

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
March 21 & 22, 2015  
Dee McIntosh  
Hope Endures  
Hebrews 12:1-2**

Good morning, everyone. How're you all doing? Oh, we can do better than that this morning! I know that the weather forecast says it's going to snow and we're not looking forward to that, but we're in the house of God! Amen? Amen! My name is Dee McIntosh. I'm on staff here at CPC and it is great to be with all of you this morning. That kids' play was amazing wasn't it? My favorite thing about kids is you can really tell their personalities when they are on the stands singing. You know, the kids who stand straight and they don't really want to open up their mouths and they don't want to move, and then you have the kids who are singing and they are moving their bodies all around. That was me when I was in choir. I just wanted to steal the show and so it's good to see that there are other little ones like me out there.

When I was in high school, I was a track runner. That may not seem surprising. I have very long legs and I was very fast. I come from a long line of track runners. My mom was a track runner. All of my aunts and uncles were track runners and so it was natural that I would run track as well. The race I specialized in was the 400-meter and I was good. I mean I was really good! When I was a sophomore in high school, I qualified for the Junior Olympics and got to compete in the 400.

By the time I got to my junior year, I had an ego the length of my arms and no one could tell me anything. In preparation for districts, my coach asked me if I would be willing to run the 800. I thought he was insane. "What do you mean you want me to run the 800? I'm a 400 runner and I'm good. There's no one better than me." But he said it would help my endurance in the 400. So the day of the race, I got lined up for the 800. Now let me just tell you the difference between the 400 and the 800. The 400 is a sprint. It's one time around the track and you're running as fast as you can to get to the finish line. The 800 is kind of like a trot. You're not really running that fast in the beginning, but in the last 200 meters, everyone kicks in and you get to see who the real runners are, the real speedsters.

So the gun goes off and immediately I'm out in front because I forgot this was a race of endurance and speed. By the time I crossed the 400-meter marker, I was way out in front and then it hit me. Where I would normally be done at this point had I run the 400, I still had another lap to go and I was tired and, frankly, I never really wanted to run this race. I continued to run, the pack was behind me, but when I got to the last 200 meters, I did what any normal, sane, able-bodied teenager would do. I faked an injury. With all the dramatic flair that I could muster, I slapped the back of my hamstring and I think I yelled or shrieked or something. I hobbled onto the field and if that wasn't enough, I rolled around on the ground for a minute or two just for those spectators who were still watching me. I watched as my coach walked down the bleachers from where he had been standing across the field. He walked slowly, ever so slowly. He waited

until all the runners crossed the finish line and then he walked slowly through the gate and across the field to where I was lying. He peered down at me and said, “The moment you took your eyes off the finish line, you’d quit the race.” And then he turned around and walked away. Apparently, he knew I was faking.

We’ve been in a sermon series on hope this Lenten season. In the first sermon in the series, John Crosby told us that hope is not circumstantial. It is not based on karma—if I do the right thing today, goodness will come back to me. Hope is not to be confused with emotion. It is not to be understood as happiness or some elated feeling. Hope is a steadfast orientation toward the promise. It is the proven and tried result of perseverance in the midst of the obstacles and the storms of life because hope is the certainty in the goodness and **faithfulness of God**. My life verse, my favorite verse in all of Scripture, is Psalm 27, verse 13, when the psalmist is facing persecution and peril and says,

*<sup>13</sup> I would have lost heart, unless I had believed  
That I would see the goodness of the LORD  
In the land of the living.*

*That* is hope! That is what hope is. **Hope rests upon the faithfulness of God** and God’s ultimate faithfulness has already been shown to each of us in the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen! Turn with me if you will to the Book of Hebrews, chapter 12. I said this last night, but ever since churches started getting screens, no one actually opens the Bible anymore. Have you noticed that? Just thought I’d throw that out there as you guys are opening up your Bibles. I’ll wait. Amen! Starting in verse 1,

<sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Amen! What I find interesting about the New Testament, particularly the New Testament Letters, which we call the Epistles, is that there is a sense of urgency in running the race of faith that just doesn’t seem to exist in the church today. For starters, it is understood that the New Testament, writers, particularly the apostles and the early communities, believed in the imminent coming of Christ. They believed that Christ would actually return within their lifetime. This is very different from the church today. This sense of the apocalyptic, that sounds daunting, doesn’t it? The apocalyptic simply means the returning of Jesus Christ. This sense of the apocalyptic became central to the understanding of the race of faith. The early church, therefore, was to endure the obstacles and tribulations that came with being a minority religion because Christ would soon return and set all things right. They were to be exemplars of the Gospel, living as if Christ would return that day.

Here in this text that we just read, the author of Hebrews is urging the small community of Christians to run the race of their faith with endurance in the face of peril, casting aside all of the things that could weigh them down and to set their eyes on the promise, the promise of Christ’s return. In chapter 10 of Hebrews, the author says this,

<sup>35</sup> Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. <sup>37</sup> For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay . . . .

This is so different from our context today, isn't it? Apart from the few who will proclaim to know the date and the time of Christ's return, I'm not sure how many of us actually live our lives oriented toward the apocalyptic, oriented toward the fact that Christ's return is our promise. How many of us live each day with the reality that Christ could actually return at any moment? In the church, Jesus Christ's return, I think, has become sort of a tall tale, kind of like Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox. We've heard the tale but we don't believe it could actually happen. This is not how the early church lived. This is why the early church is so distinctive from the way that we live today, because they believed that Jesus would return and when he returned, they wanted to be able to say that they had persevered. They had done what God had called them to do.

Friends, I'm here this morning to tell you that unless we know what the promised goal is, we cannot expect to endure the race. No one signs up for a race or an athletic event without first knowing when or where the finish will be, and most of us will not venture out in life and make decisions unless we know what the end goal will be. Sure, we'll take some risks, but those risks are often only worth it if the end result is worthwhile.

There is nothing more worthwhile in all of life than the return of Jesus Christ. There is nothing more worthwhile than thinking about spending an eternity with Our Lord and Savior. What I'm presenting to you today is not some hellfire and brimstone being proclaimed on the street corner by those with megaphones. What I'm talking about is a new heaven and a new earth, a new reality, in which there will be no more sickness or disease, no more suffering and strife. In the new reality that Christ will usher in, all things will be made whole and the light of Christ will shine so brightly that there will no longer be night. There will be no more hunger, no more isms—not sexism, classism or racism. Can you imagine that? It's amazing.

For the community in the Book of Hebrews, nothing meant more to them than finishing the race, and Christ stood as a forerunner before them, the exemplar in both symbol and substance. Christ was the symbol of **God's faithfulness** in fulfilling the promise given long ago to the Israelite people thousands of years before, and substance as the tangible flesh and blood of one who endured the cross for the sake of the joy that was set before Him. I think now we are ready to talk a little bit more about this race. There's a sign in my gym that I look at every morning. It hangs on a bright red pillar in front of the spinning machines. Every morning when I get on the spinning bike, I stare at the sign, often using it to help me get through my last few minutes of spinning. It says this.

It will hurt.

It will take time.

It will require dedication.

It will require willpower.

You will need to make healthy decisions.

It requires sacrifice.

You will need to push your body to its max.

There will be temptation

But I promise you, when you reach your goal, it's worth it.

This is the race of faith, the race that we've been called to endure. The race will hurt. As humans on this earth, we are almost guaranteed suffering and pain. That is the race. That is what we experience and endure. None of us are yet living in heaven and so we will experience the brutality of being human beings on earth. We will come across obstacles in life. Some of us will experience sickness and disease while we are on this earth. Many others of us will have heartbreak along the way, but **God is faithful**. The race of faith will take time. Because our ultimate hope is dependent upon God and not ourselves, there is no such thing as *arriving* in the Christian faith. The race takes the entirety of our lives. It will require dedication and willpower. When all else fails, will you still be standing? When all else falls away, will you retain your faith? As the saints before you, will you continue on in the race for the sake of the joy set before you?

You will need to make healthy decisions. It will require sacrifice. The Kingdom of Heaven is not like Burger King. You will not have it your way. There are people with poor habits, who have bad relationships, who have old ways of thinking that we will have to let go of if we have any expectation of finishing our race. **God is faithful**. You will need to push your body and your mind and your spirit to the max. There will be days when you will want to give in. There will be days when you will want to throw in the towel, but do not give up. Don't give in. **God is faithful**.

I have been sick for the past two weeks. I have had the stomach virus and some sort of flu-cold thing going on, stuffed up to the nines, and I thought this whole week, what if I just said I couldn't do it? What if I just said I'm going to stay home? I have every reason to stay at home this week, and yet **God has proven Himself to be faithful** when we push and press on, believing that He is there with us. The race of faith requires us to set our eyes on Jesus, who has shown us what it means to endure the race set before us. What I love about this passage in Hebrews is the imagery of looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The Greek word here means *to look away*, too, which means that while we are in the race, we are to look away from everyone and everything else that stands in the way, preventing us from concentrating on a single object, Jesus. Jesus is our eternal promise. He is proof of **God's faithfulness** and He will one day return to reign over both heaven and earth in its new splendor and glory. I cannot wait to be a part of what it is God will bring in with the return of Jesus Christ.

This whole week I've been doing a study on the apostle Paul. He is a really great Biblical character. I mean, who has a better story than the apostle Paul? This is a man who persecuted Christians relentlessly. He went after them with everything he had and then he had this dramatic conversion experience when he actually got to see Jesus. It doesn't get much better than that. If you want to talk about a good faith story, Paul has the best, I would say. Paul persevered through being put in jail. He persevered through people spitting on him and beating him up. People talked about him and they lied about him. They cursed his very name, and yet Paul persevered. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be Paul, to have been used by God to do miracles, signs, and wonders and write the majority of the New Testament, yet have this thorn in your side? Paul prayed three times to God to remove the thorn. We don't actually know what it was, but three times he prayed. Do you know what God said? "In your weakness, I am made strong." All right, God. You could have just said *no*. That would have been okay. And yet Paul still persevered. Toward the end of his life, he wrote this to his protégé Timothy.

<sup>6</sup>As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the

righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing [2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:6-8].

When I get to the end of my life, when I get to the end of my race, I have no idea how it's going to come. It may come with me just dying in my sleep. It may come through any sort of things. None of us knows what our end will actually be or when it will come about. I don't know about you, but I have made it up in my mind that I want to be like Paul at the end of my life. I want to be able to say that I have fought the good fight, that I have finished the race. I have endured and kept the faith. There is no greater glory than being able to join with the Messiah in the end and say that you have endured every single thing that the world threw in your way, that you have endured. This doesn't mean you will be perfect. This doesn't mean you won't quit from time to time. There are times when I'm like, I'm just going to quit for about 30 minutes here and then I'll get back in the game after about 30 minutes. But there is nothing more important than us setting our eyes on Jesus and finishing the race. Pray with me.

Father God, we are so grateful to be with You this morning. We are so grateful, God, that You have given us an eternal promise, the ultimate promise, the return of Your Son Jesus Christ. God, we stand here affirming and believing that Christ's return is not a tall tale but is, in fact, a truth and that it will come. Father God, I pray that as we endure the obstacles and all of the things that we face on a day-to-day basis that we will continue on, that we will not give up. Our hope is in You, God, because **You are faithful**. We pray all these things in Jesus Christ's Name. Amen.

A postscript from John Crosby:

*"I'm encouraging our congregation to get and read The Hope Quotient by Ray Johnston (available in our bookstore). The overarching theme of the series and many of the illustrations are found in there; solo deo Gloria!"*