

CONFIRMATION SUNDAY

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Finish the Race

Hebrews 12:1

¹Therefore, 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.

Psalm 27:1

The LORD is my light and my salvation-- whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid?

There are many different comparisons that can be made when it comes to life on this earth. Shakespeare compared life to a play when he wrote, "All the world's a stage. And all the men and women merely players." In the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's momma says, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." Perhaps one of the best analogies that can be made is between life and a race. This is a comparison that is made a few times in the Scriptures. On this Confirmation Sunday, we are going to look at one of these instances, which is also one of our Confirmation verses today, and take from it the encouragement for all of us to finish the race of life in faith.

It's a great picture that the author of Hebrews uses in the first verse of chapter 12. It's one that was easily understandable to those living in the first century and it is one that is very accessible for us today. Every four years, millions of people around the globe tune in to watch athletes compete in the Summer Olympic Games—the direct descendant of the kind of games the author of this letter was writing about nearly 2000 years ago. And just what kind of Olympic event does he compare life to? It's a race. But what kind of race is it? The Greek word that is used is the word *agon*. This word is the root of our English word "agony." The kind of race that is meant is a real struggle. This is not the 100-yard dash. This is a grueling marathon—one that requires great endurance.

What makes the race of faith so grueling? In our verse from Hebrews the author writes about things that try to hinder us in our race. This leads us to think of our three great enemies of our faith—the devil, this world and our sinful flesh. The devil is hard at work these days and he has only one goal in mind—to destroy your faith and take you down with him. When you come to church, when you publicly proclaim your faith in God, you paint a great big target on your back for Satan. He doesn't want your faith to endure and he will do everything he can to see to it that it falters. One of his favorite tools to use is the influence of a sin-filled world. It's not easy to live your Christian faith and stand up for God's Word these days. And it isn't going to get any easier. You will be painted as an old-fashioned fool. You will be mocked and ridiculed. You will be pressured into abandoning the Word of God and adapting to the values of a corrupt society.

The struggle not only comes from the outside. At times, we provide our own opposition when we listen to the devil's lies ourselves and become entangled in sin. It's hard to run a race when you are weighed down unnecessarily or when your feet are all tangled and not able to move freely. This is what sin does to our race of faith. What is it that is weighing you down or tying you up these days? Is it your

unwillingness to give up on the pleasures this world offers and devote your life to God alone? Is it a lustful heart? Is it an apathetic spirit—you just don't care? Is it anger? Is it selfishness? The end result is that, by our sin, we make the race more and more difficult. In the face of so much opposition, the temptation is strong to just give up—to stop running.

Many runners have faced this dilemma—they have felt the urge to stop running. Some have quit. Some keep on going. Where do they get that strength and power to endure? One source of encouragement, especially in the Olympics, is the great crowd of people standing on the sidelines, cheering them on. The author of Hebrews wants us to know we, too, have a crowd cheering us on in our race of faith. He writes, *“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.”* What is this great cloud of witnesses of which he writes? You simply need to go back one chapter in the book to Hebrews 11. This is known as the great “Heroes of Faith” chapter. If you remember, last week's sermon was based on the section of this chapter which speaks about Abraham. But he's not the only hero that is mentioned. There is also Noah and Joseph and Moses and Rahab and the list goes on.

This is the crowd that has gathered to cheer you on. These are men and women that have run the race of faith and have finished. Their faith still testifies to you today. They know what it is like to face the trials and hardships of a life of faith and, through the Word, they still speak to you today. Noah says to you, “Do you feel, at times, like you are the only believer left in this world? Like everyone is against you? I've been there. I endured. Keep going. You can make it.” Joseph says to you, “Do you feel as though God has placed one too many difficulties in your life? Do you think that there is no way your situation can work out for good? I was there. God did make it work it. And he will for you, too. Keep on going. You can make it.” Moses says, “Do you struggle with feelings of inadequacy? Do you doubt whether or not you have the ability to carry out the job the Lord has assigned to you? I've been there. God got me through it. Keep on going. You can make it.” Rahab says, “Are you loaded down with guilt? Do you doubt there is a way God can use a sinner like you for the good of his church? Look at how he used me. He can use you, too. Keep on going. You can make it.” These aren't the only heroes out there. You have your own personal heroes—a grandparent or parent, a spouse or a child—someone who is now at home with the Lord, but whose faith still serves as a living witness and encouragement for you today.

This is the great crowd of supporters you have, cheering you on, letting you know you are not alone in your race of faith. But that's as much as they can do—cheer you on, inspire you. The real strength for the race comes from the one who is standing at the finish line—he is the one that the great crowd is all pointing you towards—he is the one that can actually give strength to your weak legs and aching muscles—he is your Savior, Jesus. In our other confirmation verse, the psalmist puts the spotlight on the one who gives us strength when he writes, *“The LORD is my light and my salvation-- whom shall I fear?”* The reason we are able to keep on running is that we know the Lord as our light and our salvation. We know that through our Savior Jesus, we have forgiveness for our sins. In him, the guilt that weighs us down is removed and we can run with freedom and confidence. His Word shows us the way as the light for our path.

The psalmist goes on to write: *“The LORD is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid?”* This is a great thought. The Lord is the stronghold of my life. That means he is the one I can keep coming back to for strengthening and endurance. Life is not easy. It is good to know that no matter

what happens, no matter what difficult situation you find yourself in, you can come to the Lord as your anchor and your assurance. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do you know the story of John Stephen Akwari? Akwari was a marathon runner from the country of Tanzania, who competed in the 1968 Olympics held in Mexico City. Akwari is not remembered for setting a world record or winning the gold medal. Akwari is remembered for finishing dead last. Hours after the winners had crossed the finish line, after the awards had been handed out, the few thousand people remaining in the stadium were surprised by the glow of the lights off of police cars, escorting a man into the stadium. Here was Akwari, struggling to finish the final lap with a bandage around his bruised leg. Although Akwari had been a favorite to finish the race, he had stumbled and fallen and now struggled with all of his might to limp across the finish line. The remaining crowd cheered him on as though he was the winner. Later, a reporter asked Akwari why had gone through all that pain, even when he knew he had no chance of winning. Akwari responded, "My country did not send me 7000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7000 miles to finish it."

That is the same sense of purpose and perseverance that beats in the heart of a Christian. Jesus Christ did not suffer and die for our sins that we might start the race of faith. He gave his life that we might finish it and see him in heaven. That's it. That is our goal: to finish the race. Along the way, we receive encouragement from a great crowd of witnesses, those who have gone before us and those that are in the race with us even now. The encouragement we receive is to keep our eyes on Jesus. He is the one who will give us the strength to go on. He is the one who will forgive us when we fall down. He is the one who lift us up and put us back on the track. He is the one who will see us to the finish line and welcome us home to heaven. Keep on going. Keep your eyes on Jesus. You can make it. **Amen.**

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