

Come this time next year, the Summer Olympics will have concluded what they will call the Games of the XXXII Olympiad in Tokyo, Japan. Some of us Americans will watch every single possible minute across several networks on television, even on our computer and cell phone. Others will not care one bit to watch even a second of it. But I remember the first one I paid rather full attention to in our family's living room night after night: it was the Olympics held in Atlanta in 1996.

I remember the second rendition of the United States basketball so-called Dream Team, as they thoroughly dominated their opponents on the court. It was, also, when US Women's gymnastics won their first team gold medal, when Kerri Strug had to stick the vault-landing after just tearing two ligaments in her ankle only minutes before. Then, there was Michael Johnson, who became known as the fastest man in the world, at the time, when he broke the records in the 200 and 400-meter dashes, wearing his golden shoes that made him an American icon.

Now, it would be nice to tie him in, with bursting American pride, to the second reading this morning: to "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Except most scholars and, well, common sense Bible-readers

will tell you that such a race of a lifetime is not quite so short, but it requires a bit more pacing of yourself over a much, much longer distance. If anything, it is more equivalent to a marathon. And most of America, and even the rest of the world, cannot remember or have never heard of the man who won the gold medal in Atlanta for the over 26-mile race. However, if anyone knows about running with perseverance, not just for Olympic stardom, but for life-survival, it is a man named Josia Thugwane (*Too-gwan-ee*).

Because, shortly after Josia was born in South Africa, his father left the family for another woman, who did not want a child who wasn't hers. A couple years later, Josia's mother found another man, but he didn't want a child who wasn't his. And so Josia would be raised by his grandmother and uncle; all well and good, except, while the rest of the children in the household went off to school, Josia had to stay behind and take care of the cattle, forcing him to grow up illiterate. However, that wasn't the true nightmare: his uncle turned out to be physically abusive towards him. So, sadly enough, his first long-distance run, his first direct experience with the very words: "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us," was in the middle of the night, running away from the home that welcomed him in,

yes, but nearly destroyed his life as well. Twenty-one miles, he ran in darkness, pushed along by the fear of the slightest possibility of lights beaming from behind him from his uncle's pickup truck to take him back to the absolute hell he was living through.

Soon enough, he found work gardening for an elderly woman, who provided him the needed room and board. And one day as he was sitting on a gate along the side of a road, there was this group of young men running, and Josia decided to join them on-the-spot for nine miles speeding to the front of the group, and still standing at the end while the rest collapsed, gasping for air. Josia, then, summoned the courage to ask their coach if he could join the team, sponsored by one of the local mining companies. In a few years' time, he would win the national marathon for South Africa, and qualify for the team to go to Atlanta. Unfortunately, his perseverance would be tested, yet again, when he was car-jacked at gunpoint only months before the games, and a bullet grazed his chin, inches from certain death.

There's much, much more to Josia's story, but suffice it to say, he won the gold medal in Atlanta. Nevertheless, the best part of the story is that he became the first black man from South Africa to ever medal in the Olympic

games, because only two years before did apartheid come to an end in that country's awful history and Nelson Mandela was elected president. President Mandela called Josia the "golden boy of South Africa," saying, he "reinforced our pride and confidence as a nation." Of course, even the best of runners whether it be on the track or on the path of life, cannot maintain the same speed and endurance forever. Josia would finish 20<sup>th</sup> in the next Olympics, and his popularity gradually faded away.

Perseverance, Scripture tells us, is what we need; not just the physical kind, even the emotional, but a spiritual perseverance, a faith, a trust that God is not simply the One who coaches us up from the sideline, but who will be so filled with belief in what we have to offer in this race of a lifetime, who will be so personally invested in us to, actually, run right beside us all the way to the end and beyond. Granted, God, also, throws in a fair share of a great cloud of witnesses to run alongside us, too. Except, we know from Josia's story, and even from our own, that not everyone in the cloud is filled with the best of intentions for us. We know there are some rather hideous curves and twists to this path that we must run through as well.

We, also, know not everyone is blessed with natural perseverance and dedication to keep going like Josiah did in the worst circumstances imaginable. After all, part of the race set before us, are other lanes of lives around us, and some who just need to get off the track entirely for a while. And God empowers us to leave our lane for a while too, to not be so obsessively focused on running our own race no matter what, leaving everyone else behind; but to stop altogether for a while, and sit beside them, to convince them they still have what it takes to run their race too.

In the end, that's what our Lord did for us. And that is why it isn't so much about how fast we get things done in this life, or how long we can keep going, maximizing every possible step as if the fate of the entire world depends on us; because someone already took care of that for us. It was the steps he took up a hillside with holy perseverance, to say the least, with a cross on his back. Not to mention, the steps he took out of a tomb and into our very hearts forever. And for those holy steps into our life, with the Gospel promise that he will never run away from us, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen!