

Date: January 26, 2020

Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

Title: Looking to Jesus in 2020

Theme: Endurance

Proposition: Looking to Jesus and how He lived is the goal every Christian should pursue.

Sticky: It *is* how you start and it *is* how you finish!

Introduction: For the past fifteen years here at Brookside we have chosen a Scriptural theme for the coming year. This last year our theme was *Love God; Love Others* based on Mark 12:30-31. I trust that theme will never escape our attention because *Loving God and Loving Others* are the two great commandments of Scripture. But as I thought and prayed about what our theme as a church could be this year, I couldn't help seeing double: 20/20. Let's take that double vision and turn it into perfect 20/20 vision as we focus on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Brookside we need to keep our eyes fixed on Him, in 2020 and beyond. Look with me at our text as I begin reading the first three verses in Hebrews 12. **“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (2) Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”**

What has drawn me to this passage is the imperative we see in the first phrase of verse 2, **“Looking unto Jesus,”** or another translation could be, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” I know of no better emphasis for this year than to look to Jesus. This speaks of a united action, “Let us.” It speaks of a definite action—“Fix our eyes.” And it speaks of a single aim—on “Jesus.”

My prayer is that we as a congregation will come to know Him better than ever, to love Him more and more, to serve Him with a renewed enthusiasm, and to declare His name with increasing urgency.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, help us to be “Looking to Jesus,” this year so that He can enable us to run the race of faith well. Help us to once again contemplate all that Your Son Jesus has done for us—may we truly know Him, the One who died and arose for us. Father, transform us more and more into the image of Your dear Son. Keep us from being weary and discouraged, so that we can run with endurance. In His precious name we come to You, oh Father. Amen.

The New Testament often describes for us the Christian life as a race to be run or a fight to be fought (Hebrews 12:1-2; I Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16; I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 2:5). The metaphors that we read about from Paul stem from literal athletic events that were conducted in ancient arenas in the early first century of Greek culture.

The athletic metaphors picture for us an arena where there is pain, heartache, sickness, sorrow, pressure, hardship and even death. It is there where we run against a very threatening opponent and our fortitude is tested.

The Jewish believers, who received this letter were getting weary and wanted to give up; but the writer encouraged them to keep moving forward in their Christian lives, like runners on a track. And the most graphic metaphor of the Christian life is that of a marathon. I do not say it's a race because the Christian life is depicted not merely as a race but a marathon. Friends, the Christian life is not a sprint where you speed by an opponent in a short distance. The idea in our passage this year is that you're not competing against anyone, but you're running against obstacles that would hinder you, or even stop you in your service for God. In a real sense, every Christian runs his own race pressing to the finish line in God's kingdom. Paul said it this way, **“I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14)**. He told Timothy, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (II Timothy 4:7)**. The joy of the marathon runner is to finish the race. How many here this morning have

ever run a 26 mile, 385 yard marathon and finished? My utmost respect for your perseverance to finish. When I think of marathon runners I will always remember the story of Cliff Young, the 61 year-old sheep and potato farmer from Queensland, Australia who showed up in 1983 to enter the ultra-marathon which is run from Sydney to Melbourne a 543.7 mile race. It is considered among the world's most grueling ultra-marathons. The race takes usually takes seven days to complete and is normally only attempted by world class athletes who train specifically for the event. These athletes are typically less than 30 years old and are backed by large companies such as Adidas, Umbro, and Nike. Cliff showed up in overalls and work boots. To the surprise of everyone, he didn't show up as a spectator but to pay his entry fee and run this grueling marathon. He was told, "You're crazy, there's no way you can win this race." He was mocked and made fun of but he let people know that as a young boy he would run for days to round up his sheep any time a bad storm was getting ready to roll in. When the race started, the pros quickly left Cliff behind. A classic Tortoise and Hare image. The crowds and television audience were entertained because Cliff didn't run properly; he appeared to just shuffle. Many feared for the old farmer's safety. The professional runners knew that it took about seven days to finish. In order to compete, one had to run about 18 hours a day and sleep for 6. The thing is, Cliff Young didn't know that. He ran day and night without ever stopping, and he set a new record of five days, fifteen hours and four minutes. He received the \$10,000 first-place prize money and quickly divided it up and gave it to the first two runners. Cliff Young was a hero in Australia for his endurance and fortitude to run a race that few ever attempt to run. He was a model of the mantra that we here so often, *it isn't how you start but how you finish!* But for a Christian it is how you start and it is how you finish. There are some of you today that have never entered this race. Your start in the race of faith is just as important as you finish your race. Friends, we are called to run the race of faith as a believer. We're to run to the finish line and to finish strong. Dear Christian, let me ask, how are you faring in your race of faith?

The Christian life is not a fun game of dodge ball. It is a hard-fought, tough-minded race. The word for race is from the Greek word *agon*, from which we get the word “agony.” The writer of Hebrews is picturing for us athletes in an agonizing footrace, running for the finish line. Such a race requires both training and strategy if it is to be run well. Looking to Jesus and how He lived is the goal that every Christian should pursue. So, what are the particulars to which we must give attention to keep running when the race of life gets difficult? Any of you going through some trials or difficulties today? This past week? I know many of you are because trials and difficulties are not an elective for a Christian, but a required curriculum if you’re going to grow stronger in your faith. So often we hear a great message or we go to a conference or a retreat and we get excited but then it doesn’t stick but only fades into a wonderful memory in our mental scrapbook. No, for you and I to continue to run the race well, it will take resolve and help from the Holy Spirit. It will take character. Let me share three reminders that will energize us as we run the race of faith in 2020.

1. The encouragement God gives - v. 1
 2. The exercise we exert - v. 1
 3. The example we follow - vv. 2-3
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1. The encouragement God gives as we run - v. 1 (Hebrews 11) Look with me at the phrase in verse 1, **“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”** All competitors love to have spectators don’t they? Can you imagine what the Super Bowl would be like if no one showed up in the stands for the game? How many times do you hear players say, “The fans really inspired me.” Pastor and author Kent Hughes tells the story that when he was in seminary he was working a swing-shift in a factory in Los Angeles. He said he made an acquaintance at work with a law student who played tennis. Kent mentioned that he loved tennis and soon he and Larry talked a lot of tennis during breaks. Soon after, they met at the tennis courts to see who was the best. He said the game was fairly competitive until Larry’s wife, Billy Jean, showed

up and started doing a little of her own talking to them. To say the least, she was not impressed with their tennis ability. But he said, with her there watching, their shots became crisper and they began to hustle more for each ball because Wimbledon champion Billy Jean King's presence definitely elevated their game.

On a far more exalted level the author of Hebrews paints for us here an incredible picture of one's spiritual's observers in an attempt to motivate and instruct his discouraged believers there in the church to keep on and not to quit.

Many of us have in our minds that there is this stadium, and all of these saints from chapter 11, the Great Faith chapter, are sitting there looking over the battlements of heaven and are cheering us on to the finish line. That gives us the impression that somehow the saints who are now in heaven constitute some kind of mass of spectators who are watching us here on Earth. Unfortunately, that is not what is taught in Scripture. Saints in heaven do not have a preoccupation with things on the Earth.

We aren't told here that we have a "cloud of spectators." We are told we have a "**cloud of witnesses.**" I don't think that Abraham, who is the presence of the Triune God, is excited about looking at me while I am struggling here on this Earth. Interestingly the word **witnesses** comes from the Greek word *martys (martoos)* from which we get the word martyr. A martyr is one who attests by his/her life what is true. We've just met them in chapter 11. We know this by the first word of chapter 12, "**Therefore**" which is referring to chapter 11 and includes many of the heroes of the faith like Abraham, Enoch, Noah and many others.

- Encouraged by heavenly winners - You remember what statement Paul Harvey was known for? "The rest of the story," and in Hebrews 11:35-38 we discover a different group of witnesses who ran a very different kind of race. Torture, mockings, prison, and the sword were their ultimate end. Yet in Hebrews 11:39 we discover, "**And all of these, having obtained a good testimony through faith.**" Heavenly witnesses serve as a wonderful source

of encouragement as we run in the race God has specifically designed for us. But notice also we're,

- Encouraged by earthly winners - Any of you this morning being called by God to do something that you've never done before? **“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8).** Are any of you having to give up something that is precious to you? **“By faith Abraham when he was tested, offered up Isaac. . .his only begotten son” (Hebrews 11:17).** By the way, the phrase **“By faith,”** is used 21 times in Hebrews 11, indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure. Any of you battling with a disease that you know can take your life? Death is making you nervous? **“By faith Joseph, when he was dying. . .gave instructions concerning his bones” (Hebrews 11: 22).** Listen, we have witnesses here who faced death, and you and I can now face death but do not need to fear the shadow of death. These witnesses are testimony of God's goodness and His faithfulness. He is with us while we are in the shadow of death. How many of you are having to make a decision based on long-term spiritual wisdom with short-term physical enjoyment? **“By faith Moses. . .refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:23-24).** In Hebrews 11:32-35a, no less than ten incredible feats of faith are catalogued, things like shutting the mouths of lions, becoming mighty in battle and seeing the dead raised to life again. This is supernatural stuff anyway, you look at it. Our hearts should be encouraged by these champions of the faith.

Transition: Listen, these people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, we are witnessing their testimony and how, by their faith, God bore witness to them. God has given us a roster in Hebrews 11, listing those who ran the race with endurance and cleared the so-called high hurdles in their paths. Secondly, notice here in verse one that we are

given three specific guidelines that will enable us to run well in this daily race of faith.

2. The exercise we must exert as we run - v. 1

- Run cleanly - **“let us lay aside every weight.”** Athletes in training will often wear weights to help them prepare for events. No athlete would actually participate in an event wearing weights because it would slow him down. You see baseball players in the on-deck circle swinging a bat with heavy metal weights on it before he takes his place in the batter’s box. Too much weight would slow the swing down.

For the Christian weights are encumbrances, stuff, excess baggage that can slow us down and keep us from running our best for Jesus. Not all encumbrances or hindrances are sin, however.

What is a hindrance to you may not be a hindrance in any way to someone else. Encumbrances will slow us down spiritually. Reid read a passage from I Corinthians 9 this morning where the writer, Paul, was saying that he would sacrifice whatever was needed to win the prize. Paul didn’t want to be slowed down spiritually. He said he would discipline his body into subjection, into slavery, if need be, in his mission of winning souls to Jesus. Most people, including many Christians today, are instead slaves to their bodies. Their bodies tell their minds what to do. Their bodies decide when to eat, what to eat, how much to eat, when to sleep when to get up, and on and on. Folks, there must be an attitude in this race of faith that understands the spiritual exercises to run this race. It takes the discipline of an athlete. Once there was a speaker for the Navigators who was speaking to 30 people at a retreat. He began his message by saying, “If we all meet back here in 20 years, there may be three of you that are still faithfully serving the Lord.” He continued, “I am here this weekend looking for the three.” It’s how you start and it is how you finish.

Sometimes a weight can be a “good thing,” but it is not the “best thing.” Friend, as a devoted disciple of Jesus, we must not settle for good. We must sacrifice for the best. There are certain things

that everyone else in the world can do but you shouldn't do. Just because I can doesn't mean I should. You want to know a few weights that affect us spiritually? What about weights of impatience, indifference, laziness, procrastination, wrong priorities. Most of us battle too much TV; movies, TV series, ball games. Three hours per night with no time left to read or memorize God's Word. The Psalmist said, **"Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee"** (Psalm 119:11). Listen if you're not able to be in the Word on a daily basis, most likely there is a weight in your life. The Greek word *ogkos* is the heaviest word for weight. It means the things that you may enjoy in life have become weights because they occupy too much of your time, and too much mental energy.

- Run confidently - Not only are we to lay aside every weight, we must also set aside **"the sin which so easily ensnares us."** Isn't this an apt description of what sin repeatedly does? It traps us. The sin here in the context of Hebrews 10, 11, and 12 suggests it is the sin of unbelief. This particular sin affects us like a cramp in the leg, causing us to break our stride or hobble off the course altogether. Unbelief is an attitude of the heart which says for me to stay in the race I need God + _____. Once we add a plus sign to the equation it does not matter how we fill in the blank. We have stepped into the realm of unbelief. Hebrews 11:6 states, **"But without faith it is impossible to please God."** Besides unbelief, I have heard believers confess in my office: Sexual promiscuity—the guilt of a pre-marital sexual relationship, no discipline in the area of moral purity. Sins like drugs, alcohol, anger (usually occurs with men and often times good men who love the Lord but explode at work or at home). Sins of pornography, cursing, slander, gossip, stealing, guilt, bitterness, to name a few. But the one I don't see very often, though, is the sin of pride. Proud people never think they have a pride problem. But if we would finally admit to pride, then God could replace it with a humble heart. When I see men and women who are not

effective for Jesus, it's usually because of a weight or a sin. They never see the value of their usefulness to God. They are never willing to sell out and be all in for God.

- Run consistently - Verse one concludes by challenging us to **“run with endurance the race that is set before us.”** The word **“endurance”** comes from the Greek word *hupomone* meaning to abide under. The idea here is that when things happen in your Christian life that you don't understand, or when trials physically or relationally get difficult, or when opposition at work or family hits you, that you keep running without throwing in the towel or dropping out of the race. You persevere! You endure! Listen, we will all get weary, tired, or distracted, but the key is to stay on course and endure. God specifically designs a particular race for each us. What is important is not how fast I run, but how long I run. It's not just how I start but it's how I finish. When your alarm goes off early in the morning and you know that you can't grow as a Christian unless you get out of bed and spend time in God's Word and prayer, you have a choice to make. God is looking for the discipline and character to get out of bed and spend time with Him. This race does not require ability it requires fortitude. It is not a sprint but a marathon. Don't cut bait and run from God. If you remember, that didn't bode well for Jonah.

Transition: We come finally to our last reminder and it's the best. It's the key for staying on course We look to our hero and we all have heroes. The question is, is it the right hero? Growing up, for me, it was Wally Johnson. He was the president of the youth group. He would challenge us in the Word. He was a good athlete. He had white Stan Smith Adidas tennis shoes. I mean I wanted to dress like him, talk like, be like him. He was a good example to me. In Hebrews 11 we have been given a roster of Old Testament witnesses that encourage us and are example to us, but friends we should have only one focus and that must be Jesus. He is. . . .

3. The example we must follow as we run - v. 2 He
tells us two ways to follow the example of Jesus

- Look at Him - v. 2 **“Looking unto Jesus”** This first word in this verse is from the verb *aphorao*. It means “to look away from all else and fix one’s gaze upon.” Greek scholar Brooke Foss Westcott comments on this present participle, suggesting that it means attention focused “not only at the first moment, but constantly during the whole struggle.” Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. He is faith’s pioneer and perfecter; its beginning and end. He completed it. From A—Z it’s all about Him. God designed a race tailor-made for His Son which He gladly embraced, even though it was hard and shameful. Why did He do it? **“Who for the joy that was set before Him.”** You know who the joy is referring to here? If you’re a child of God this morning, saved by Jesus, just put your name right here in parenthesis next to the word **joy**. It was for you. You are His joy. So, you focus on the joy that enabled Him to endure the awesome agony of that cross.
- Think about Him - v. 3 **“Consider Him”** The Greek word *analogizomai* means “to meditate or reflect upon.” Consider Him **“who endured”** (It’s the key word in our text. It appears in all 3 verses tying this passage together). He faced all kinds of hostility but He endured. He remained submitted to His Father’s will. Friends, sometimes the race is tough and the obstacles are heavy, but when the thought of quitting or walking away begins to harass you, just get your spiritual eyes and mind back on Jesus. If you are to finish the race well, it is imperative to keep your eyes on Jesus. If anything in life gets your eyes off of Jesus, it is, without question, not of God. On this truth you stand and you run. On Dr. Bob Jones Jr. headstone reads: *A fight well fought; A race well run; A faith well kept; A crown well won.* It is how you start and it is how you finish!

Conclusion: Friends, not everyone here is in the race. There is an entrance fee for this race. You can’t run with perseverance a race that you’ve never started. The entrance fee has been paid for you. Jesus paid for it on the cross. When you acknowledge your sin and you accept

His payment by faith, you don't have to work for 50 years in China to receive it. All He wants is a willing and repentant heart to receive His gift. You need to realize that you need Him because you're a sinner and God offers Himself through His Son Jesus to save you. Today could be the day you enter the race of faith.

Prayer: