

“LET US RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE”

Hebrews 11 (excerpts); 12:1-2

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According to my best calculations, over the past eight years I’ve preached about 350 sermons in our church. For listening to that many sermons from the mouth of the same preacher, you deserve your own special day of recognition! At least you’ve never had to listen to the same sermon twice; I’ve preached a new sermon every Sunday, because I wanted my preaching to be fresh and because you deserved better than re-runs.

However, there is one aspect of my worship leadership that I have repeated *ad infinitum*. Every Sunday almost without exception, I have offered the same benediction. In fact, I have done so throughout my ministry career, dating back to 1976. My way of ending the worship hour has been as predictable as sunset at the end of the day. For some of you, that predictability may have been boring, like listening to a broken record; for others of you, it may have been comforting, like hearing the sound of an old familiar melody. In either case, I’ve pronounced this benediction hundreds of times here in Woodbury, and some of you know it so well that you can recite it silently as I say it aloud. So, as our journey together comes to a close, perhaps you deserve an explanation. Has there been a method to my madness? Why have I used the same benediction every Sunday; and why, pray tell, have I used this one?

For starters, my strategy is hardly original. I’m not the first person in a public role to employ a trademark way of wrapping up an event. For example, this became a common practice during the golden age of television. Famous entertainers had a signature sign-off in song: Bob Hope crooned, “Thanks for the memories”; Carol Burnett sang, “I’m so glad we had this time together . . . now it’s time to say, ‘So long.’” Broadcast journalists used a similar technique: Edward R. Murrow signed off with the words, “Good night, and good luck”; Walter Cronkite intoned, “And that’s the way it is.” Their words were not only a signal that their program was over; the very repetition of their words gave us a sense of constancy in the midst of changing times.

More to the point, I’ve known other preachers who used a signature sign off – a benediction they would recite Sunday after Sunday. My pastor during seminary repeated the same words each week at the end of the worship hour. The congregation never tired of that ritual; they looked forward to it; they knew it was coming, but they still found it electrifying. As a young preacher, perhaps I was seeking to acquire some of that same magic.

But I had an additional motivation: I was also seeking a way to capture the unique moment we experience at the close of worship, when we are finishing one activity and, at the same time, starting another. I was searching for a benediction that looks forward as well as backward. I kept my ears open for words that point in both directions but point primarily forward.

Well, I once heard my seminary pastor preach an Easter sermon on Hebrews 12:1-2. That passage spoke to me and stayed with me. Later, when I became a worship leader myself, those verses struck me as an appropriate benediction for a worship service. Some churches have a sign above their rear door for people to read as they leave the sanctuary: “Our worship has ended; now our service begins.” That’s the message I wanted to capture in my closing words to a congregation

each Sunday. I wanted a benediction that would be more than a benign blessing, more than an “Amen” to all that has been said in the previous hour. I wanted a benediction that would also be a charge, a call to action, a summons to take our faith out of the sanctuary and into the streets. I found that benediction in Hebrews 12:1-2. It is an invitation not to walk, but to run out of the sanctuary, to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:1c).

I’m sure you’re not surprised that I was drawn to an athletic metaphor for a benediction. You know all too well that I’m a sports nut; some of you have even teased me for using so many illustrations from the world of sports in my sermons. But as it turns out, I’m in good company; the writers of the Bible often use athletic images to describe the life of faith. In particular, both Paul and the writer of Hebrews liken their Christian experience to a foot race. They know that the Christian life is not a leisurely stroll; it is a fast-paced journey. It is also a lengthy, demanding journey. The race of faith is not a 100-yard dash requiring only a brief burst of energy; it’s a long-distance contest, a marathon, where the one thing needful is perseverance.

I confess to you that I am more aware of that need today than ever before. What have I needed to get to the finish line in full-time ministry, if not perseverance? What have all of us needed to get through a global pandemic, if not perseverance? What have we needed to keep growing spiritually when we were isolated and undernourished, if not perseverance? What have we needed to remain committed to the Church during a time of upheaval and uncertainty, if not perseverance? What have we needed in our efforts to make the world a more peaceful and equitable place, if not perseverance?

It was the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who expressed this need more clearly than anyone I know about. He once wrote: “The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; which thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, in something which has made life worth living.” I’ve always been inspired and often been humbled by Nietzsche’s phrase, “a long obedience in the same direction.” It’s a call to endurance, to lasting commitment, to “stick-to-itiveness.” It’s a challenge to fix our eyes on a worthy goal and to “keep on keeping on” until we finally reach that goal.

When the loud cry for racial justice began to ring out a year ago, I saw a TV news segment in which a politician addressed an audience on the steps of the state Capitol in Hartford. He noted with appreciation that large numbers of people were attending rallies and speaking out against racism at that moment in time. But then he asked his audience, “Where will you be a year from now? Will you still be rallying to the cause, when stories about injustice are no longer on the front page?” Then he concluded with a line I will never forget: “What we need is not a moment, but a movement.”

God knows, that’s what all of us need, no matter what our cause or conviction – not just a moment of high inspiration, but a movement in our spirits that has staying power, a movement that sustains itself and lasts over the long haul of a lifetime. You and I need “a long obedience in the same direction.” We need a movement in our striving for self-improvement, whether it’s losing weight or kicking a bad habit or developing a new hobby. We need a movement in our efforts to make the world a better place, whether that means advocating for bigger government or smaller government. We need a movement in our marriage and family life, which is less about “wine and roses” and going to Disney World and more about showing up and remaining faithful one day at a time. Above all, we need a movement in our life of faith, which is prone to brief moments of

creativity and energy followed by long seasons of dormancy and atrophy. The fact is, you and I are often content to be “couch potatoes” instead of running with perseverance the race that is set before us.

It’s interesting that the writer of Hebrews refers to the life of faith in competitive terms, as a “race” like the Boston Marathon. The difference is, in the race of faith we are not competing against other runners; we are competing against ourselves, with our own outer impediments and inner demons. The writer pictures a group of runners approaching the starting block, wearing garments that need to be removed before the contestants can run freely. Can you imagine trying to run a long-distance race wearing a robe that would flap in the wind and get tangled between your legs? But still, it’s tempting for the runners to remain fully clothed. The outer garments they wear are warm and comfortable and attractive, so they are reluctant to shed them.

The writer identifies these garments in two vivid terms – as a “weight” that impedes rapid movement, and as “the sin that so easily besets us” (v. 1b). He is obviously employing a metaphor: his real concern is not with the physical baggage that is a hindrance to runners, but with the spiritual baggage that is a hindrance to Christians; and the Christians he is addressing here are carrying a ton of spiritual baggage. The epistle to the Hebrews is written to new Christians, especially Jewish converts, who are experiencing challenges to their faith, including the pressure of persecution. They are weighed down by fear and doubt; they are tempted to sin by reverting to their old ways of living and renouncing their faith in Christ. They are falling back rather than moving forward.

Friends, these images should resonate with all of us, because we too feel the burden of “every weight and the sin that so easily besets us.” We are weighed down by many things, but above all by “memories of the way we were” – before the pandemic hit and brought our world to a screeching halt, before we had to hide from our neighbors by wearing masks and meeting by Zoom, before half of our voting citizens looked at the other half with suspicion and contempt, before people took to the streets to protest their station in life, before our sanctuary attracted only a few scattered souls and our church basement became a ghost town. If I’m reading the signs of our times correctly, “the sin that so easily besets us” is our tendency to pine for the past or remain paralyzed in the present, when God’s call is to move headlong into the future – to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

A movie came out of Britain in the early 1960’s entitled, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. It centers on a working-class boy, Colin Smith, who is sentenced to a youth detention center for burglarizing a bakery. He gains privileges in the institution through his prowess as a long-distance runner. The film opens with this young man running alone, along a bleak country road somewhere in rural England. In a brief voiceover, Colin tells us that running is the way his family has always coped with the world’s troubles, but that in the end, the runner is always alone and cut off from spectators, left to deal with life on his own.

Notice that the writer of Hebrews has a different perspective on the long-distance runner. He assures us that, as you and I run the race of faith, we are not alone, and we are not doomed to loneliness. We are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” by those who have run the race ahead of us, crossed the finish line, and are now seated in the stadium cheering us on.

If you are a regular worshiper here, you are undoubtedly familiar with the text from Hebrews 12 that I quote every Sunday. But you may not be familiar with its context. Chapter 11

of Hebrews is often referred to as a “roll call” of Israel’s heroes – individuals who are exemplars of a life of faith. Their faith is not just bland belief; it is radical trust. They take extraordinary risks by venturing out into the unknown and exposing themselves to hardship and danger, all in obedience to God. Here they are called “witnesses,” which is the English translation of a Greek word that literally means “martyrs.” Many of them are martyrs; they die – often prematurely and tragically – without having received the full portion of God’s promises. But the good news is that these giants of the faith haven’t disappeared into nothingness. They have been received and rewarded by God, and they are still with us, serving as models, inspiring us to remain steadfast, encouraging us to endure.

Friends, you and I have our own cloud of witnesses, our special cheerleaders who surround the track as we run the race of faith. More than a few times in my life, when I was in a moment of exhaustion or doubt or despair, a Christian friend has said to me, “John, keep the faith.” Now, let’s be clear about what these individuals were asking me to do. They weren’t asking me to hold fast to a set of beliefs – you know, the Apostles’ Creed or the theology of John Wesley or the approved doctrine of the Methodist Church. No, they were urging me not to give up on myself or on some task or cause I was invested in. At that point, I had “grown weary in well doing,” and they were encouraging me to persevere when my enthusiasm and energy were waning. They said, “John, keep the faith. I did, and you can too.” However, because they were Christians, they didn’t just offer themselves as models of endurance; almost invariably, they pointed beyond themselves to higher source of inspiration.

And so does the writer of Hebrews. He points to Jesus, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” as our ultimate role model. He too has previously run the race and won. But Jesus is not merely one of the many spectators in the gallery of Old Testament witnesses. He is instead singled out for his unique capacity for endurance. After spending three years trying with limited success to get people to buy in to his kingdom mission, he spends his final six hours in apparent defeat, hanging from the gallows. Jesus “endures the cross, despising the shame”; then, and only then, does he assume his seat “at the right hand of the throne of God.” You talk about perseverance! And I complain because I’m tired at the end of a 12-hour working day, or because someone views homosexuals differently than I do, or because someone disagrees with our church’s COVID protocol.

I wonder this morning: as you seek to run the race of faith, what are the weights you need to lay aside? What is the sin you need to shed in order to run freely? What keeps you from persevering – as an employee, as a parent, as a church member, as a Christian witness in an unjust and unhappy world? Is it despair, fatigue, lethargy, apathy? I’m now 72, and with each passing year, I am increasingly haunted by a comment once made by Leopold Tyrmand in *The New Yorker*: “Though nothing keeps us from pursuing what we consider right and fighting against what we see as wrong, the task does become more boring after thirty-five.” As Christians, we have a higher calling: we’re called to a movement, not a moment; we’re called to “a long obedience in the same direction.”

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that does so easily beset us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfect of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” That’s my benediction, and I’m sticking to it!