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Sermon: “Looking to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

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Sometimes when people find themselves in a challenging or stressful situation they want to go back to a time when it didn't seem to be so challenging or stressful: a graduate struggling to find a job may wish to go back to being a student, a married person in a stressful marriage may wish to go back to being single, a divorced person struggling with loneliness may wish to go back to being married, a supervisor or manager burdened by responsibilities may wish to go back to just being an employee, a new middle school student may wish to go back to elementary school, a homeowner of a large home with an equally large mortgage payment may wish to go back to owning a smaller home with a smaller monthly payment—it goes on and on. When things become challenging or stressful in our lives, we often want to go back.

Today I'm preaching from the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, and while it is unclear who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, it is very clear to whom and why it was written. It was written to Christians in the Roman Empire who had converted from Judaism to Christianity and who were the victims of the brutal persecution the Roman emperors were inflicting upon the Christians—persecution that included harassment, imprisonment, separation from family members and friends, and in some cases, torture and death. To escape this persecution many of these Christians were *going back* to Judaism, a recognized religion in the Roman Empire. The Letter to the Hebrews was written to these persecuted Christians to encourage them *not* go back to Judaism, but to look to Jesus instead.

Along these lines the writer of this letter emphasizes one main theme: the superiority of Jesus Christ to the Old Testament. The writer describes how Jesus is superior to angels, superior to Moses and Joshua, and superior to the entire Old Testament sacrificial system. Jesus is superior to the Old Testament because of who he is as the Son of God, and because of what he has done in his death on the cross. In response to who Jesus is and what he did on the cross, we, like the original recipients of this letter, are called not to go back to our former way of life, but to look to Jesus instead.

All of this is found in today's passage, as the writer encourages us: “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus 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, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

In this sermon I could list ten ways to “run with perseverance” as a Christian, and load you down with suggestions of things to do, but I doubt that would encourage you at all. I suspect that many of you are already running in many ways—running yourselves ragged at your jobs, running around trying to please others or keep up with others, running from the past, running around

town doing back to school shopping, running from weird people who want to befriend you on Facebook, or running amok simply trying to keep up with the demands of life—as Hillary Scott of the country band Lady Antebellum wonders, “I run my life, or is it running me?”

Others of you may be “running on empty,” like Jackson Browne sang, or feel like you have already run out—run out of options, run out of money, run out of energy, run out of time. All this running or running out can bring us to a place where we stop and ask ourselves, “Why am I doing this?”

I recently read J. D. Salinger’s third book, *Franny and Zooey*, about Franny and Zooey Glass, a brother and sister in their mid-twenties. Franny is at a restaurant with her boyfriend, Lane Coutell, but is unable to eat, in the midst of a breakdown, questioning the meaning of life. At one point she mourns, “It’s *everybody*... Everything everybody does is so—I don’t know—not *wrong*, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and sad-making. And the worst part is, if you go bohemian or something crazy like that, you’re conforming just as much as everybody else, only in a different way... I think I’m going crazy. Maybe I’m already crazy” (p. 26).

Running around or running out can indeed make us crazy. We live in a culture in which people are ranked all the time, and run around like crazy trying to do things that will push them farther up the list.

On Thursday morning this past week the new president of UVA, Teresa Sullivan, hosted a gathering for local pastors at Carr’s Hill, and Paul Walker, Dave Zahl, and I attended. She was very kind and gracious to all of us. In describing some of the stresses of UVA students she mentioned that about 90% of the students at UVA were in the top 10% of their high school class, which means that 90% of UVA students have to learn what it’s like to *not* rank in the top 10% of their class anymore.

Of course people are ranked not just at school but other areas as well. Last Sunday I was reading the *New York Times Magazine*, which included an interview with the Hassidic rabbi, Yehuda Krinsky, who, by the way, has had Bob Dylan to his house for dinner a couple of times ☺. The interviewer, Deborah Solomon, began the interview, “*Newsweek* just published a list, ‘The 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America,’ and placed you at No. 1. As a Hassidic rabbi... do you think you can rank rabbis or any other religious leaders as if they were athletes?” Krinsky responded, “I am of the opinion that you can’t rank human beings. Every person has something to contribute to the welfare of the next human being. No two people are alike or look alike, and everyone has something that another person does not have. Who’s to say who’s higher and who’s lower? In terms of the essence of human beings, I don’t feel it’s proper to rank them because we don’t really know what their mission in life is.”

I think Rabbi Krinsky may be on to something. After all, scripture is clear that we are not ranked in God’s eyes, that all of us, regardless of whether or not we’re in the top 10%, are sinners in

need of the grace and love of God. And if we're honest, when things become challenging and stressful, even with our faith, we all are tempted to go back. All of us find ourselves at times in our lives either running around or in a place in which we have simply run out.

And that's why the phrase, "looking to Jesus" in today's passage is so crucial. Today's passage shows us that we are to look to Jesus because of who he is and because of what he has done. In today's passage Jesus is described as "the pioneer and perfecter" of our faith. The King James Version puts it a little differently in referring to Jesus as the "author and finisher of our faith." The point is that in the midst of wanting to go back, in the midst of all the running around or the running out, in the midst of all the efforts to achieve a higher rank we can be encouraged by looking to Jesus because of who he is, the "pioneer and perfecter," the "author and finisher" of our faith. We can be encouraged because Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has chosen us (John 15:16), that he prays for us (Romans 8:34), and that he will finish the work he has begun in our lives (Philippians 1:6). We can look to Jesus because he has always been looking out for us.

Not only can we be encouraged because of who Jesus is, we can also be encouraged because of what he has done, as Hebrews 12:2 tells us he "endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

The good news is that when Jesus was in the most challenging and stressful circumstances imaginable as he faced his passion and death, he did *not* go back, he did *not* run around or run out, he did *not* concern himself with rank. Instead, Jesus endured the cross, and the shame that went with it. Death by crucifixion was not only unbelievably painful, it was also considered shameful.

One of my favorite biblical scholars is the late F. F. Bruce, and in his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews he describes the shame involved in crucifixion:

"To die by crucifixion was to plumb to the lowest depths of disgrace; it was a punishment reserved for those who were deemed most unfit to live, a punishment for those who were subhuman. From so degrading a death Roman citizens were exempt by ancient statute; the dignity of the Roman name would be besmirched by being brought into association with anything as vile as the cross" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 338).

And yet even facing such extreme shame, Jesus still did not go back. The good news of the gospel is that, as we see in today's passage, Jesus "endured the cross, disregarding the shame." The good news is that Jesus disregarded the shame of dying by crucifixion, and in doing so also took our shame upon himself.

Many people struggle with shame, a heavy sense of guilt and defilement because of things they have done or things that have been done to them. Some people are able to mask their shame behind busy, overachieving lives; others struggle with depression or anxiety or turn to self-

destructive behaviors to numb the shame. In fact, some people run around like crazy or become preoccupied by where they rank because they are trying to keep their shame at bay. But these things don't work. The shame remains.

Consider for a moment the most shameful thing you have ever done, the thing in your life you wish you could go back and undo. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus' blood covers that, all of it. You have been forgiven by God. On the cross Jesus took your shame upon himself, because he loves you.

Or consider for a moment the most shameful thing that has ever been done to you, the thing that was not your fault but still causes you a deep sense of shame. Jesus' blood covers all of that too, all of it. He wept when you went through that, and on the cross Jesus took that shame upon himself, because he loves you.

The good news of the gospel is that you do not have to bear your shame anymore. Jesus has borne it for you. Whether the shame is the result of something you did or the result of something done to you, you need not bear it anymore. Jesus has borne it for you. Jesus "endured the cross, disregarding its shame."

And in today's passage we see that Jesus' work of atoning for the shame of our lives is complete, that Jesus "has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Nothing need be nor can be added to the completed atoning work of Jesus' death on cross. This is a recurring theme throughout the Letter to the Hebrews.

The recurring theme for the Minnesota Vikings training camp is the issue of whether or not Brett Favre will return ☺. The recurring theme of every Nicholas Sparks novel is that a couple falls madly in love but one of both of them will die ☺. The recurring theme of the Letter to the Hebrews is that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross has completely atoned for the sin and shame in our lives. This is evident in the recurring references to Jesus sitting down at the right hand of God after his death and resurrection. He has taken his seat because his atoning work is complete. We see this in chapter 1: "When (Jesus) had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (vs. 3); we see this again in chapter 10: "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God'" (vs. 12); and finally we see it in today's passage in chapter 12: "(Jesus) endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (vs. 2). There is nothing you can do to add to Jesus' complete atoning work. He has completely borne your sin. He has completely borne your shame. It is not yours to bear any longer.

Moreover, Jesus' place at the right hand of the throne of God reveals that he went from the lowest place possible, the shameful death by crucifixion, to the highest place possible, the right hand of God Almighty. This gives us hope especially when we are in the midst of the lowest places or seasons in our lives. The story is not over... someday we'll be with Jesus in the highest possible place, heaven.

And it does not end there. Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter, the author and finisher of our faith bore our shame on the cross not only because he loves us, but also for joy: “for the sake of the joy that was set before him” Jesus “endured the cross.”

Imagine the joy Jesus felt at his resurrection, his atoning work finished, his bearing the sin and shame of the world, finished. He wants us to experience joy too, the joy of knowing we are forgiven, the joy of knowing that we do not need to bear our shame anymore.

At the Last Supper Jesus spoke several times about joy. He said that he wants our joy to be complete (John 15:11); he assured us that although we will experience pain in our lives, that pain will eventually be turned to joy (John 16:20); and he promised it would be a joy that no one would be able to take away (John 16:22).

So today, if you are in the midst of a challenging or stressful situation and you just want to go back, or if you are running around like crazy or have simply run out, or if you are preoccupied by where you rank in life, or if you are dealing with a deep sense of shame in your life, there is good news. We can be encouraged as we look to Jesus because of who he is, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and because of what he has done: he endured the cross and bore our shame. We have been forgiven. We do not need to bear our shame anymore. Jesus died for us and bore our shame for the sake of joy, and while we experience that joy in bits and pieces in this life, we have the hope that someday we will experience it to the fullest in the presence of our Savior.

In the meantime, we can look to Jesus because he has always been looking out for us.

Amen.