

Sunday, April 5
Run the Race: “The Cross, The Shame and The Joy”
Hebrews 12:1-2

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-cross-the-shame-and-the-joy/>

The past couple of weeks, I’ve seen a lot of Facebook posts saying things like, “I don’t know who needs to hear this: but it’s Sunday.” Or Friday or Monday or whatever day it is. During these days where many of us are working or learning from home by mandate or by choice for the good of others, it is so easy to lose track of time. I’ve never been more grateful for my little pill box. Oh, it’s Tuesday. Thank you. Of course, it only works if I remember to take them each day which I don’t.

Holy Week in the Church begins today, Palm Sunday, as we walk slowly through this week towards the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. I don’t know about you, but Holy Week has snuck up on me while I’ve been overwhelmed by the adjustments, concerns, work and worries of life in quarantine.

And the realization that I’ve missed part of this holy season has made me sad and feels like yet another experience I’ve lost and need to grieve. Lent is my favorite church season as we are invited to slow down, to practice small deaths to things, to awaken to what God is doing in us and around us. To not miss the transforming story of radical love and grace on display along every inch of the road to the cross.

But to be completely honest, even in times without a global pandemic, I have found myself distracted during this season. I find myself in a rush to get to the “Easter Sundays” in life, the celebrations, the victories, the red tape of the finish line. I want to avoid the hard parts, the painful parts, the lonely parts of the race.

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When I was in college, I went on a weeklong trail hike in the mountains of Colorado. Our group headed out that first day, each weighed down by 40 lb packs of food and tents and supplies and full of dreams and hopes for a magnificent adventure ahead. Shortly into the first or second day, I was empty of dreams and hope and instead full of regret and pain and shame. I had not prepared well physically for this trip. I had underestimated how hard this journey would be – the elevation, the altitude, the weight of the pack. Did you know mountains just keep going up and up? They do.

But I had no choice. I couldn’t turn back. They couldn’t just leave me ... although I’m sure that was discussed in tents at night. I had to keep pushing forward each day. I had to endure the pain and the shame as I made my way slowly up and back down at the end of that week. I have

a few snapshots in my mind and maybe a photo album, but to be honest, I missed a lot of the beauty and majesty of the people I was with and the scenery of that adventure because my focus was on the pain and shame of the journey.

We are on a hard climb right now; a long marathon and we don't know how long it's going to last or what it is going to cost us along the way. Some of you listening today have lost jobs or investments. Some of you have lost special events and senior year traditions that may not be recovered. Some of you have or will lose someone you know and love.

On the mountain expedition, all I wanted to do was just get back down as fast as possible. I wanted it to be over. I wanted to skip past the pain, the shame, the lessons and get to Easter Sunday and a hot shower and an indoor toilet. But I couldn't. I had to walk the path ahead of me. The question was not *if* I would run the race but rather *how* I would run the race.

The question for us is not *if* we will run this race but rather *how* we will run this race.

As followers of Jesus, we look to Him for how to live and how to love. We look to him, study him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, to learn how to run well this race we're in.

Hebrews 12:1-2 reads:

“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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our 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.”

On Palm Sunday, we remember that Jesus willingly went to Jerusalem in obedience to the Father, knowing he was on a hard journey toward the cross. He knew full well what this week would hold for him, the pain he would endure, the betrayal of those closest to him. Yet, Jesus voluntarily obeyed God, but not only that, Jesus did this with great joy – for the sake of joy.

When Jesus invites me to obedience, I wouldn't often describe my attitude as “with great joy”. It's more like kids at home these days when being asked to help with a chore. ‘Do I have to?’ ‘Ughh’. (Yes, I speak fluent teenager.)

God, do I have to forgive them? Do I really have to be okay with second place? Are you serious about that tithing thing or about sharing my toilet paper? Do I really have to fully surrender my plans and my life to You or could we work out some kind a deal – say 60-40 split? So often we think of Christian obedience as “giving in”. But if we look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the One who has run the race and finished it well, obedience to his Father brought him joy. True joy – not a shallow, happy-clappy attitude that doesn't acknowledge suffering or hard things. But rather a joy that is a pervasive and constant peace that comes from hope in God. Jesus didn't pretend hard days weren't ahead of him. When he road into Jerusalem with crowds

cheering and waving palm branches and shouting, Hosanna!, Jesus knew that these same people a few days later would be cheering for his death. He knew great pain was ahead of him. Throughout this week as we journey to the cross, we will read the stories of the great burden and weight this knowledge placed upon Christ's spirit just like the great burden and weight of the cross on Christ as he made his way to Calvary. And, yet he carries both with joy, with a pervasive and constant peace that comes from hope in God

What does it look like for you and for me to run this race with joy, true joy? How do we obey God with true joy when the weeks ahead of us are going to be heartbreaking and full of loss?

The Franciscan School of theology claimed that the cross was a freely chosen revelation of Love on God's part, meant to utterly shock the mind and heart and turn it back toward trust and love of the Creator.ⁱ

Trust and love.

I often tell the youth that when I'm facing hard things in life, things that don't make sense, things that hurt, I ask myself one important question: Do I trust that God is good? Do I believe that God's unchanging character is one of love and goodness? Because if I believe that God is loving and good and unable to be anything but loving and good, then I feel safe to trust and surrender my worries, my fears, and my life to God. I can do hard things because I live with a persistent and constant peace that comes from hope in God.

How do I know God is loving and good? There are many ways but none clearer than the events of Holy Week. In Jesus and out of great love, God enters our pain, the pain of the world and transforms it. God transforms all human suffering by identifying completely with our suffering and standing in full solidarity with it from beginning to end. This is the real meaning of the crucifixion.ⁱⁱ

Jesus endured the shame of being an outsider (mocked by the same people who waved palm branches and then crucified by religious leaders), He endured this so that we can all be insiders. All of our shame and guilt over not measuring up is taken into Jesus' great heart and erased, as he demonstrates a love for us which has always been there, yet we struggle to see and believe.

Picture yourself before the crucified Jesus; recognize that he became what you fear: naked, exposed, vulnerable, shamed. He became sin to free us from sin. He ran the race with joy not to change God's mind about us but to change our mind about God. To show us that God is loving and good and trustworthy.

One of the hardest moments on my hiking adventure was an afternoon where another team member had to carry my pack along with his. I was embarrassed. I was humbled. But I needed the help. I needed to set aside the weight that was keeping me from finishing the journey. I needed someone to come and take the weight off of me and carry it for me.

Some of us are carrying loads too heavy for us to carry. We're tired but we're proud. We're exhausted but afraid to trust. We need someone to come and carry it for us so we can run the race well.

Jesus has done this for us. Out of radical love for us and with great joy, Jesus took our sins upon himself on the cross, so that we might be transformed by this radical display of God's love and goodness – set free to run the race set before us with joy, with a persistent and constant peace that comes from hope in God.

What mountain are you climbing? What burdens are you carrying that you need help carrying? What is the next step of joyful obedience God is asking of you and me right now?

This Holy Week may you be reminded of how loved you are by God – not because of your goodness, but because of God's goodness. May you trust that you were on the heart and mind of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, as he finished the race with joyful obedience. And may the Holy Spirit gift you with strength, courage, and trust to run the race with joyful obedience.

ⁱ <https://cac.org/a-bigger-god-2019-02-06/>

ⁱⁱ <https://cac.org/coincidence-of-opposites-2019-02-07/>