

RUN THE RACE—Surrounded by the Faithful

Hebrews 12:1-2

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March 1, 2020, First Sunday in Lent

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/guide-my-feet-judson-choir-surrounded-by-the-faithful/

You may not realize it but the New Testament is full of sports metaphors, drawn from the Greco-Roman culture. Our text this Lenten season is just one example. The first-century world was very serious about their amphitheaters and stadiums. Who better than Chiefs fans to attest to the power of the cheering crowd, urging the athletes on?

Since v. 1 begins with the word “therefore,” we have to look at what went before it. Hebrews 11 is the roll call of the faithful through the ages. Here is a 30-second summary: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel. And that 11th chapter closes out with these words: “Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword...destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy” (vv. 36-38).

These faithful ones are in our arena. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. A middle school teacher was leading her class on world cultures. As a class exercise, she asked students to share their earliest memories. The usual answers came—my dog, riding a pony, my mom, going to the lake. Then it was a Jewish boy’s turn. Without pausing, he said simply, “Abraham.” Think about this: Judaism and Christianity both center on the word “remember” (Passover, Lord’s Supper).

Perry Sanders told the story of the woman in Louisiana who repented and came to Christ. This new convert got excited when she learned of Lottie Moon, a missionary to China, who died in service to her Lord. For generations, Baptist churches named our Christmas Missions offering after Lottie Moon. As this new believer was telling a friend about Lottie Moon, the friend said, “I’ve never heard of her.” The Christian was indignant. “Woman, read your Bible!” Who’s in the balcony of your life, cheering you on? Not just Bible characters. Modern-day cheerleaders.

I don’t know exactly what it means that we are surrounded by the faithful. Can they see everything we do? I hope not! I like what the late Bible scholar F.F. Bruce wrote. It’s not so much that they look at us as we look at them [*New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle of Hebrews*, p. 346].

What an astonishing fact—someone was here before us! G.K. Chesterton wrote, “If you want to know the size of the church you have to count the tombstones.” So here’s a good reminder: The past should be our mentor, not our master.

I wonder why Hebrews encourages us with a cloud of witnesses, with stories about people, instead of merely with precepts, commandments, “Thou shalt keep going.” Because we are wired for stories. Judaism and Christianity are story-formed faiths.

If all we do is look at Bible verses, someone can say, “How do you know that’s true?” But when we see a real person following Christ, obeying God, we begin to believe it’s doable. Jesus worked for them. Maybe he can for me, too. Somehow, through their struggles and pain, they made it. We can, too. I’m not the first to go through this heartache.

Dr. David Gushee recently published a book, *Moral Leadership for a Divided Age*. In it, he shares the stories of morally courageous people. He says this is the best way to teach ethics rather than simply studying theories and ideas. Because we can relate to real people, real stories.

I was visiting with Rod Maples about his marathons He told me about one at which he wore a St. Louis Cardinal tee shirt. As he ran, he started hearing, “Go, St. Louis, Run!” He checked his pace and realized that at the sound of that encouragement, he was actually running faster. And partially because of that, he qualified for the Boston Marathon! Wow.

In a recent video conference, Dr. Gushee talked about the fourteen people surveyed in his book. He said many of them battled depression and discouragement. But the one thing that drove them back into the race was a sense of calling which detached them from short term results and a focus on the long-term finish line.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, * and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”