

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 The Joy Before Us
August 18, 2019

Everybody sins. Everybody dies. Everybody wants life to matter. These are three of the general truths about life that every human being shares. Yet not one single person lives a general life, but a specific life in a particular time and place. Good and wonderful things happen to almost everyone. Life is a luscious feast. Bad and terrible things happen to almost everyone. Life is a consuming fire. On the surface there doesn't seem to be equity.

Some doubt that there will be any feast left after the fire. That is what it means to doubt the promises of God. Others are convinced that the fire can't touch the most precious things, or that if it does, it cleanses and refines, but does not destroy. That is the meaning of faith.

The Bible is the story of faith, of those who believed even in the worst of times; faith is the reason we should read the bible. I am reminded of an old tired question of a secular humanist who asked, "why do we read the bible anyway, it is written by people who thought the earth was flat and it has so much violence in it, it reflects such misery?"

We read it because even though there have been revolutions in technology and knowledge, the central facts haven't changed. Everybody still sins, everybody still dies, everybody still wants life to matter. Good and wonderful, bad and terrible things still happen. Some

believe the fire wins. Some still believe in the victory of the feast.

Hebrews

There is no doubt in my mind that the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews were struggling to maintain their faith in the victory of the feast. They weren't the first to struggle. Our generations won't be the last. The letter was written as both a stick and a carrot, a warning *and* an encouragement.

My assumption is that everyone here today is here because of their faith, and not because of their doubts; but we can acknowledge the situation for what it is, a question about the nature of things. Part of the great letter's appeal is the "roll call of faith" here in the 11th chapter, at which we have been looking this Sunday and last.

It reviews the biblical accounts of the principle characters of the story of Israel, who lived very much in the same situation as we do. They journeyed. They struggled. They saw some of the most amazingly wonderful things and had great successes. They saw some of the most wrenching tragedies and made astounding blunders. Along the way they made some discoveries.

The Good and the Bad

Whether they saw triumphs or failures, their stories are compelling and in the text we have read today we are

reminded of both. We read about how they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, among other things.

We read how others of them were tortured and faced jeers and floggings and were put in prison. They were stoned and sawn in two and put to death by the sword. They went around in animal skins, persecuted and mistreated, the world not worthy of them. They were all commended for their faith.

Running Races

The author of the letter is very eloquent at this point. He writes, “since we have been surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us cast off what hinders, the sin that so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

As you may imagine, this image of running races is a vivid one for me, because when I was young, I used to run races. Running races is a very basic sport and my guess is people did it long before they ever had olympic contests or were able to write about it. It is so simple. “I’ll beat you to that tree over there,” someone might say. And the other, “over my dead body,” and the race is on. Someone say, “go.”

Though it is simple, just get there faster, it is more difficult than one might assume. If one starts out too fast, one may become fatigued and lose ground in the middle. And there will surely be obstacles, stones

upon which to step and injuries to suffer. Of course there is the struggle against exhaustion that tempts a person to quit, or slow down, or decide, “who cares?” Endurance is hard.

My recollection of training runs and races alike is that it seemed like they would never be over, even though all the races I ever ran ended in a matter of minutes. It only *seemed* like they would never end. But I was always attracted to the running of them. I think that is important. If life is like a race, it seems our natural tendency is to *want* to live it. That desire is part of God’s gift.

No Matter What Happens

Things like races are relatively easy to get excited about, or any kind of project where one sets a goal. They give a person a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to train hard, a community of people to train with, and a set of tasks to work towards accomplishing. But when the race is over (or whatever other task is at hand, getting an education, passing a law, writing a book, building something, etc.), then the reason is gone too.

Life has a quality about it that is at best only “like” a race, because the reason for getting in the morning is not attached to any specific task or intermediate goal, just live it faithfully until it is over. And live it faithfully no matter what happens. There is much to be endured. There is much to be celebrated.

In the end, the example we are to follow is *not* the example of the so-called patriarchs,” but of Jesus himself, who, “for the *joy set before him*, endured the cross, scorning its shame.” That same joy is set before us.

What I encourage you to see is that no matter what else we think give our lives fullness, it is in reality the relationships with people that fill the meaningful things with meaning. I think of my time as a high school runner, what I remember the most is the people I ran with, and against, not the races.

Though I didn’t realize it at the time (I would have had no way of knowing), they were some of the most remarkable people I would ever meet. To this day I remember them and the challenge of trying to be friends, teammates. They taught me lessons. Who cares how the races turned out?

The point of the Bible, and the Letter to the Hebrews, *is* that life *is filled* with meaning. When we accepted Christ, we entered that world of meaning. Every part of our lives explode with significance because we are not alone and the people who we journey with throughout life are important, fascinating and frustrating at the same time.

Sinners In the Hands

There was a sermon preached a long time ago by an 18th century Congregationalist minister named Jonathan Edwards who served somewhere in

Massachusetts. It is entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

The sermon depicts a great boiling pot into which people are falling because of their sinfulness. The only thing that protects them from destruction is that the God, whom they have sinned against, is catching them tenderly with the hands of love. The title makes it sound negative, like criminals in the hands of the law, but instead it is the saving hands of the merciful God into which they have fallen. It is the triumph of mercy over judgment, which is one of the great religious discoveries the biblical pilgrims made on their journey;

that the greatest power in the universe is the power of God’s mercy holding back the power of God’s wrath in love.

“If thou hadst marked iniquities, O Lord, who could stand,” we read in the 130th Psalm, “but there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

We should be afraid of this mighty power, but we should also be filled with joy because it is the news of our Redemption and it is such good news. It is the joy set before us. It is what God has done about the mess of human affairs, Jesus is what God has done. It is the victory of the feast.

Run the race.

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