



Sunday November 05, 2023
Hebrews 12:1-3 (All Saints Sunday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

5k's, 10k's, half marathons and marathons have become pretty popular forms of recreation and enjoyment for a lot of people these days. Most of you already know that I'm one of *these* people, and maybe some of you are too.

For those who take running in these events seriously, there's lots of training that goes into preparing to participate in one of these races. There are *some* people who do it to compete against others with the goal of winning. Others are there to compete against themselves with the goal of beating their previous best time. And still, for others the goal is simply to finish the darn thing and get the t-shirt and finisher medal.

So, whether you like races or not, *or* you're just someone who feels that the only good reason to run is if you're being chased by a bear – the author of today's scripture text from Hebrews, uses a metaphor common in that day and time, comparing living a life of faith with running a difficult race.

The race that *we're* being called to run is not one based on speed or distance, but rather on endurance, perseverance, and patience. The goal of running *this* race isn't to beat others to the finish line and best times are completely irrelevant. The goal of running this race is simply to keep going and not stop until you cross the finish line.

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, and it has been our tradition to take time to remember all those in our faith community and in our personal lives who have died in the past year.

All Saints Day gives us a moment to grieve those saints we have lost, but also to move us into thanksgiving for their lives among us, and even more, to celebrate their place now among the great cloud of witnesses gathered in the presence of God.

However, sometimes as we recognize this day, I think we do so with a narrowed vision of loss. So, I'd like us to consider expanding our vision of who else might be impacted by this day. Because here's the thing, loss that deserves notice and demands comfort comes from many different places, not only death.

It comes as we depart one job for another and leave friends and colleagues behind. It comes as high school and college students prepare to head off for their next round of schooling or many other directions as they begin the next phase of their lives. It comes as you slowly lose a loved one to dementia, cancer, addiction or any other illness out of your control. It comes in the loss of employment or dignity. It comes in the loss of safety and peace.

It comes in the loss of freedom and independence. It comes when a marriage or other relationship ends. It comes from the exhaustion of caring for a child with special needs or a parent whose health is failing and the occasional recognition of all that's been given up in order to offer that care. It comes from disappointment at home or work or school – of dreams deferred, hearts broken, or hopes destroyed.

These losses, whether they result in physical death or the realization that something important in our lives has come to an end, is nevertheless very real and very painful. And I feel there's incredible value for us taking time to recognize how this day could address *all* the various losses that we've encountered.

So, what are some of the losses that you have experienced and have watched others experience over the past year? And I wonder if we might also imagine that the "*saints*" that we speak of are not only those who are now gathered in the presence of God, but also each of us who have and continue to experience loss.

Like a runner who feels like they've hit the wall – that point when their exhaustion overwhelms, and their legs have grown heavy – when they have nothing left inside and they feel like they just can't go on anymore, and so they stop running. I wonder if any of you have ever felt this way in *your* life.

Well, if you have then let me reassure you that you're not alone, because many, if not all of us have also felt this way. But thankfully for us, God knows all too well the struggles we face and doesn't expect that perseverance to come from within us.



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In today's text from Hebrews, we are offered the encouragement we need to keep going, keep enduring, keep persevering, keep fighting – keep running. In fact, the entire point of these three short verses that we heard today is to give us encouragement, hope, motivation, and strength to keep running the race before us.

And verses 2 and 3 point us the very source of this encouragement, *“looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart.”*

God knows our struggles all too well, because in Jesus he walked that journey ahead of us so that we might have hope for the difficulties we will face. God is so intimately aware of our struggles that he even knows that we need nourishment to sustain us through all of the challenges we will encounter. So, he invites us to gather regularly around his table of grace and mercy, forgiveness and love – and there we are fed and strengthened by the body and blood of Jesus.

It's a common practice for many runners to recite a mantra in their head over and over in order to help them overcome the pain and shift their focus to something more positive so they can keep running. Well, I thought of a few that might encourage *you* and help you in *your* race:

- *“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.”* Romans 14:8
- *“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”* Isaiah 41:10
- *“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”* John 14:3
- *“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”* Joshua 1:9
- *“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Roman 8:38-39
- *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* Philippians 4:13
- *“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”* 1 Thessalonians 4:13

I could go on and on, but I think you get the point.

My friends, God has surrounded with us a great cloud of witnesses to these encouraging truths – those we mourn today: Mary, Linda, Gerald, Roland, Villgerd, James, Connor, Benicio, Joanne, and Clifford – along with so many others that God has placed throughout our race to cheer us on and give us strength to keep going.

So, keep running. Do not be weary and do not lose heart but set aside every weight and sin that seeks to diminish your joy and separate you from the love of God. And as you do, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus – the one whose race took him to a cross and ended victorious at an empty tomb. Thanks be to God. Amen.