

BELPRES CHURCH

Endurance

Hebrews 12:1-3

Speaker: Becky Bastien

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Good morning.

Today's text comes from Hebrews chapter 12, one through three, which says this, "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, 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. Consider Him, who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Well good morning. My name is Becky Bastien, if we haven't met, and I work here with our elementary kids at BelPres and last week I was trying to figure out what God was calling me to preach on. And if you know me, you know it is very uncharacteristic of me to do anything last minute and that I usually have a draft of my sermons done a month or so in advance.

And so it was a real shock to be about nine days out and have not a single word written. So I asked the kids and students team for sermon ideas last week. Some were better than others. One person suggested that I preach on the whole story of Joshua, which I thought would take the whole three-day weekend. But then I was asked a question that was really helpful, what are you thinking about or what do you spend time talking about these days? And well, the honest answer is that in this season I spend a good amount of my time talking and thinking and praying about being pregnant because my husband and I are expecting our first kid in August. Oh, thank you.

Now don't worry, I'm not going to preach about being pregnant nor the stories of women in our Bible and how they had kids though I think that could be a really interesting sermon series. And I do just have to say I have grown in my appreciation for Mary's faith because if somebody asked me in the next few months to get on a donkey to go visit my in-laws, I don't know that my answer would be yes. But in this season, God has been teaching me a lot about endurance and perseverance. Pregnancy is a long journey and it is exhausting in ways that I would not have known until I was living in the midst of it,

physically, emotionally, spiritually. Though many women did try to tell me, you just can't know until you are doing it yourself. And when I thought about what the Bible gives when I'm looking for encouragement to have endurance, I thought about the letter to the Hebrews.

Now we don't know exactly who received this letter, but it's clear that the community is living under oppression and persecution. Much of the book of Hebrews is encouragement to clinging to Jesus and not give up when things are hard, while also proclaiming who Jesus is and how worth it is to follow him. So why do we need this? I know for some of us, our lives in Bellevue might feel really distant from a place where we would feel persecuted for our faith or be worried about that. Well, for others it may ring true like our immigrant and refugee brothers and sisters and the experiences that they have lived through. This encouragement though isn't just good for churches living under political oppression. It says this, "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, the race marked out for us."

So the question is what race is that? Well, generally it's the one for all of us of following Jesus, becoming his disciple, living a life of faith. Specifically, God may have a particular calling for you in this season as well. It might be in where or how you choose to work or be a student. It might be in something about how you're a parent or a friend. The author of Hebrews knows that following Jesus isn't always easy nor keeping our faith whether we've done it for one day or for many decades. So we need someone reminding us to run the race like we mean it. Now, never fear. This is not the Nike, just do it sermon, I promise. I imagine many of you have seen the athletic brand's advertisements over the last few decades with the words just do it, their slogan featuring top of their game athletes in their Nike gear.

It might be because I'm really not an athletic person, but I find just do it not very motivational or helpful. Pragmatically, if you were to hand me a tennis racket and tell me to go out and just do it, nothing I would do would look anything like Serena Williams, nor do I think if you ask Caitlin Clark how she learned how to shoot a basketball, do I think she would say, "Oh, I just do it," unless she was joking. As I was thinking about this race in faith though, I asked some friends who are runners and athletes, what they think builds endurance. And their answers were things like this, getting the right fuel, years of practice, running with others, remembering they can do hard things. Now I get these things can't fit on a billboard and they aren't nearly as catchy as just do it, but I find them far more helpful.

And luckily the author of Hebrews seems to know that we would need more than just a bumper sticker saying, keep the faith believe, pray more because I don't know about you, but on hard days I need more than that to go on. And I find these three verses to be packed with wisdom about how we can be fortified in our faith and build it up even on hard days. And there are three main things I see in this passage for us today. First, we are encouraged as we are running the race to be connected to the community of believers, to throw off everything that's a distraction, and third, to remember to look to Jesus. So first, connection to community or as the verse says, "We are surrounded by

such a great cloud of witnesses." What is a cloud of witnesses? It is the faithful people that came before us.

Now chapter 11, which is right before this set of verses, gives a list of people beginning back in Genesis, a lineage of believers who have faithfully tried to follow God. Now let me take a moment to tell you about these people. There was Moses. He was a great leader, well-respected who led God's people out of slavery. Ooh, he did also murder a man. And then there was Abraham who was told that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. And this was a crazy thing for him to believe God about because he received this message when him and his wife were very old and they had not had any children. And so he practiced great faith. There was that one time though that he told a terrible lie about his wife that endangered her and protected him. And then of course Rahab who hid the Lord's spies in her house as they were living out the calling that God had asked them to.

She was so important to their plan. She was also a prostitute. My point, these were not perfect people. Some of them made giant mistakes, some were outsiders, some were downright scandalous, but that is not what they are remembered for. They are remembered for having great faith for following God even on the hard days, even when they didn't know what was next to them. In chapter 11 verse 16, it says, "God is not ashamed to be called their God." Hear that for a moment. God is not ashamed to be called your God either. God isn't surprised that we're not perfect and he still wants relationship with us. Recently I was talking with a about how God views us and we were trying to imagine how God thinks about us and sees us as we mess up. And he ended up using the metaphor of watching a toddler learn how to walk.

Have you ever seen a toddler try to learn how to walk? Do you see perfection when you imagine it? No, of course not. They wobble and they fall and they grab things and it takes them time to learn how to walk. And if you've ever worked with elementary kids or for that matter, any age group, you know that kids don't stop falling as toddlers, they continue to do it forever and maybe throughout adulthood too. But what does the parent do? The parent picks them up, wipes away the tears, encourages them to do it again because they know that they will get better if they continue to practice. Is God surprised that we fall? No, of course not. Is he surprised that Abraham wasn't perfect? No, absolutely not. He expects it and he knows how to teach us, encourage us, soothe us, whatever we might need in that moment.

So don't let your imperfection keep you from having a relationship with the God who made you knows you and is ready to coach you wherever you are on this race. So the Bible is telling us we have this incredible group of people whose lives can encourage us when life is not easy, who fell a lot, who lived through real and difficult times, but continue to follow God. Now that does mean of course that if we are going to be encouraged by their lives, we might have to open up the Bible and read about them or our Bible apps and see what they did. And if you're looking for a place to begin, I'd open up Hebrews 11 this week and read through the stories of these different people and you will see the stories of how God's faithfulness stretches across generations. I also see this as a calling to not live the Christian life alone.

We are not meant to live in isolation. God calls us to community and strengthen us together. It makes difficult things far easier. Now, I mentioned earlier that I am not a very athletic person and this has been true much of my life, but there's a point in college where I realized that I needed to find a way to take good care of myself. While I'll never be in the Olympics, I feel my best when I'm taking good care of my body. And I had tried a variety of workouts and classes and nothing really stuck. And in a last ditch effort, I texted a friend who's a runner and I said, "Hey, I found a couch to 5K plan. Will you do it with me?" Now mind you, there was a summer in college where this friend ran, biked, and swam a triathlon every single weekend and my plan detailed things like walk for five minutes, jog for two minutes, walk for five minutes, you're done.

This was going to be hilariously easy for her and yet she said, "Yes." We met up, we'd follow my plan precisely and slowly build up my endurance over time. And with her encouragement and having somebody keep me accountable, I was able to eventually run a 5K. We did it together in Seattle and though she certainly could have done it far faster, she raced it with me. And I'll never forget being at the finish line and I laid down in the grass to catch my breath and I eventually looked up to see her dancing to the music that they were blasting at the finish line.

I saw then that doing something difficult with someone is incredibly helpful. Now I didn't become a runner. In fact, I don't know that I've ever run since, but I always remember that what I was able to do, I was able to do because somebody was doing it with me. And we need people. We need people around us in our walk in faith the same way on the bad days to encourage us to keep going or on the good days to say, "Wow, you have come so far. This is incredible." And in some seasons we may be the encourager and in some seasons we may be the one receiving encouragement, but this is one of the gifts of Christian community. And so if you aren't connected here, I'd encourage you to find a way to get connected. And if you don't know where to start, come talk to me or somebody else on staff or a volunteer.

We'd love to find the right place for you to get connected. I find that it is the biggest difference maker in walking this life of faith. So Hebrews' first encouragement for us, connection with the community of believers both past and present. Next, throw off everything that's a distraction. It says, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles so that we can run the race God has before us. As I was reading these verses this week, I noted something I don't think I've ever seen before. On first glance, I see the obvious call to turn from sin that separates us from God. Now this makes sense to me. Jesus' ultimate goal was to come and bring us into relationship with God. Sin separates us from God. And so obviously Jesus wants us to turn from sin in order to be in relationship with him, but there's more here.

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin. So maybe there are things that aren't sin or don't look like sin that could be hindering our ability to fully run this race. Have you ever seen a kid get their hands stuck in a cookie jar because they've stuck it in and they've tried to grab five cookies at once and despite their best efforts and their grunts and their twisting, they can't undo the physics that their hand and all of the cookies can't come out of the cookie jar at once.

And so the solution is to do the thing that they desperately don't want to do. They have to let go of the good thing, take their hand out, and then try a different approach. Maybe just taking one cookie at a time. We're the same way. Things that look good to us like having a full schedule, taking care of every single person around us, being respected by the people we work with, getting perfect grades, keeping up with everyone else in Bellevue may actually be the things that are trapping us from a life of joy running the race God has before us.

God may call us to focus on his priorities instead of his own as we run this race. We have a phrase we use on staff. Maybe you've heard it before, that we have to be okay getting a B on something. And the idea is that if then A is the best grade, then we often try to get an A on absolutely everything we do. Now, please hear me. I don't think we're perfect. I'm not saying we only get A's and B's, but there is a problem when our goal is to get an A on absolutely everything. What is that? Well, unfortunately, eating, sleeping, and being human gets in the way of being perfect all the time. I don't know if you've encountered that too. It would be nice if when God called me into ministry, he had said, "You no longer need to eat and you no longer need to sleep. You can just do all the work because it all feels important."

And yet he is not given that ability to me yet. I wonder if you feel the same about your work or your grades or whatever you're passionate about, that there's never quite enough time to do all the things well that you wish you could. And if we're going to get anything done nonetheless, sleep, eat, be present, read the Bible on occasion, be good friends and spouses, parents. We have to be okay getting a B on something or maybe even a couple of things. Now were any of those things necessarily bad on their own? No. But we have to be realistic about our capacity and discern what are the things God is calling us to focus on in this season. And so we might pray to God and ask, what is hindering me from running the race you have for me?

And then be ready to give up some things that are taking up space in our lives that God wants to use for something else. When we're able to focus on God's plan, we spend less energy doing a thousand different things and take that energy and strength and use it towards the things God is calling us to do. So Hebrews is making a bold proclamation here. You can't do it all and in fact, some of the things you're doing will have to go in order for you to find joy in a life with Jesus. Number three, finally we look to Jesus. Now here's the thing that I think people can miss in this verse. The point of it is not to win the race. Hear me, the point is not to win the race nor to complete it the fastest or to look the best doing it in the latest Nike gear because this is a race Jesus has already won.

Verse two says, "Jesus saw the potential joy before him, endured the cross, defeated death so that you and I can be in relationship with him." We can't beat him at his own game, but as we are running, we can look ahead and see him already at the finish line and take heart knowing that he was successful and is with us on the race wherever we are. If you've been here for a while, you've heard us talk about the marks of a disciple. And you may have noticed we didn't hand out checklists for you to mark when you've completed one of them and move on to the next one. And that's because faith isn't something to be achieved and then moved on from, but it's something to be lived out over

and over and over again. This is actually one of my favorite things to teach our kids in the upper campus.

So many things they're learning in life, they assume the adults around them have already mastered. And so it's important for us to teach them that faith is not like that. It's not learning your multiplication tables, rather it's something that will take a lifelong journey and that I am continuing to learn about following Jesus every single day. And so sometimes in the middle of preaching to our kids, I'll pause and say, hey, if you're an adult and still have trouble remembering to ask for God's help, will you raise your hand? We'll get a few hands and the kids start looking around or on a week where we're talking about loving our neighbor, I might say, "Hey adults, have you ever been frustrated while driving your car and forgotten to love your neighbor?" Sometimes I get two hands for that one, and I wish you could see the looks of shock on our kids' faces as they're amazed that these adults that are teaching them are actually not perfect.

But this is the beautiful thing about following Jesus that I don't want them to miss or us to miss. God is not surprised that we are not perfect, but he wants us to be running towards relationship with him regardless. This advice sounds really different than a Nike ad right? Be connected to a community, throw off everything that's a distraction, look to Jesus. But as I was reflecting on what God's just do, it moment would've been, I was reminded of one of my favorite stories of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet in the Old Testament and in the midst of his ministry of sharing God's messages found himself on the run from powerful people who wanted to kill him. He went out into the wilderness, hid under a bush and prayed that God would put an end to everything and to him. He fell asleep. And the next thing he knew, an angel was waking him up and saying, "Get up and eat".

No explanation, no guilt for his prayer or addressing of his emotions. Just do it Elijah, you need some food. He looks around and some bread and water is there. He eats and drinks and goes back to sleep. Later the angel comes back and tells him again, "Eat some more Elijah," and so he does, and the food and the rest strengthen him, give him some new perspective, and he's able to continue on with his ministry. God's just do it? Take a rest and have a snack. Why? Because God knows who we are and he created us and is not surprised when we need breaks. Yes, we're given a metaphor of running a race, but God doesn't think you're going to run it at the level of perfection or speed that Jesus was able to. It's why God gave us the gift of Sabbath and we've been practicing it this year.

We need to rest and rest in the presence of the God who created us. It is there that we find the endurance and perseverance to get back up and continue our walk with Jesus. So God, we thank you that you are on this walk with us, this race, whatever speed we are going at, and we thank you that you are the God who is not ashamed of us. Help us to take that to heart this week, to know that you love us, you care for us, you created us, and you know who we are and so will we. Be encouraged and remember your great love for us Jesus. In your name we pray, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Who has encouraged you in your faith? Why/how?
- What helps you to have endurance in your faith in hard seasons?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.