

Today’s lesson is read from Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Hear the words from Hebrews:

Read Hebrews 11:29-12:2

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Gracious God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Today’s lesson from Hebrews teaches us that life is like a race that has been set before us. How many of you knew that you were running in a race? Some of us here today more than others are a lot further along in that race. Al, how old are you again?

I joke, but seriously, we are all running a race and we are running it by persevering in our faith and keeping our eyes fixated on Christ.

In middle and high school I wrestled. And to be honest I had no idea what I was getting myself into. My first year in 7th grade I was terrible. I didn’t win one match. I would place my right foot on the starting line and then just lock up and freeze. It was embarrassing and hard to watch. But my dad would go to every match. The next year I thought things would be different, as I had gotten taller and leaner and had a lot more experience at the sport. Boy, was I wrong. I didn’t win a single match that year either. But dad was their cheering me on, seeing me lose every match.

It wasn’t until Blythewood High opened its doors in its first year as a school that I made the transition from Ridge View to Blythewood. And this time I swore to myself like the year before that things would be different, but this time I would get serious. That I would do whatever it would take to become my best. So, in a crazed fanatical way I began to mimic Rocky Balboa’s morning routine; from the first Rocky, not Rocky IV. I

would crack 4 eggs into a cup every morning at 5am and drink it straight. I know, fanatical! It wasn't until someone told me about salmonella that then did I stop. But I would do that every morning and then put on a 25 pound weight vest and then go run the track at the High School. That 25 pound weight vest became my best friend. I even wrestled our heavy weights during practice with it on. For three years I was named a captain of that team, for three years I was awarded the most dedicated award, and even placed fourth in the state in the 215 weight class weighing in at 180. I breathed dedication, I embodied perseverance, and all the while I had no idea that it was setting me up for the reality we come to today in our lectionary reading from Hebrews. That by faith in Christ we run this race of life with perseverance through whatever obstacles come our way. And there will be obstacles. But isn't that what a lot of us Christians miss – is that the race isn't always easy. That the race of life we run will be a nice peaceful jog.

Many of us, following Jesus's example, “share the peace” with each other every Sunday morning: “The peace of the Lord be always with you.” “And also with you.” We assume — the vast majority of us, anyway — that ours is a religion of peace. Of peace-making, peace-loving, and peace-keeping.

And isn't that the confusing thing about what we've heard this morning from the readings in Jeremiah and Luke? Just what are we to make of these passages as a whole, which explodes off the page with harsh, provocative language that sounds anything but peaceful? “Is not my word like fire?” God asks in the reading from Jeremiah. “And like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” “Many great heroes of the faith, writes the author of Hebrews, died gruesome deaths, but “did not receive what was promised.” “I came to

bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!” Jesus cries as he makes his way towards Jerusalem and death.

These texts invite us — or no, they compel us — to move beyond soft, Christianity, and wrestle with the hard, high costs of discipleship. They declare in honest terms what will happen if we dare to take our faith seriously. What will happen in our families, our communities, our churches, and our world if we allow the “fire” of God’s word to burn through us. Bottom line? If “tender Jesus, meek and mild” is what we prefer, then this week’s lectionary is not for us. If feel-good religion is the comfort zone we refuse to leave, then we’re missing out, because the peace of God is about so much more than good feelings. Or to put it differently, if neither you nor anyone within your sphere of influence has ever been provoked, disturbed, surprised, or challenged by your life of faith, then things are not okay in your life of faith.

the writer of the letter to the Hebrews addresses a community needing to hear that it needs to persevere through life’s trials. In chapter 11 we hear the writer conclude the roll call of what is essentially the Bible’s Hall of Fame of Faith. And indeed, the achievements of these faith-filled men and women are awe-inspiring. During their lifetimes, they “administered justice,” “shut the mouths of lions,” “quenched raging fire,” “won strength out of weakness,” and “received their dead by resurrection.” How much more impressive can you get? But the “Hall of Fame” doesn’t stop there; it’s far too honest to leave out the dark underside of triumph and victory. Many of God’s faithful were tortured, flogged, mocked, and stoned to death. Many went about “poor, persecuted, and tormented.” Many spent their lives wandering in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground. And all of them — all of them— died without receiving

what was promised to them. What does this mean? Well, among other things, it means that God’s timing doesn’t always align with ours. It means that crises of absurdity, meaninglessness, pain, and horror go together with human existence, regardless of whether we profess faith in a benevolent God or not. It means that we Christians need to be clear and honest about the faith we profess. Yes, there is joy in the Christian life. Yes, there is beauty. Yes, there is the promise of love, wholeness, healing, and grace. But the life of faith is also difficult. The life of faith is also risky. And the life of faith does not ever guarantee us health, wealth, prosperity, or safety. To suggest otherwise is to lie, and to make a mockery of the Gospel.

“Since we are surrounded.” The “Hall of Fame” reading in Hebrews ends with a beautiful image of “a great cloud of witnesses.” The writer encourages us to persevere in the race of faith precisely because we are not alone. Jesus has pioneered the way of faith for us, and countless men and women have gone ahead through the millennia, shaping the path for us to follow. Their stories — stories of triumph and sorrow, gain and loss, trust and doubt, achievement and disappointment — offer us both comfort and accountability. I don’t know about you, but I find it far too easy to forget about this “cloud” in my daily life. Living as I do in a culture that worships individualism, I’m quick to assume that I’m alone, unseen, and unfettered in my spiritual life. But I’m not; I’m surrounded. I’m surrounded by witnesses whose testimonies both console and challenge me. I’m surrounded by witnesses whose stories must touch and deepen my own. Christianity is not about me and my personal Jesus, doing our own private thing together. Ours is a profoundly communal faith, one that spans place, culture, race, ethnicity, and time.

That is what our Bible lesson is about today. It teaches us that life is like a race that has been set before us. We may struggle and face many obstacles, but we have a great crowd of witnesses who are cheering us on. We have a Heavenly Father who loves us and will help us when the pain is too great. We have a Savior, who left his place in heaven and came to earth to show us how to run the race. If we will keep our eyes on him, how can we help but finish the race?

Let us pray:

Commission & Benediction:

Go now with your eyes on Jesus,
the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Lay aside the ways of sin,
bring forth a harvest of justice and righteousness,
and run with perseverance
the race that is set before us.

And may God turn to you and cherish you;

May Christ Jesus surround you with the light of his presence;

And may the Holy Spirit give you life and strength.

May we go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ. Amen.