

Septuagesima Sunday – Pr. Faugstad sermon  
1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5: “Eyes on the Prize – Looking to Jesus”  
January 27/28, 2024 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Merciful God and Father, we give You most hearty thanks that in Your Word You have graciously revealed the goal toward which we should ever strive; and we humbly ask You, keep and direct us by Your Holy Spirit upon the way of truth, that, when our course is run, we may obtain the crown of righteousness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 79)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the ninth and tenth chapters of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. / For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who calls us to take up our cross and follow after Him, running the race of faith, until by His grace He brings us across the finish line, dear fellow redeemed:

In today's reading, the apostle Paul brings in some history of God's chosen people Israel. They had multiplied greatly over their more than four hundred years in Egypt. Over the course of that time, they had gone from being honored guests in the land to being enslaved. Now God had brought them out of slavery, and the people followed Moses out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

As they traveled, “the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light” (Exo. 13:21). This made it abundantly clear to them that the LORD was with them. Then they came up to the Red Sea. Everything seemed to be going well until they saw the Egyptian army coming toward them in full force. There was nowhere to run or hide.

The people immediately complained to Moses that they would have rather stayed in slavery than die in the wilderness. Moses reassured them that the LORD who brought them out of

Egypt would guard and keep them. He said, *"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent"* (Exo. 14:13-14).

What happened next? The LORD told Moses to stretch his staff over the sea to divide it, so the people could cross over on dry ground. While a wind divided the sea that night, the LORD moved His pillar of cloud and fire between His people Israel and the Egyptian army to protect His people. Then the Israelites walked through the sea with water on each side of them. Once the Israelites reached the other side, God allowed the Egyptian army to chase after them, and when they did, He caused the water to crash down and destroy them.

As the people moved forward through the wilderness, the LORD provided them manna for bread and quail from the sky for meat. In desolate places with no water, He even caused water to spill out of a rock! He provided for and blessed His people every step of the way. Paul said that the One who blessed them in these ways was Christ, the eternal Son of God.

How could the people doubt God's love for them after all He had done? Why would they look anywhere else for guidance and help? But they did. Paul states the sobering truth, *"with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness."* Where did they go wrong? Paul describes those things, too, just after today's reading. He said that they became idolaters, chasing after the riches and pleasures of the world (1Co. 10:7). They indulged in sexual immorality, ignoring God's institution of marriage, with twenty-three thousand falling in a single day (v. 8). They put Christ to the test by their complaining, grumbling, and rejection of His promises (vv. 9-10).

So why was Paul compelled to give this history lesson? *"Now these things took place as examples for us,"* he wrote; *"they were written down for our instruction"* (vv. 6,11). Paul was writing to a Christian congregation in Corinth that was struggling with the same temptations to idolatry, sexual immorality, and unfaithfulness. And we know that the same temptations face us now in our time. As the Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, *"there is nothing new under the sun"* (Ecc. 1:9).

But are we willing to learn from the past? Are we willing to learn from what God has recorded in the Scriptures? Or do we take comfort in thinking that we're really no worse than the people who went before us, and we are probably a little bit better? The reason that Paul used the language he did — *"all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink"* — was to tell us that when we see the Israelites, we should see ourselves.

We are baptized in Christ, and we partake of the food and drink of His body and blood. Would we give up all these blessings and embrace our sin instead, like the Israelites did? The answer of all of us here would be, *"Absolutely not! We wouldn't give up what Jesus has done for us for anything in the world!"*

But then Paul would challenge us: *"Do your words and actions prove this priority? Do you run the course of this life with your eyes always on the prize? Do you exercise self-control and discipline with your body, so that things like sexual sin, drunkenness, and gluttony will not disqualify you in other people's estimation?"* Those are hard questions. But they underscore an

important point: The Christian faith is not for the lazy, for the self-secure, for the prideful, or for those who are just looking for a nice community organization.

Being a Christian requires sacrifice. It means sacrificing our sinful desires and selfish plans out of love for God and our neighbor. It means not looking for approval from the world. It means enduring criticism and possibly persecution for holding to the truth. It means sacrificing our pride, both acknowledging and admitting our many sins, for which we deserve God's wrath and punishment.

When we take these things to heart, we can't help but think we haven't run the race so well. Our mind and heart cleansed in the waters of Baptism have often been employed in unholy pursuits. Our mouth which has held the holy body and blood of Jesus has often been used for hurtful words, gossip, and lies. When we have managed some self-discipline and self-control, then it was easy for us to look down on other Christians who were not as disciplined. Then we were like the workers in the vineyard who took their eyes off the promise, and instead focused on the weaknesses and inadequacies of the workers around them.

And yet, the race hasn't ended. Our time isn't up. The Master of the vineyard hasn't called us forward to receive our wages. We are still here. We are still running. The call to repentance is a call for today and every day. But not just repentance. We are also called to faith in God's grace. He knows who He has working for Him. He knows us far better than an employer knows his employees, or than a parent knows his child. He knows the stains on our past, and the weaknesses that hinder us from giving our all for Him. And He still says (and tells us again and again), "I forgive you."

This is how the psalmist describes His enduring grace toward us: *"He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us"* (Psa. 103:10-12). That means our sin and guilt do not hold us back or weigh us down as we run the race we are called to run and carry out the work we are called to do. Those burdens have been lifted off our shoulders by our merciful God.

But our sin and guilt were not just set aside, thrown in the dumpster, or stuffed in a box in God's garage. Our sin and guilt were put on God's only Son. They were given over to Him for Him to carry and to take all the way across the finish line. That was a hard race to run, harder than we can imagine. Though He was perfect and did no wrong, He was ignored by the selfish, rejected by the prideful, and abused by the wicked. All the jealousy, all the anger and hatred, all the anguish and pain of the world were taken out on Jesus, as though He were the problem and not us sinners.

And He willingly went forward, carrying all of our sin, suffering unjustly. He kept His eyes on the prize. But what could He possibly gain by His innocent suffering and death? The prize He had His eyes on was your salvation. He ran that terrible race and did that awful work of suffering for you. The author of Hebrews writes that *"for the joy that was set before him—the joy of redeeming sinners—[he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (12:2).

Because He has won the victory for us over sin and death, the same author writes, *“let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus”* (vv. 1-2a). Where do we find our motivation, our strength to go forward and run the race? We find it in Christ, the same Christ who blessed the wandering people of Israel with His protection and care, the same Christ who blessed the Corinthian congregation with His presence in Word and Sacrament, the same Christ who still visits us now with His blessings of grace.

He does not want us to be lost. He does not want us to be overcome by our sin and overthrown in the wilderness of this world. He wants us to endure through the temptations and trials of this life and to finish our race in faith. He does not leave us to run the race alone. Like the pillar of cloud and fire, He protects us on all sides and leads us forward. He comes beside us encouraging and comforting us through His Word when the race is most difficult, and He is ready to receive us into His eternal kingdom when our race in this life comes to an end.

We keep our eyes on Him. And even when our focus is not as sharp as it should be, He is always looking with mercy upon us. The gracious countenance of the LORD is always turned toward you, to bless you and keep you, to shine upon you, and to give you peace.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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