

This Ain't No Sprint

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-13

A Google search with the terms “the toughest race on earth,” brings up this top result: the Iditarod sled dog race. The 1161 mile trek starts in Anchorage and ends in Nome, taking mushers every year, led by their team of sled dogs, across the brutal, unforgiving Alaskan wilderness during the beginning of March. The race is the epitome of an endurance test. The top finishers take as little as eight days and the bottom finishers take as long as fourteen days to complete the race. During those days racers experience freezing temperatures, tough terrain, fatigue, and sleep deprivation. In short, the race leaves spectators like those accustomed to the comfortable sunny Southern California climate, thinking, “Are you nuts?!?” And the mushers in the thick of the race are left gasping, “There is no place like Nome!”

When you look up the word “endurance” in the dictionary, you may find a snapshot of the Iditarod race next to this definition: “the fact or power of withstanding an unpleasant or difficult process without giving way” (*dictionary.com*). One veteran Iditarod musher who breeds and trains his own dogs for the race was once asked why he breeds and trains mutts for the race rather than the well-known Huskies. He replied, “Sumo wrestlers don’t make good marathoners!” In other words, this is a different kind of race. The Iditarod is a unique kind of test. A different kind of animal with a different kind of characteristics is needed if the racer and his dogs are going to “endure the unpleasant or difficult process without giving way.”

This morning in the Gospel lesson Jesus sits down on the Mount of Olives and speaks to the very first disciples that he called. These men are two sets of brothers who were ex-fishermen—James and John, and Peter and Andrew. They ask him about the signs of the end times and the Last Days that he spoke about. They want to know when this all will end. They want the details about when the things Jesus speaks about will happen and what will be the signs of its coming. They want to take away the mystery. They don’t want to be surprised. They want to be relieved of their “watching” and “being alert and ready.”

So what are the signs? We heard them this morning. They are not anything new and unfamiliar to us. We experience these signs and live in the truth of Jesus’ words every day—wars, earthquakes and natural disasters, famines. These are signs or difficulties of the last days that are common to all people. But you and I, as struggling followers of Jesus, also experience difficulties that are unique to disciples of Christ—persecution and resistance to the Christ and the Christian faith, and separation and division around Christ and the Christian message even in families and among brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives. We experience false teachers and false messages that distort, water down the Christian message, and threaten to lead people away from the truth.

In rattling off a list of the signs of the end times, Jesus doesn’t give the disciples exactly what they asked for. He doesn’t point to any one sign that they can look for. He doesn’t take away the tension for them and he doesn’t relieve them of the necessity of “watching” and “being alert and ready” for the close of the age and his second coming. Instead, Jesus lays out the “toughest race on earth” for them. He speaks to them about the race of discipleship as a faithful follower of him. And if the participants in this race are to cross the finish line remaining faithful to the one they follow without

giving way, they will have to experience a difficult process and withstand many unpleasant experiences. The race of discipleship is an endurance race. And so the last thing we heard Jesus say to his disciples is, "The one who endures to the end will be saved." In other words, "This ain't no sprint!"

Endurance is tough. So how is your endurance in the race of Christian discipleship? An enduring disciple is to remain faithful in God's Word through hearing, studying so as to not be led astray. Otherwise, there is danger of listening and believing another word and another teaching that is contrary to God's true, right, and faithful word. An enduring disciple is to give a good witness in word, thought, and deed to God in Christ and his work of salvation for the world. Otherwise, he or she may be responsible for leading others astray and trusting ultimately in something or someone that only disappoints in the end. An enduring disciple is to delight in the fruit of the Spirit and bear it forth in his life—love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. He or she is not to give into desires of the flesh that are contrary to God and ultimately hurt him and his neighbor—sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, envy, and drunkenness (See Gal 6). Our Lord calls us to follow with endurance. The life of discipleship "ain't no sprint." Sprinters who remain faithful for short distances, only to give into the temptation to slouch in their following, don't make the cut.

This is why you and I need the Enduring One. We need to live in and through our Lord's Christ, the one who came to earth and made himself low for us, enduring the sufferings, trials, and temptations that are common to all men. This Christ knows how to run the race. He knows how to run in such a way that he endures and does not give way. He suffered resistance from religious leaders and even his own people. His disciples disowned him when the race got tough in the last week and hours leading up to his death. His family even thought he was delusional. And yet he stayed the course and carried out the mission of salvation that his father had planned. And he did it perfectly right up to his last breath at the finish line of his death and the sacrifice for your sins—"It is finished!" He endured through the grave for you and defeated Satan, the enemy of God, to bring a ministry of life eternal.

And he literally endures for you and in you as a forgiven, baptized child of God. The New Testament writers speak of Baptism as being baptized "into Christ." You are baptized into the enduring one who helps you to follow him and endure these difficult days in faithfulness. You are a saint, redeemed by God. But God's work in you is not fully complete yet. For, Jesus has not yet returned to complete it. This means that as you live in these difficult times, you also live as one who will give into the temptation to sprint, slouch, lose your focus, and take those "lazy days."

The last days are difficult days. The signs that Jesus spoke of in the first century AD are present today. These are dark days. This Gospel reading is a dark passage for our ears to hear. But I want you to also see and be confident in three bright rays of the Gospel that shine through for you in this reading as a follower of Christ.

First, these difficult signs that obstruct our path in the race of discipleship are given a name by Jesus, "birth pains." Now, I am sure that everyone in the congregation, perhaps especially the women, just cringed at the mention of that phrase. But this metaphor is actually good news for you and me as followers of Jesus. It calls us to remember that the pain of these last days is only temporary. Just like darkness comes before the dawn, so the pain of child bearing and birth comes before the joy of the newborn child. As believers in Christ, we experience pain now but we look forward to the joy that

comes in the soon-coming return of our Lord.

The second bright ray of the gospel that shines through is that the Gospel message of forgiveness with God in Christ will continue to be proclaimed no matter how thick the persecution becomes and how difficult the road may be. This is God's promise. And he always keeps his promise.

Finally, the third bright ray of the gospel is that the Holy Spirit lives in you to help you endure to the end in faithfulness and with full confidence in Christ. Jesus promises to his disciples in our reading that the Spirit of God will give them the words to speak and will enable and empower them to give a strong witness to the forgiving, grace-filled, mercy-over-flowing work of God in Christ. This promise is also for you. This is your time to witness, by the grace of God through his Spirit!

Bask in the light that these bright rays provide for you as a believer in Christ. You do not go at this endurance race of Christian discipleship alone. God even provides other Christians to encourage you. And your God, the savior, is also your helper. So go about your race as a father, mother, son or daughter, brother or sister, co-worker, and friend. Ask your God to help you endure and trust in the help of his Spirit. And look forward to the return of Christ and the day when you can say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). Come, Lord Jesus, Come! Amen.