

SEXAGESIMA

“Live Together, Die Alone”

*Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall
by the same sort of disobedience. Hebrews 4:11*

On your mark, get set, go!

You’re a runner in a race.

You’ve been running for a while. The starting line was there, at the front, where God first called you out of darkness and the shadow of death and set you on the straight and narrow path that leads to life.

He accomplished this by means of His Word. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel,” Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism. Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ, and that Word was combined with plain water to make a Baptism, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of new birth in the Holy Spirit, setting you on this road and this journey that continues to this day.

Has it been an easy race? By no means! When you were younger, maybe. But as you’ve grown, so have your troubles. Temptations to sin have been legion. Your faith in God has been tested. The cares and riches and pleasures of life have, at times, been near-suffocating.

And yet, here you are, still running, jogging, or even limping along. Thanks be to God! Not only has He set you on this path, but

He’s the reason you’re still going.

Back in the 16th century, Luther also wrote a sacristy prayer for pastors—we have a copy of it hanging up here in our sacristy. It begins like this:

O Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great responsible office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago...¹

But the same could really be said of all Christians. God has made us His people; He has adopted us into His family, the Church; and had we been without His help we would surely have thrown in the towel and abandoned this race long ago.

¹ LW 5:123.

But we have not been without His help. God did not call us to faith by the Gospel only to leave us to run on our own strength. He has been with us, this whole time, as He says in the last chapter of Matthew: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20).

He’s been with us by means of His Word. That same Word that brought you from death to life now strengthens and preserves you in the true faith. When you grow weary, God’s Word gives you strength. When you get lost, God’s Word steers you straight. When you fall down, God’s Word picks you up. It is living and active, powerful and effective. It does what God wants, in all its forms, whether spoken or written, joined with water, or “in, with, and under” bread and wine. Every sermon, every hymn, every Sunday School lesson, every Bible study, every family devotion, is Jesus being with you, helping you on your way to the finish line.

And not just you.

“Let *us* strive to enter God’s rest,” the author of Hebrews says. This may be a race, but those running with you aren’t competitors: they’re teammates; and you’re here for them, just as much as they’re here for you.

We don’t think about it much that way anymore, do we? Our faith is an individual thing. And that’s true. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out in *Life Together*,

Alone you stood before God when God called you. Alone you had to obey God’s voice. Alone you had to take up your cross, struggle, and pray and alone you will die and give an account to God.

But, he goes on to say,

the reverse is also true. You are called into a community of faith; the call was not meant for you alone. You carry your cross, you struggle, and you pray in the community of faith, the community of those who are called. You are not alone even when you die, and on the day of judgment you will be only one member of the great community of faith of Jesus Christ.²

We run together. We live together. We’re a team; and just as members of a team stick together and encourage one another, so do we, so that no one may fall.

And that is still very much a possibility, especially now that we’ve been scattered by fear of this pandemic. The community you see here today is not what it once was. The

² *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5: Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1996), 82.

race got a lot harder this past year, and we lost some people. They fell behind. Maybe they haven't completely thrown in the towel yet, but they're in serious danger of doing so; because faith can't live apart from the Word, and the Word is best heard in community, confessing together the mysteries of the faith, receiving together the Sacraments of the Church.

You either live together, or you die alone.

Old Testament Israel found this out the hard way. When the author of Hebrews in our text warns of falling “by the same sort of disobedience,” he’s referring to those who left Egypt with Moses in the Exodus. Although they were set on this journey to the Promised Land, they provoked God by sinning. One by one, they gave in to their fears. They failed the test. They abandoned the race. And so, as God swore in his wrath, they did not enter His rest. They didn’t make it to the finish line.

God doesn’t want that to happen to us. In fact, Paul says toward the end of Romans that “these things [that happened in the Old Testament] were written down for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (15:4). We know what happens when we try to go it alone, without the help of God or His Church, because we’ve seen it happen before. We’ve had good news preached to us, even as they did, but unless we have ears to hear, unless we are encouraged with the Scriptures, unless we are reminded of our Baptism and receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of this altar, we too will fall.

This race isn’t over yet. And the devil has come down to us in great wrath. It’s harder than ever (in our lifetimes, at least) to be a Christian. Think of the pressures our young people in particular face, growing up in a time when orthodox Christian beliefs are widely considered to be homophobic, misogynist, transphobic, etc. How extremely difficult it must be to block out the intense rays of wanting to fit in. And when you live in one of the biggest cities in one of the richest countries in the world³, how can you not be a little short on breath?

And yet,

There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. We must press on; and we must do so together, as the family that we are.

³ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities> and <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-richest-countries-in-the-world.html>

That means that if you know someone who's fallen behind, someone who's struggling or hasn't been here in a while, reach out to them. Ask them how they're doing. Remind them of God's love for them in His Son, who won heaven for them when He gave His life on the cross. Invite them to come back. But don't leave them in the dust. What if you're the answer to their prayer? What if God has raised you up for such a time as this?

Parents, teach your kids the faith. Don't wait until they're older; start now, before the world gets to them first. If you don't catechize them, the culture will, long before they get to us (for Confirmation).

And, congregation, don't forget the promise you made when each and every one of these kids was baptized: to hear God's Word and receive His gifts together. We're a team; so, don't forget about our youngest members. Why not come alongside them? Say hello? Thank their parents for being like those who brought their children to Jesus that He might bless them? It's not easy, I can tell you; but the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

And if you're the one who needs help, don't be afraid to ask. "Come to me," says Jesus, "all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Cast your burdens on Him, and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest.

Let us bear one another's burdens in Christ. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1-2). Let us encourage one another with the living and active Word of God, which will not return to Him empty, but will succeed in the thing for which He sent it: to see His chosen people safely across the finish line.

You're a runner in a race. You've been running for a while. But the Lord your God is with you always, and so are we.

In † Jesus' name. Amen. The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria