need to continue living faithful lives as followers of Christ, we need to look beyond the heroes of the faith to the author and perfecter of our faith – we need to look ultimately to Jesus Christ himself!! Hebrews offers the image of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have lived the life of faith and now cheer us on as we run the race ourselves. We are called to be looking to Jesus as the ultimate example of faithful living for our own journey of faith and its unique opportunities and challenges. But what do we see and experience as we look to Jesus for inspiration and motivation? Raymond Brown in his commentary on Hebrews has offered these insights about looking to Jesus. We see:

- *Jesus, the victorious pioneer:* we look to Jesus as the author of our faith, the one who is going ahead of us as a point soldier facing the worst the enemy has to offer or as the lead bird in a flock of Canadian geese faces the headwinds straight on. Jesus leads the way down the path of faith and calls us to fall in behind him.
- *Jesus, the only perfecter:* just as we look to Jesus as he leads the way, so he also brings us home across the finish line. Because he was obedient unto death we all receive the victory wreath! What an inspiration that should be in our journey!
- *Jesus, the devoted servant:* Jesus endured the cross for the sake of the joy set before him. Joy?? How could there be joy in the cross? Well, Jesus prays in John 17:24 for the joy of having his followers with him in heaven to see his glory, a result only possible because of Jesus’ death for us. And Isaiah 53:10-11 tells us Jesus was fulfilling the will of his Father and seeing the fruit of many brought to

righteousness through his sacrifice. Greater love has no one than to lay down their life for a friend! How can we not be inspired to follow one like this?

- *Jesus, the effective priest:* we see Jesus “has taken his seat” according to Hebrews 12:2. The work of redemption has been completed: “It is finished” Jesus cried on the cross. We have the assurance that all that is necessary for our salvation has been provided for us. All we need do is respond with gratitude and dedication!
- *Jesus, the enthroned Lord:* we see Jesus “at the right hand of the throne of God”. We are still running the race, but Jesus is watching and guiding and leading us on to live into his plan and course for our lives. He will bring us home one day in spite of the twists and turns we encounter along the way!
- *Jesus, the patient sufferer:* we see Jesus and consider what he endured for us in his passion and death: mocking, ridicule, torture, excruciating pain, spiritual darkness.

We have never battled sin to that degree! His faithfulness calls us to deeper obedience and perseverance in running the race set before us.

In all these ways Jesus is the model, the example, the inspiration for our ongoing struggle to live the Christian life for God’s glory and the benefit of others around us. “Let us run with perseverance the race set before us” says the author of Hebrews. The word in the text for perseverance is the Greek word “hupomone” – a word that means enduring under pressure, staying the course when things get tough, hanging in there to achieve a desired result or goal in the long run. It’s a word that describes the nature of our journey of faith. We are living the Christian life under many stresses and pressures all around us: the sin which clings to us and entangles us and trips us up, the pressures of culture and the world around us that contradict our faith, just the challenge to live life in a way that is pleasing to God from day to day. It’s what Jesus did as he moved toward Jerusalem with conviction and commitment. It’s what we are called to do as we go to Jerusalem with Jesus during this Lenten season of faith.

One of the inspirational stories of the Winter Olympics so far is a perfect illustration of this “hupomone” kind of attitude. Lindsey Vonn is the most successful American woman skier in history with 31 World Cup wins overall. She has won back-to-back overall World Cup Championships as well as championships in the individual disciplines of downhill and Super G. But she had never won an Olympic Gold medal before this week.

It wasn't easy. She arrived at the Olympics having sustained a badly bruised shin during a training accident. Any of us who have ever bruised our shin can immediately understand how painful an injury it can be. Yet she persevered (along with the blessing of a delay in the race schedule) and kept her eyes and heart focused on the goal of winning the gold medal in the downhill, the most difficult skiing test in the Olympics. No one knew if she could ski well enough to come away with the gold. And then the course itself proved to be a true test as women began to spin and crash off the course right and left!

Yet Lindsey persevered – she exercised “hupomone” enduring under physical pain and mental pressure few of us could ever understand. She skied her heart out and came home victorious, bursting forth in tears of joy reflecting her achievement of a dream of a lifetime! The joy she experienced made all the sacrifice and pain worthwhile.

So we too are called, following the example of Jesus Christ, to run the race of our faith with perseverance, with hupomone spirit! Will it be easy? No. Will we endure struggle and suffering and pain? Yes. Will we receive the victor's crown in the end? By looking to Jesus and following faithfully in his footsteps, yes we will! Let us fix our eyes and hearts on the Lord Jesus through these next 40 days that we might experience the same joy he did in fulfilling the Father's will once and for all! Amen.