

16 November 2003  
Second Last Sunday in Church Year

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“The Finisher of our Faith”

Text: Hebrews 12:1-2; Mark 13:24-31; Daniel 7:9-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Someone once said that *“Life is like a bowl of cherries.”* Forrest Gump told us that *“Life is like a box of chocolates.”* But today God is telling us through the author of the letter to the Hebrews, that the Christian life is like a race. It is a race of endurance, more like a marathon than like a sprint. It is a race which is begun in Holy Baptism, and run each and every day after that. It is a race in which we are sustained by the living water of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us to run through the preaching of the Word, and through the eating of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. And it is a race that one day will end, when by God’s grace we will cross the finish line when our earthly life comes to an end. So, we are told,

***“Let us run with endurance [this] race that is set before us.”***

Now while that is an easy picture to keep in your mind, it is not such an easy thing to do. Because sometimes we get tired of running this race, and just want to sit down and give up. Sometimes we lose our way. Sometimes instead of running the Christian life we try to run other races instead – and find ourselves running after money or success, or popularity or fame, or love. Perhaps sometimes we run only to keep one step ahead of the next guy. And then there are the times we spend running away from something or someone, or running in circles, or even running away from God.

***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”***

And this race that is set before us is more like a cross country race than a race on a nice, smooth track. For in this race, in this life, there are hills to climb, obstacles to negotiate, narrow paths to follow, and rocks and mud to slow you down. This race set before us was never promised to be easy, although if you’re anything like me, you sure do often wish it was a lot easier, and flatter, and shorter!

***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”***

And in this race we are not alone. For not only do we have our fellow runners, our fellow Christians to encourage us on the way, but as we heard in Hebrews, ***“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”*** And these are witnesses not simply *watching* us on the way, but witnesses *testifying* to us. Testifying to God’s faithfulness. So that when we are tired and weary of running, when we have doubts and fears, when we wonder whether or not it is really worth it, we hear that it is . . . and to keep going.

And who are these witnesses? That we are told in the previous chapter of Hebrews. They are the great heroes of the faith who have gone before us: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the list goes on and on. We could add to that list the witnesses of the New Testament, like Peter, Paul, James, John, Apollos, and others. And then there are the Fathers of the Early Church, the Reformers, even perhaps our own parents and grandparents. Not that it was easy for them. They struggled and they stumbled. They sinned and had doubts. But their life and faith is an example to us, and is testifying to us, that just as God kept them on the way, so He will keep you and I on the way. And as God was faithful to them, will He not also be faithful to us? So keep going.

***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”***

And as we run, the author tells us, ***“lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.”*** It is difficult to run with such things. And ask yourself: what burdens are you trying to carry as you run? What weights of stress or anxiety? What weight of expectations have others placed upon you, or have you placed upon yourself? ***Lay aside every weight.*** And also ***“the sin which clings so closely.”*** Or as other translations put it, ***“the sin that entangles.”*** And picture hair that’s tangled, and trying to run a comb through it. You just can’t do it. So what sins are holding you back? Tangling about your legs? Reaching out and grabbing you and ***“clinging so closely?”***

***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”***

Except we cannot do it. We cannot do it *if* we think we can do it! If we think we can lay aside our burdens; if we think we can loose ourselves of the sin that entangles; if we think we can if we just try harder, and do better, and be more dedicated, and just . . . But you cannot do it. For even if you could do all those things, and run focused and strong, and endure to the end, you would only get in sight of the finish line and then find out that there is a chasm between you and the goal. A chasm which you cannot cross. A great chasm between us and God, torn open by sin. It is the bottomless *valley of the shadow of death*. And it is the end of the road. The end of the road for everyone and every life.

And so how do we get there? How do we get across? Actually . . . it is by running the other way! We get to heaven not by running toward the goal, toward the finish line, toward heaven – but by running toward and to the cross. By running to Christ crucified. And that is what the author to the Hebrews meant and was describing when He said, ***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”*** For in running this race, we must look to Jesus, but not as we would like to see Him, enthroned in the glory of heaven, and so try to run to heaven ourselves! But to see Him as He wants to be seen, and that is as the bloodied, pitiful, dying man on the cross. As the Son of God who *came down* from Heaven, not to set an example for us and teach us how to do it, but as the One who came to cross the chasm Himself. To bridge the gap between God and man. To enter the valley of the shadow of death for us. And that is what we see on the cross – the battered, bruised, and bloodied body of the One who entered that valley, who entered death, and died.

***“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to [this] Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”***

The author and perfecter . . . or as some other translations put that, ***“the author and finisher of our faith.”*** And take careful note of that: the *finisher* of our faith. The finish line of our faith. The One who can get us to the finish. And He is the finisher of our faith because He is the One who finished the race! The only One. For He is the only One who entered the valley of the shadow of death, and came out the other side. For after entering death through the cross, He then three days later emerged from death, from the valley, and ***“is [now] seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*** And because He did, His resurrection means that there is now a way across the chasm, a way to get to the finish, to reach the goal that is set before us, and that is to be in Him. In Christ. For He knows the way. He is the way. The only way.

And so to ***“run with endurance the race that is set before us,”*** is not to try to run to heaven, but to run to Christ. To run to where He and His cross have now promised to be for us, and that is in His Word and Sacraments. For in those means is where His crucified and risen body and blood now are for us. We do not have to wonder where He is, or how to find Him, or how to receive Him and His gifts – we know. They are here. And when we are baptized, when we are absolved and forgiven, when we hear His Word, when we eat His flesh and blood, we are joined to Him. He lives in us and we in Him. And in Him, we not only run the race set before us, but finish it. For in Christ is where our burdens and weights are lifted. In Christ is where the tangle of our sin is removed, forgiven. In Christ in where our faith is strengthened and sustained. In Christ is the promise of eternal life. And in Christ we too will be seated around the throne of God in

Heaven. For He is the finisher, and will get us where we want to be.

But if we are sure and confident that Christ will get us where we want to be and will finish our faith – **then we are also where we want to be in this life.** For we will already have all that we might otherwise race after in this life. In Him we are safe and secure. In Him we have meaning and purpose. In Him we have contentment and satisfaction. In Him we are loved. . . . And so we can ***“run with endurance the race that is set before us,”*** for we know where we are going. We know that we will finish. And we know that in Christ, the victory has already been won.

And knowing this, we will not fear when the end of our race draws near – be that in death, or when Jesus comes again at the end of time, with all the signs and wonders that we heard about in the Old Testament and Gospel readings. We will not fear when ***“the sun is darkened and the stars are falling from heaven.”*** We will not fear when ***“the Ancient of Days takes His seat, the books are opened, and the Judgment begins.”*** We will not fear, because Jesus has promised us, ***“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.”*** And that doesn't just mean the Bible, but His words of grace and promise. His words that we rely on. His words which will not let us down.

And then as we run, as we run in Christ, and His cross, and His promises, we join and become one of that ***“great cloud of witnesses.”*** And you have the opportunity to testify, to encourage, to help your fellow saints on the way. To point them to Christ, that they too may finish the race . . . for the finish may be closer than we think.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.