

The Sixth Sunday in Lent – Passion Sunday
April 9, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

“Focused Faith”

Whenever Holy Week hits, I have this knee-jerk reaction like the rare times when I’m watching a horror movie. It could be any suspenseful, thriller type of movie actually. I see Jesus entering into Jerusalem on the donkey’s colt and immediately cringe. ‘No, don’t do it!’ I want to scream. ‘Don’t go in there! Don’t open that door! You’re going into a trap!’ Part of the blame comes from knowing what is coming next, how the action progresses. Spoiler alert, Jesus, this is not going to end well. You’re not going to make it.

But this is the crazy thing about what is about to take place, all the mind-blowing events we just read about a few minutes ago. We cringe, we wince for what Jesus is going through. But Jesus knew exactly what he was getting into. Jesus knows who is waiting for him after he rides into Jerusalem, and he still goes. Jesus knows which disciple will betray their friendship for a pocket full of silver, and yet Jesus doesn’t blacklist him. Jesus knows the schemes and plots of Israel’s religious authorities, and he doesn’t shy away. Jesus knows the Roman governor will be torn between justice and appeasing the will of a mob, and yet Jesus subjects himself to Pilate’s questioning. Jesus knows a cross awaits him, and doesn’t turn back. Jesus knows this is the beginning of the end, yet he pushes forward.

When I was reading through the verses again, seeing these events with fresh eyes, verses from the Book of Hebrews jumped out at me. Hebrews 12:2 offers this encouragement: **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.”** Faith needs focus. The Christian faith focuses on Jesus. That’s a powerful picture packed into those few words. Fix our eyes on Jesus. It means looking away from something and then concentrating on something more important. It is utter and complete focus on one single goal.

When I hear about that kind of focus, I can’t help but think of elite athletes. Olympians who train their entire lives for one event. Professional sports stars who live with an intensity to become a professional and then pursue the trophy in their sport. There is wisdom in trying to emulate those elite performers and their passionate pursuit of their goals. So we read up on the best ways we can maintain healthy, balanced lifestyles. We want to be dedicated to work or school while still being there for family and maintain cherished friendships. We know the natural tendency to chase after nice things, shiny things, new things. So we work at improving what’s inside. We develop passions and hobbies that are more about

becoming a better person rather than accumulating stuff. Even then, we realize we can be so wrapped up in those goals and pursuits that it can suck the joy right out of living life.

That is especially true this time of year. Easter is coming. So that means finding time for family and friends. Making it special by having the right celebrations and food and maybe some candy for the kids. And even during Easter, especially during this time, we so easily lose our focus. We get distracted from the one place where we want it to be and know it needs to be. Hebrews 12:1 helps us to be realistic about ourselves: **“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”** You can see the athlete in this encouragement. If an athlete is gearing up for competition, they might stand in front of a mirror and realize they could stand to get rid of a little baggage. The only way that is going to happen is through some rigorous training. Then when the competition is at hand, they will take with them only what is absolutely essential. Anything else will just be excess weight, holding them back, causing them to exert unnecessary energy, giving them a competitive advantage.

It's really an issue of focus. It's not that you and I aren't trying. It's that we're trying too hard, at the wrong things. It's not that we aren't working. It's that we are loading ourselves down, packing on too much baggage. Not to simplify things too much, but it's really life. Another tragedy is announced across the TV airwaves. Another phone call with a devastating diagnosis. Another week at work when you can't possibly keep up and accomplish everything you need to do. Another friend who reaches out with a need. And you want to be there for them all. You want to do it all. But it all starts to wear on you, weigh you down. You can't help starting to **“grow weary and lose heart.”** (Hebrews 12:3) And it's all because you've lost your focus.

Instead of looking at Jesus and cringing, look to Jesus and see joy. Jesus saw everything that was coming and still found joy. **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”** (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus knew exactly what was coming. Jesus anticipated the pain, the humiliation, the disgrace. But none of that was enough to distract him from his ultimate goal. He found joy in keeping his focus on what you needed. He delights in facing down your fears to let you know 'I've got this.' And all the realities of life that wear you down, he shoulders those burdens himself. He finds his pleasure in sorting through all your distractions to be the sacrifice you need. Jesus isn't here just for your support and inspiration. Jesus is the ultimate goal of your goal of faith. Jesus is the originator of faith and the one who brings faith to its ultimate goal. So there is nothing more you need to do, nothing you have to do, nothing you even can do to add to your faith. Who He is and what He did are what we put our faith in.

There was a ten-year-old boy who lost his left arm in a car accident. But he was determined to keep doing all the things his friends did. So he learned to shoot a basketball left handed and throw a baseball with his left hand. When his friends got interested in martial arts, he went with them. Every day after school, he would head to the studio to study with an old Japanese judo master. Every day, the master only taught him one move. After a few months, he summoned his courage and asked: “Sensei, shouldn't I be learning more moves, some

blocks and kids?" The wise sensei replied: "This is the only move you know, but it's the only move you need to know." Not wanting to question this experienced master, the boy kept training.

Soon enough the sensei entered his young protégé in a competition. Surprisingly, the boy won his first two matches. Then the boy shocked even himself by winning a third match against a very difficult opponent who knew all kinds of moves and holds. In the finals, he was matched up against a bigger, stronger, more experienced opponent. Even the referee was concerned the new student might get hurt. But when the sensei insisted on going through with the match, the opponent made a critical mistake and dropped his guard. Instantly, the boy used his one move to pin his opponent, win the match and the tournament.

It must have been more than just luck. So on the way back from the tournament, the boy finally spoke up: "Sensei, how did I win the tournament with only one move?" "You won for two reasons," the sensei replied. "First, because you studied nothing else, you have mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm."

The cross isn't just one Bible story among many other inspirational stories for life. It is the story. It is the one thing Jesus needed to accomplish in his life. He had to shed everything else so he could give his life for you. He had to keep focus. He had to endure everything that came with it. It is God's story of victory for you. In all of life's cringe-inducing moments, Jesus is your joy. Through all the suffering and burdens of life, look to the cross of Jesus. In all your struggles and distractions, keep your focus on Jesus. When Jesus extended two arms on the cross, he defeated your soul's every enemy and brought you back together with your God. That one move is all you need. Amen.