

August 14, 2022  
Luke 12:49-56  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2

## The Race that is Set Before Us

### Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you have broken down the walls and divisions that keep us from one another and sent your Spirit to guide us and give us hope. Fill us with courage so we may live for your kingdom and the mercy and love that it brings; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Faith means having hope. It means believing in something you can't see.

It's looking into the distance and waiting for the blessing of God and

knowing that that blessing will come. In spite of how things look. In

spite of how bad things seem. You keep going, no matter how hard things get.

Having faith is not easy. That's what Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel of Luke. Following him won't be all sunshine and roses.

Sometimes, it will be a struggle. They will have to make hard choices.

There will be conflicts with those they love. Jesus tells his disciples that

if they keep going with him, it will get harder. Yes, they have caught a

glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Yes, they have experienced God's

healing and demons cast out and people restored and forgiven. They

have seen the full power of God's love and what is promised to the

world. But if they go on from here with Jesus, they will to the cross and

endure the suffering of love. Much will be required of them. Much more will be demanded.

The disciples have a reason to hope. They have a reason to believe in the Kingdom of God. It is real to them. More real maybe than to the average person in the crowd. And the average people looked to the disciples for hope. Their faithfulness would help others be faithful. As Jesus' life shape their lives, their lives would shape the lives of others. And there was some pressure there for the disciples to be a good example. Others were watching them, taking their cues from them. So they couldn't just quit. You know how hard it is when you are the older sibling or the senior employee, or the veteran officer. You have to keep going. And you work hard when others don't. You step up when others quit or turn their backs. Because you will keep doing what's right, even if no one notices or appreciates it. You aren't doing it for them, you are doing it for you. For something bigger than yourself. For the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

The disciples had hope in Jesus. They believed in the good news he announced that the kingdom of God was on its way. It was coming.

Meaning it was not here yet. It was not the established kingdoms of Herod or the Rome empire. It was not the kingdom of Caesar or the kingdom of the Roman Senate or the Jerusalem Sanhedrin. It was not the same as any of the current institutions. Their policies were not divine, and their rulers did not automatically have God's blessing. Jesus said that in God's Kingdom, God blessed the poor, the hungry, the sad, the ones suffering and sidelined by life. In God's kingdom, captives would be released and the oppressed would go free. There would be love for you and your neighbor and your enemy alike. In God's kingdom, there would be mercy. And all the mercy you gave would be the mercy you would receive.

Jesus said that God's kingdom was coming; it was just there, in the distance, just beyond their sight and their grasp and it was breaking into the world. And his disciples were to trust and put their faith in that. And teach others to have faith in it too. To believe that God's kingdom was coming, and it would disrupt all the other kingdoms out there. That it would be very good news to some. But it would be very bad news to others. Terrible news, unwelcome news. People with their own

kingdoms wouldn't like the change. They would react with hostility and anger. A crisis of faith would unfold, and things would turn dangerous. It would be like an out-of-control wildfire, raging through everything. People would choose division instead of mercy. They would choose fear instead of hope.

Jesus told his disciples that they would see their families come apart. They and many of those in the early church would see their communities turn against them. Their neighbors. Even their own family members. In hard times, there would be hard decisions to make. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us of all the people who made tough choices. The people who believed in the greater good things of God, who blessed the poor and the hungry and the grieving and were imprisoned, tortured, exiled or killed.

But Jesus proclaimed a kingdom beyond any kingdom on earth. Where mercy mattered. Where there was abundant life for all, not just a few. God's kingdom is about the power of love, not the love of power. And that's what he asked his disciples to believe. He asked them to live that truth, no matter who it disturbed or how it might get them into trouble or

how many family and friends they might lose. To live that truth is a hard decision. To be faithful to love and kindness, to risk mercy and grace. Maybe it has cost you dearly. But you had to. You couldn't be blind to injustice. You wouldn't stand by sanction while others were treated as less than human. You wouldn't stand above others and cast stones and act like you had God's kingdom in the palm of your hand. When you know the mercy you give is the mercy you will receive. And more is required of us as disciples.

Being faithful will be difficult, Jesus says. In the coming crises, the wildfire of hurt and suffering, and cruelty and betrayal by his own friends and denial, the courtroom trial, the guilty verdict, his abuse and abandonment, his crucifixion and death would reduce their world to ashes. But from this end, there would be a new beginning. After death there would be resurrection. This is the way, MY way, Jesus says. And if you want to be my disciples, it must be your way too. Follow me and trust God as I will trust God. On the darkest of days when everything looks like a failure, have faith. And believe that God has faith in you.

Trust that God has promised to always be with you. And God won't ever give up when things get hard.

Believing in that kingdom that is beyond us and beyond the tragedy of the world is not easy. It is not easy to trust God in the midst of fear and stress and cancer and financial hardships and broken relationships. It is not easy to put our faith in love and mercy. But in this faith we are not alone. We are never alone. There are so many others who have walked this way before us. So many others who have had to hold on to God, with the barest of beliefs and the faintest of hopes. The Bible is full of people living by faith: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Rahab, Hannah. Stephen, Elizabeth, Mary, Paul, John of Patmos. The Bible is a story of refugees and daredevils going out on a limb. Who keep trusting in God, even when it is difficult. And these people are all around us, it says in the letter to the Hebrews. Like a great cloud of witnesses.

Cheering for us, encouraging us to keep going, to run the race that is set before us.

Alright, it's time for some Greek. The word for race in Greek is agon.

It's where we get our word, agony, if that tells you anything. It means

contest or fight. It is the give-it-all-you've-got attitude of competition, which the Greeks loved. They idolized Olympic athletes who exerted every ounce of strength to overcome their opponents. Push. Jump. Grab. Hit. Fight. Keep moving. Go, go, go! For the writer of Hebrews, faith isn't a short sprint; it's a long-distance marathon. And your body will hurt. And your lungs will scream for air. And your joints will cry for you to stop. Because it is hard to keep going and keep hoping and keep doing the right thing.

But this is your race. The race that is set before YOU and no one can run it for you. No one else can run our race. This is part of love. This is part of participating in God. We keep going and we keep at it. Because there are people watching us and cheering for us. People who know we have it in us. People who have been through all of this themselves and know we can make it.

When I was in middle school, I was on the track team. It was a very small school, so pretty much anyone could be on the track team. The coach put me in on the 100 and 200 meter sprints. And if you know anything about track, then you know sprints are for runners who can run

really, really fast over a short distance. I have never been and will never be one of those people. But at least the event would be over with quickly. At every race, I would line up against all the other runners. The starting gun would sound and I would give it everything I had. And in every race, I would come in last. Every time, over and over again. But I still showed up. And every time, my teammates would cheer for me from the sidelines. My teammates who had already run their races or would run them later, they cheered for me. We all cheered for each other. No matter who we were up against or how we expected to do. And that's what we are meant to do here in church. We are here to encourage one another in our races. To cheer for each other and tell each other to keep going and keep giving it all we've got, even when it's tough, even when it looks impossible that we will win.

There is great cloud of witnesses around us. People watching us, people who have run their race or will run soon. People who do brave things. Like Malala Yousafzai standing up against the oppression of girls. Like Greta Thunberg standing up to demand we address global climate change. Like my friend Lori, who stands up for foster kids with medical



problems. Like the folks at the Hope Center who stand up for people in addiction recovery. Like the kids caring for parents and the grandparents caring for kids. Like the people in Eastern KY who stand up against strip mining and the devastation it causes. Because the things we do to the earth won't affect some of us, it will affect all of us.

The race is set before us, and it is our race to run. The race of faith, the challenge and contest of living a life of mercy and truth. On the way to the kingdom of God. That is not established by the love of power, but the power of love. It's the kingdom the world is hoping for and praying for, where blessed are the poor and hungry and hurting. And there is abundant life for all. We run the race that so many have run before.

Toward our true end in God. Our promised land. Let us lay aside whatever weighs us down. Let us have hope; looking to Jesus, who stood up for the mercy and grace of God's kingdom; faithful to God; faithful to us.