

Sermon (*August 21, 2022*)

Pastor Mel Jacob

Isaiah 58:9b-14 • Psalm 119:89-90 • Hebrews 12:18-13:1 • Luke 13:10-17

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

Just as an aside, someone pulpit-supplying does not do it alone, and I'm always grateful to be with Kyle, who's always helpful, and today with Carol Ann, because they are a very important part of our worship, and the meaning of this Sunday together.

I would like to read the first verse from the 12th chapter, the book of Hebrews: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us set 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 the perfecter of our faith..."

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

How many of you think of "Godspell," 1973, a musical that got a lot of popularity, and that tune, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" has a lingering effect in how it catches the spirit. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way..."

About six weeks ago, I attended a Zoom conference of speakers of an interfaith Christian organization that I've been part of for about five or six years, entitled Food for the Poor, that provides not only food but also educational services, micro-enterprises, health care, to literally millions; began primarily in the 17 countries in the Caribbean and Central America, but has expanded; even cargo container-loads of food and supplies were given to those fellow Americans who were hit by the disastrous floods in Kentucky.

It's an organization that this new executive director is the third one in 40 years—very gifted; a very stable organization. And as he worked with speakers, and they're about 70 of us, about a third are Lutheran, about half are Roman Catholic priests, retired; some Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and we go to different churches on particular Sundays that there may be a need.

When the new executive director began his Zoom presentation, in the background was the music of "Prepare ye the way, Prepare ye the way of the Lord." What is he going to do with this? Is this what is he going to do with this? He began to emphasize the importance of the Lord in the common faith that all of us hold in Christ, our Lord, and his own. But then he talked about structural changes and different ways of doing things—as you would expect, as there is a changeover in leadership, as the previous one had retired. "Prepare ye the way,

prepare ye the way.”

It literally could be the theme song of the book of Hebrews.

For a few decades after Jesus walked on this earth, there was no church as such, but rather gatherings of followers of Jesus, and the writer of the book of Hebrews was concerned about a particular gathering, or a group of gatherings, that were composed primarily of those who were of the Jewish background, which was the only established religion at that time, as the Roman government was a pantheistic government with many different gods.

And there was disappointment. There were lacks in what was being done. There was indifference, and discouragement, to which the writer of the Hebrews was very much aware, and addressed this situation at that particular time.

Tenuous, amorphous, shaky at best, were the faith communities. But then he goes, in this book of Hebrews, and *grounds* them in the faith of the millennia and the promise of that which had occurred thousands of years before, even at the point of creation, and then to Abraham – as we remember, he was the one who received God’s covenant and the promise that from his seed, a nation would follow the children of Israel. And indeed, he was faithful to that promise.

And then it carries on, and we read in the book of Hebrews of how others followed the example of Abraham, including Isaac and Jacob, and we know the various ones in the Old Testament that, in *faith*, believed in the promise and carried that banner through their life, in perseverance and assurance.

There’s witness in a faith that wasn’t transitory.

Which made me think of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Mark Twain, Samuel Clemens. You possibly know the story of how Tom had a good friend Huck Finn, and Huck Finn was a rather mischievous person. He kind of had a ne’er-do-well reputation in this little town that they live. And Tom explains that one Sunday, he finally attended worship with him and went down the aisle with an act of conversion that all the community noticed. But then at the end, there was a little sly comment from Tom, in which he said, “The preacher was so good that Tom stayed converted until Tuesday.”

Hebrews goes to great lengths to “prepare the way,” for centuries, for millennia, prior to the birth of Jesus: the Exodus, the judges, the prophets, the kings. We read, even in the book of Psalms, a reference to this endurance. Psalm 119, for instance: it’s the longest chapter in the Bible. (If you are determined to memorize a chapter of the Bible, I don’t recommend this chapter, because it contains 176 verses.) But in verses 89 and 90 we read, “Lord, Your word is firmly fixed – firmly fixed – “Your faithfulness endures, endures into the generations.”

In the lesson that I began, it speaks of “the great cloud of witnesses,” the great cloud, the genealogy of assurances, in faith, the trustworthiness for the way to come – for the way to come, which became Jesus.

With certainly the ravages and the brokenness of hearts, the selfishness of sin that we can find in Joseph, and the brothers of Joseph that led to him going into Egypt; within the realities of the losses and the unwanted changes that the Judges of the Old Testament continued to address; and how about the difficulties of letting go? Remember, the children of Israel after the Exodus and the desert region, they began to murmur and grumble, why don't we return back to the familiar, and not to the promise that lies ahead?

Hebrews: the book of Hebrews offers, invites, and challenges us around this very central thought. Faith-filled promise can be relied upon; trust and believe.

And in the soil, in the soil of the century and the millennia that occurred in those clouds of witnesses, we read these words from Matthew's Gospel, the fifth chapter, that “Jesus came to fulfill all the law and the prophets.”

Martin Luther writes, “Faith is permitting ourselves to be seiged, to be seiged – to be taken hold of by that which we do not see.”

But what we do see today, what we do see among us, can be challenging to faith. Two-and-a-half years of dealing with a pandemic, of which caution is still a wise course of action. (My wife just told me one of our really good friends in Atlanta says that he has caught Covid for the second time, this weekend.) Living in a culture of “mine, mine, mine,” living in a culture of consumption, that tends to be focused on *my* interest and tends to be focused on my self-serving; and a divided government... What we do see can be challenges, and often are challenges to our faith, in which the perishables of our purchases can become so important, only to discover after a while, that they don't endure either.

From John's Gospel in the sixth chapter, we read, “We do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures.” To receive, and have a message planted, of endurance, of faithfulness, of promise, of the suffering one – as the writer of Hebrews presents – of the suffering one who knows human frailties, of the same suffering one who went to the cross, beyond his own fatigue and sense of betrayal, who knew death itself, of the one who persevered over sin, death and evil *because he loves you and me*, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith, we read, Jesus, the ultimate model of endurance, to bring hope, to bring redemption, to bring grace, to run the race with perseverance. That's how the author of Hebrews explains it.

Run the race with perseverance.

A good while back, I had the opportunity – it was a transformative opportunity.

One of the members of the transportation command of which I was a chaplain was wounded in Iraq. And I went to visit him at Walter Reed; arrived on a Friday afternoon, and I was immediately invited to a dinner that was being offered to the soldiers who were wounded in the orthopedic area.

“Sure, I’d like to.”

Buses carried the patients and an African American man took me in a van, and we arrived at this very exclusive restaurant in downtown Washington, DC. And the owner of that restaurant, every couple of months or so, opened up the basement for a large banquet area, and there a party happened.

And when I walked in there, I knew I was out of place, because I had both arms, both legs – and the camaraderie, and energy, and excitement that was occurring amongst those who were participating and those who were giving care; missing one, two, three, four appendages, certainly quadriplegics, paraplegics – I felt out of place – but what surprised me, and what energized me was a sense of excitement that they provided, because they were a *community*, a community that contained laughter and common values. It was how they *were* with one another, that transcended what my eyes saw, and what my presuppositions brought me into that room with. They were so accepting. And then a leader asked me to say a prayer as the food was brought in.

Part of me thought: What a privilege, to represent our denomination in that setting. Another part of me: How do you capture a different kind of “race” that is being run, amongst all of those in front of you? How do you affirm their struggle, and be grateful for their sacrifice, and express gratitude for the warm-heartedness of the owner of the restaurant that provided all of this without charge? How do you wrap it up? How do you embrace it all with the love of God through Christ Jesus?

After my prayer and after the meal, the gentleman who brought me there transported me back to where I was to spend the night. I was so impressed, how he handled that downtown DC traffic, somewhat like we have here in Seattle. A lot of hub and bub, and he’d negotiated it, negotiated the stoplights and the moving traffic in and out so well. And I asked him about his volunteer caregiving role.

And what he did was, he pulled up his sleeve, and exposed his prosthetic arm and the fingers that look so real that were grabbing the steering wheel adeptly, safely; and then he lifted up his right leg pants, and there was his prosthetic right leg, with which he again skillfully managed the gas pedal and the brake, and I was amazed. I was amazed at being so unaware that he himself had these challenges.

Not a person of many words. He simply said, "Here."

"I've been there. I know what it's like, to keep on when it's not easy to keep going on. Even to walk, much less to race." And then he concluded by saying, "I am glad I can help. It's what I am."

"It's what I am."

Humbled, humbled that moment, still carrying the spirit of that inside of me.

The spirit of the book of Hebrews can be found in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians as he wrote in the second chapter, "Look not only to your own interest, but to the interest of others. My beloved, God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure, holding fast the word of life not to run in vain, or labor in vain."

A beautiful, beautiful verse. So we, you and me this day, are graced. Graced to prepare the way, to prepare the way of the Lord, what is before us. And to become that cloud of witnesses for those who follow us, assured and confident that *we* are children of God; that in baptism, we became that child of God, and that we are nurtured, as we are again this day, by the presence of Jesus Christ, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Having received this wonderful grace, from the Perfector, who endured the cross and is seated at the right hand of God. Let us run with perseverance, the race that is set before us.

That's what we, that's what we, a cloud of witnesses today —

It's what we are.

Amen.