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“The Dog Days of Summer”

Hebrews 12:1 – 7, 11 – 14

II Corinthians 4:7 – 15

Text: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . . and let us now run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” . . . Hebrews 12:1

“What superpower would you like to have?” my son asked as we were driving away from the local cinema complex. “With all the superhero movies we’ve seen this summer, I wasn’t surprised by the question. ‘I’d like to be invisible,’ said his sister. ‘Flying would be cooler,’ he responded, and so the debate began. All the way home, they argued about the merits of flight versus X-ray vision. Eventually they agreed that it didn’t matter if the power was cool; the point was to pick a power that made life easier.

“Which power would you choose, mom?”

I thought for a moment and replied, “Perseverance.”

“That’s not a superpower!” They laughed and went back to ignoring me.

It may be true that perseverance is not a superpower in the classical sense, but it’s a human characteristic that’s in short supply these days. There’s not much call for perseverance, tenacity or endurance. If something isn’t working – with our jobs, with our relationships, with our possessions – we give up and move on.”¹

Well, I would counter that by saying that we do know perseverance – it happens every summer. Let’s face it its hot! And this New Englander can tell that even the hardened veterans of Washington’s summers would say that our weather can be described by the three “H’s” – hot, hazy, and humid. And as that weather sets in, so does a change in our energy. We would much rather stay inside, not far from the air conditioner, an air conditioned mall, theater, or restaurant. And now we are into the late summer doldrums, known as the dog days of summer.

Those nine of us who have just returned from Nicaragua welcomed slightly cooler temperatures, but much worse humidity and frequent torrential downpours. It is almost impossible to get acclimated to this kind of heat and humidity. Now take a transplanted Mainer who loves the modified winters of this area; . . . well, let me say that hot in Maine is in the high 80s with dew points over 65. You folks here don’t even blush until dew points get into the low seventies!

Summers also bring with them a certain shift in living – especially in church life. Church is a bit slower, often much less eventful. Attendance is down, and most often so is giving. The

¹ “Living the Word”, *Christian Century*, July 26, 2011; p. 22

traditional choir gets some Sunday's off, and the church school goes into an exciting, but also a "one-room school house" mode. Sunday services, some would say are a bit less exciting or stimulating.

"God doesn't take a vacation" declares the sign-boards for some churches – but people certainly have. And to those of you who have already taken a vacation (or don't know when you will) are left here to mind the church until everyone gets back.

As I prepared for this week's sermon (ummmm, before I left for Nicaragua), I discovered that the reading from Hebrews held a particular relevance. Consider the context of the epistle. The Hebrews had been plodding along, year after year after Jesus had been crucified, waiting for the promised second coming. But what had changed? Not much. Caesar still ruled; the faithful still suffered and died. Their unbelieving neighbors ignored them or taunted them, saying, "Where is your Lord? Why doesn't your God get busy and do something?"

For the Hebrews, it was a time of uneventful waiting, a weary cooling of the church's heels in the doldrums of unfilled expectations. They had not paid for their faith in blood; no dramatic, barbaric persecutions had tested them. But they were paying a price. The price of waiting, anticipating; "the things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." It's the kind of waiting we all do from time to time.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews contains that memorable roll call of the heroes and heroines of the faithful. "Therefore," chapter 12 begins, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . . let us now run with perseverance the race that is set before us." (12:1) Jesus is the "pioneer" Who has gone before us in His suffering; which in turn enables us suffering ones to run "our race" with confidence. (12:2, 3)

But the difficulty with all this talk about running is that the Hebrews aren't going anywhere. Unlike some of the other saints, they do not seemed "disciplined" by martyrdom and/or violent persecution. (12:4) Never-the-less, they have been tested simply by their long, uneventful, un-dramatic wait. Their "race" has been mostly a hot, uneventful, uninspiring trek; rather than a martyr's dash for glory. And they have found that the way is long.

In these dog days of summer, as August plods wearily along and our church life drags along uneventfully, I think I am learning, with those Hebrews, what it means to wait. My garden teaches me. No matter how well I water, fertilize and weed my vegetables; green beans still between 50 and 60 days from planting to harvest. It can't be rushed. Tomato plants – even the "early girls" are going to require almost two months – and for the flavorful "big boys" or "beefsteaks" will take over 60 days. (Did you ever think about why they choose a feminine name for the early ones, and a male name for the more flavorful ones? - aww, perhaps the subject of another sermon). Each summer I learn over and over the virtues of things like patience, persevering, and waiting.

The liturgical season of Pentecost begins so dramatically with raucous shouts, visions tongues of fire. Like in the fire of Pentecost, the church is born and re-born amid the Spirit's descent and optimistic talk about JOY, power and all that we share in our efforts to spread the Gospel and help produce more disciples for Jesus. But the fire of Pentecost soon becomes the

sweltering heat of the summer sun. The old hymn speaks of “the burning sun of the noontide heat and the burden of the day.” (“Beneath the Cross of Jesus” UMH # 297) Such un-fulfillment can sometimes be a cross to bear.

To be martyred by fire before screaming pagans is one way to both demonstrate and pay for your faith, and some Christians have known that. But I would submit to you that it’s also tough to pay, day by day, in the lonely, dull, ignored-by-pagans wilting that comes from waiting. It might be said that in the middle of the summer, for this church at least, it is neither the hopeful first light of dawn nor the brilliant apocalyptic hues of sunset – it is the relentless mugginess of late afternoon and on into the late evening. And who wants to go anywhere in the hot, humid days of summer?

The “race”, if our fatigued loping along can be called a race, is hard. It’s hard because, unlike some of the heroes before us, we’re not racing against bloody executioners: we are racing against our own despair, weariness, and disappointment. As Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; . . .” We are fighting the nagging, chronic, ordinary lack of fulfillment of our hope. In other words we try to persevere.

But such waiting requires discipline, the discipline of faith which trusts, endures, and continues to name *the Name* and tell *the Story* even when the hope is unfilled and the world keeps reminding us that it is not listening to us anyway. Discipline is required – a commodity that is in short supply in the church as anywhere else today.

Old Screwtape knew. C.S. Lewis wrote the *Screwtape Letters* and in them we find a character named Screwtape, the master devil or Satan, writing to the younger apprentice devil. The satanic mentor declared that, in the fight against Christians, time itself is the best ally. Screwtape, another term for Satan, writes to his young apprentice Wormwood, on how to keep humans from doing God’s Will:

“It is so hard for these creatures to persevere. The routine of adversity, the gradual decay of youthful loves and youthful hopes, the quiet despair (hardly ever felt as pain) of ever overcoming the chronic temptations with which we have again and again defeated them, the drabness which we create in their lives, and the inarticulate resentment with which we teach them to respond to it – all this provides admirable opportunities of wearing out a soul by attrition.”

Hebrews has it right: “perseverance (12:1) is what’s needed in the dog days of the church – stubborn, hardheaded determination, which after all, may be what the book of Hebrews suggests that faith itself really is. For how does one live by something as intangible as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1) except by sheer stubbornness.

The heroes of faith, at least among those listed in chapter 11 of Hebrews, are not so much the martyrs as the perseverers – the Abrahams and the Moseses who plodded long through a wilderness of drab, uneventful, everyday life; with the noonday sun beating down on their backs,

but with eyes fixed on God's postponed future. And talk about plodding! According to the Bible, Abraham lived to be 175, and he didn't really get started until he father Isaac, **after he was 100 years old!** And Moses plodded along for 40 years in the wilderness, listening to the former enslaved Israelites constantly murmur against him until he was 120! It was not so much a "race" they ran, but perhaps a tedious wandering; not a journey but a trek.

And yet, the "cloud of witnesses" who trudged on ahead of us, whose witness was in their perseverance, now sit in the bleachers, cheering us on as those who come after them. "Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet" (12:12 – 13a) advises the author of Hebrews.

Perhaps it's at the point of our greatest weariness that we think we can hear an encouraging shout arising from those who went before us. So as I type away at this sermon, sweat gluing me to the back of my chair, I take a sip of my iced coffee, and keep on going; plodding along, trying to keep the faith, trying to learn God's will for me. And then in these "dog days of summer" try to have enough perseverance to do it!