

# 5/30/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

## SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 12:1-3; Revelation 21:1-5

## SERMON

Run With Endurance – Lois Harder

Yesterday, several Goessel students competed in the state track meet in Wichita. BIG congratulations to all of them! They have worked and practiced and lifted weights and they have run, and run, and run. This last week I sent a text message to a couple of these students asking if they'd be willing to talk with me about the word "endurance" in preparation for my sermon. Their messages came back, nearly identical saying – well, I'm glad to talk to you, but I don't know if I really have any ideas about endurance. 😊 Well, you know what? It turns out they know a LOT about endurance! I promised not to quote them directly, so I'll just give you some general ideas of their wisdom. They said that endurance is when you keep going even when you feel like you can't. It's working *through* something hard, understanding that it will be hard and not expecting it to be anything else. It's not quitting. Endurance is a thing we can do together – we each have to run our own race, but we cheer each other on and encourage each other. We can learn endurance from watching others – our friends, our parents, our grandparents, mentors, teachers, others in the church. So much wisdom. Their comments give me so much hope.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews (whoever they were) wanted to give the readers hope and encouragement. The scholars think that this group, called by their ethnic name of "Hebrews", was probably located somewhere in Rome. They were Hebrews – Jewish people who were followers of Jesus. People who loved God, who were people of "the book" – there are many references in this letter to Psalms and other Hebrew texts. They were covenant people. People trying to live in the heart of the Roman culture, as Jesus people. *That* was hard. They needed firm and frequent reminders of what it meant to follow Jesus in the midst of this giant city of Rome. The capital city of the most advanced, wealthy and brutal people of the developed world. The Roman government, including its military dominated all other countries and cultures of the time. Rome – home of The Colosseum, (photo #1) where one of the most popular sporting events was to watch Christians be attacked and mauled by wild animals. Rome was the city of aqueducts, (photo #2) a complex system of elevated channels built to get water from place to place. They could even make it run uphill and they were so well-built that remains of many of the aqueducts are still standing centuries later. Rome was the power behind the term Pax Romana – the peace of Rome, a two-hundred year period during which Rome ruled with an iron fist, creating a sort of "peace through fear", a "peace" that maintained the status quo and ensured economic prosperity for the top echelon of the empire. The Jewish hierarchy, like other groups and nations, had their own well established quid pro quo relationship with the Romans. It was, of course, the collaborative effort of the Jewish Sanhedrin and the Romans who

crucified Jesus when it became clear that his message and influence among the poor was too radical. So the Hebrews, the Jewish Jesus-followers in Rome struggled to stay focused on their call and to remain loyal to their commitment.

So the writer of this letter was exhorting them, reminding them that *endurance* is what is needed to run the race of faithful discipleship. And endurance can come partly from within, but it mostly comes from sources outside of ourselves. First, the writer says, it comes from remembering. Remember the great cloud of witnesses. The Greek word used here for “cloud” was a commonly used metaphor for a big crowd of people – and the writer had just named a crowd of faithful people in chapter 11 as he wrote about the meaning of faith – “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And then, goes on to name a long list, a great cloud of the faithful who are important to remember. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his family, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel – and the prophets, those countless and nameless faithful who had endured suffering, torture and death because of the ways they clung to their faith in God.

Of course, the most important member of the great cloud or crowd of witnesses is Jesus himself. Jesus is the one to look to for inspiration! And not simply because he was martyred, but because he was on a journey of joy. Does that sound strange? Look carefully with me at verse 2. Jesus was “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame...” Jesus is the picture of endurance, of taking his strength from the depth of his faith tradition, those who had gone before him, and his God.

Jesus was crystal clear about his purpose and mission on this earth – to bring God’s good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed, to turn the status quo upside down, to empower the powerless and disinherit the wealthiest. The letter-writer to the Hebrews encourages the readers to use Jesus as the example of how to run the race with endurance. He understands Jesus in completely human AND completely divine terms – in other words, the readers can’t cop out with the old caveat, “Yeah, but he was Jesus.” This writer sees no reason that faithful humans can’t follow the examples set by Jesus. Because, clearly Jesus wasn’t the only one! He’s is the one who shows us most completely how to live our faith and run our race, but the writer just gave a whole, long list of others who did it too – the great cloud of witnesses! “Consider,” he writes in verse 3, “him who endured such hostility... from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.”

On this Memorial weekend, we can be grateful for the clear mandate we have to run with endurance the race before us. As Jesus followers, people of the book, covenant –honoring people who love God, we are blessed with a rich faith heritage. We have 2,000 additional years of wisdom since the letter to the Hebrews was written and since then that great cloud has expanded to include even more witnesses surrounding us. We have the wisdom of our own young people who know what endurance is – they’ve experienced it in their lives and they’ll continue to learn it on their faith journeys as well.

And... we have the inspiring vision shared by John in his revelation – the hope that we have in the new heaven and the new earth that God is bringing. We have the promise that God dwells among us to comfort us as we grieve, to offer us steadfast endurance and to make all things new.

In this world of pain and loss, of violence and fear, greed and injustice, where there is so much wrong that it's painful to listen to the news and it's often difficult to know how to do justice or make a difference in our little corner, it's important to remember that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. It's important to spur and cheer each other on as we each run the race. We must remember to look to Jesus as our example as we participate with God in creating God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.