

Pastor's Message – 3/17/24

Micah 6:7-8

Ephesians 6:13-20

John 19:16-22

I was listening to an article on the radio the other day about how women are beginning to outperform men in ultra-marathons: marathons over 195 miles. I have never run a marathon. I've run two miles and ran to prepare for football in high school, but I can't even imagine running 195 miles. I can't imagine the level of perseverance that would take.

Running long distances is not the only thing that requires perseverance. There are many times in our lives when we must persevere to complete something. Maybe you have been on a long hike or mountain climb and wondered if you would make it. Then you got a second wind, and you kept going to reach the end of the trail or the top of a cliff. Perhaps you have had a difficult assignment at school or at work that took hours and meant some late nights, but you finished a project that you thought at various times you might never complete.

Today, this 5th Sunday of Lent and the last Sunday before Palm Sunday which begins Holy Week, we are continuing our Guided to the Cross-worship series and Bible Study which we began way back on Ash Wednesday, February 14. Today, we have focused on how the cross guides us to forgiveness, hope, peace, love, and trust and today we are taking a look at how we are "Guided to Perseverance" in this season.

Perseverance means continuing on even when things look hard or dire. That is certainly a common theme in Lent. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days. Jesus after which he was hungry and tired and worn out, yet he did not succumb to the temptations of the devil, who basically was telling him to give up.

Then think of the night in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus prayed in such agony that, according to Luke 22:44, "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." Yet Jesus pressed on even in this turmoil, knowing that the suffering he

was going to experience shortly was the will of God to achieve a greater goal.

Consider the rejection Jesus felt during his ministry when people turned away from his message of salvation in him. Even some people from his own hometown wanted to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus literally passed through this resistance and went on his way, continuing to preach and teach and heal.

Even though he was God, can you imagine his feelings when he saw his own disciple Judas betraying him with a kiss when soldiers came to arrest him. He must have been in sorrow to see his closest friends desert him as he was led away to trial. Yet he gave himself to those who arrested him and did not fight back or shout in anger. In fact, in Caiaphas' court, he did not say a word as false witnesses told all sorts of lies against him.

Then when Jesus was whipped by the soldiers, he took each lash. When a crown of thorns was placed on his head, he did not resist. When the people in the courtyard in front of Pontius Pilate shouted, "Crucify him, crucify him!" He did not turn away but took their angry intents.

Which takes us to the cross. "Crucify him," they said. And that is what they did. Historians call crucifixion one of the most cruel and painful types of torture and means of death. But Jesus took the nails. He heard the scoffing. He bore the pain of the life being wrestled away from his body. He even wondered if he had been abandoned by his Father when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) In that moment, he bore the weight of all the sins of the world.

The cross is the ultimate sign of perseverance. We as humans cannot even imagine what Jesus went through for us on the cross to save us from sin and death forever. Jesus is the prime example in our lives of someone who kept moving forward to the very moment of his death.

We are guided to the cross today to remember that perseverance. Many people on Good Friday set aside the three hours when Jesus was on the cross in total darkness to simply sit and think about what Jesus went through for us and feel the time ticking by slowly, not getting up to do something else or think about

something else. If just sitting that long is hard, think about how much harder the experience of the cross was for Jesus.

Christ's perseverance on the cross gives us a prime example to follow. We as Christ's followers are not quitters. We go the distance for him. We do not turn back to our old ways of sinning. We look to the goal of heaven with him that awaits us even in the midst of our sufferings here on earth. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: "We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

The comparison of Jesus' perseverance driving our own becomes even clearer when St. Paul reveals, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So, death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Corinthians 4:8-12). Jesus' perseverance unto death on the cross has brought us life, and our perseverance in our life brings the meaning of the death of Christ to light in us and through us. There is new life for us all because Jesus persevered to death on the cross for us. Now, we proclaim the death and life of Christ to all the world through our own perseverance for the sake of the Gospel.

St. Paul was writing to new Christians who were facing persecution and even death for their faith. Persevering for the sake of the cross of Christ was truly a life-and-death decision. Yet these followers of Christ persevered, and many were martyred, but their faith was revealed to those around them. Paul and Silas were singing hymns in prison that could be heard by other prisoners. As St. Stephen was being stoned, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Sound familiar? In that very moment, Stephen was uttering the same sentiment Jesus did in the moments before he

breathed his last breath on the cross when he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46).

I wonder how any of us might react if we were faced with such dire circumstances. It is hard to know, of course. There are Christians around the world who are persecuted and have their lives threatened even today. But what we do know is that we have Jesus on our side, the crucified Christ who went the distance for us and never looked back. His confidence and strength on the cross help us to have confidence and strength when our faith is put to the test through trials and tribulations, sicknesses and injuries, the death of loved ones, natural disasters, and human atrocities.

Many hospitals have crosses on the walls of patient rooms for this reason. The cross reminds us that we can keep going. We can carry on. We can buckle down and muscle through because Christ defeated our greatest enemies on the cross—sin, death, and the devil, and because of that, nothing else really matters anymore. The cross is a sign that the end of all pain and suffering will come when Christ, who was crucified and who rose from the dead on Easter, returns to take us home to heaven to live with him. His perseverance for us will be paid off when we arrive in that eternal realm where "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water" (Revelation 7:17). We will thirst no more because Jesus said, "I thirst" and drank the bitter cup on the cross. Our lives are safe in that knowledge.

As we are guided to the cross, we are guided to perseverance. Jesus' example and his promise to be with us, never to leave us or abandon us gives us the strength to persevere and press on to our ultimate reward: heaven for us all who carry on. Amen.