

Sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Durham, NC: 8/19/07. Proper 15 Year C Hebrews 11:29-12:2

In this morning's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, the writer talks about running the race with perseverance. This time next year, we will be watching races at the summer Olympics in Beijing, China. I remember a story from the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, where a British runner by the name of Derek Redmond hoped to win an Olympic medal in the 400 meter dash. Redmond had been a favorite to medal in '88 at the Seoul Olympics, but an achilles tendon injury had knocked him out of the running. After painful surgeries and rehabilitation, Redmond was ready to compete again in '92 and pursue his goal of an Olympic medal. In his qualifying heat, he took the lead early, but with about 175 meters to go, his hamstring seized up and he was forced to his knees. His Olympic dream was over. Derek never got the medal he hoped for.

It's a sad story. Derek Redmond was so determined, and he had suffered a great deal to make his way back to competition. We would like to believe that such hard and faithful work is rewarded. Not always. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews would agree. In this morning's reading, we hear about the many faithful men and women who hoped God would reward them but suffered terrible hardships along the way. It does not seem fair. Even so, the writer encourages us to keep the faith and to be like runners who stay in the race. Run with perseverance and when the going gets tough, keep our eye on Jesus. Run the race and watch for Jesus.

God has given faithful people races to run since the beginning. The writer of Hebrews (scholars are not sure who wrote the letter, but whoever it was knew their history) spends a good bit of time recounting how people throughout the history of Israel had seen amazing results by faith. By faith, Abraham journeyed from his home to a foreign land. By faith, Moses led the people of Israel on a race out of slavery in Egypt and through the Red Sea. By faith, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down and the Israelites ran in to occupy the "promised land." By faith, the people of God won victories, conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, and escaped the sword. But there were other people too, the writer reminds us, other faithful people who were not so fortunate. Even though they had faith, they suffered: mocking and flogging, imprisonment and torture, exile and execution. God gave them races to run too, but they never reached the finish line. God had some greater plan, a plan that involved all of us finishing the race together. As the writer describes in 11:40 "God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect."

God had provided something better? Well it might not have seemed better to the ones who were stoned to death or sawn in two. Sometimes, God's greater plan is difficult to discern. Our spiritual ancestors ran the races they were given with faithful strides, but we sometimes find it difficult to keep the faith. We like to win, and in many of the races set before us, we find ourselves lagging behind. We are in a race, for example, to spread the Christian faith according to the Episcopal tradition, while at the same time our culture seems less and less interested in mainline Protestantism. We are in a race to care for God's creation, while at the same time oil companies are racing to the melting arctic ice

to drill for more fuel that will create more greenhouse gases and more global warming. We are in a race to end extreme poverty in the next eight years while at the same time the uncertain future of our financial markets threatens to trip us. These races are big, but others are more personal. One couple is in a race to save a failing marriage. A neighbor is in a race to finish another round of cancer treatment. Sometimes we are in a race to simply make it through the day without going insane. The writer of Hebrews wants us to run whatever race we are given with patience and perseverance. Keep our gaze on Jesus, and all will be well. Keep the faith. Keep the faith? Sometimes we find it hard just to keep up. (hopefully you're not finding it hard to keep up with this sermon though!)

If we are growing weary or losing heart, the writer of Hebrews says to look to Jesus because Jesus endured great hostility. So just because Jesus suffered, we have to suffer too? Just because Jesus took on the pain of the world, so do we? It may seem this way at first, but I want us to take another step. Jesus suffered and died on the cross but the writer of Hebrews tells us that he also looked beyond and saw the joy of God. Jesus saw that God was promising us joy and peace, but the only way to reach that joy and peace was through a mysterious act of sacrifice. And so Jesus ran the race of death so that he could find joy on the other side and blaze the way for us. Jesus, unlike anyone before or since, ran the race of death in such a way as to make it a race of life. He changed the course. As the writer of Hebrews says, he is "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." We look to Jesus because he changed the race and won. And when we follow Jesus, he shows us the way home, the way through suffering, the way of joy.

We may not experience the fullness of God's joy in this life. We may find that our suffering outweighs our sense of peace. In the midst of our suffering, we may not want to get up and run. Or we might rather sit on the sidelines and watch others. But Jesus won't hear of it. He wants us to feel the joy on the other side of suffering. Jesus knows the race is painful. Life is painful and hard whether we run with Jesus or not. The way of Jesus is not about avoiding pain; there is no way to totally avoid pain. The way of Jesus is about moving through pain to find joy. Jesus is not getting us into the race so that we can suffer more. Jesus wants us in the race so that in the midst of life's suffering we can taste the joy of God.

I want to return to the story of Derek Redmond at the 1992 Olympics. After his hamstring popped and he fell to his knees, the television cameras cut to where his fellow competitors were crossing the finish line. But then they cut back to Redmond. He had gotten to his feet and was hobbling the last 175 meters of the race. It was amazing. He was determined to finish, even though he was in obvious agony and his hopes for a medal were dashed. The crowds were on their feet. Then came another surprise. A man from the stands ran onto the track to Redmond's side. The man was his father, and he put his arm around his son and helped him through the final meters of the race. The security guards were telling him to go away, but he insisted on staying with his son. His father had come out of the stands not to help him win but to help him continue running, so that he would not have to run alone and so that he might have the small joy of crossing the finish line.

We do not find the joy of God by winning the race. We find the joy of God by faith, when we make our way down to the track and help each other take one more step. We find the joy of God by faith when we are suffering in agony and suddenly find someone at our side. We find the joy of God by faith when we remember how Jesus walked with us on the earth and suffered and died but rose again. We find the joy of God by faith when we remember that we are not alone, that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses whose faith inspires our faith. They are cheering us on: "Stay in the race," they cry. "We are all going to finish together. Keep the faith! Jesus is with you."

And Jesus is there. Maybe it's exactly when we need it or perhaps when we're least expecting it, but Jesus is there. He's there like Derek's father, whispering to us, "You are not alone. I am with you." Jesus says, "I ran the race too. I suffered too, but I also found a joy beyond understanding. Keep running," says Christ. "Keep running and look for me."