

Sermon for: Trinity Lutheran Church, Manilla

“Guided to the Cross” – 2024 Lenten Series – March 23, 2024

Sermon Text: John 19:16-22

Sermon Title/Theme: Guided to Perseverance”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The fame of Florence Chadwick is that she was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. Prior to that historical accomplishment, she came to learn about perseverance.

On the 4th of July, 1951, she attempted to swim from Catalina Island to the California coast.

The challenge was not so much the distance (although it was 22 miles), but the bigger challenge was the bone-chilling waters of the Pacific Ocean. Complicating the adventure was the dense fog that lay over the entire area, making it impossible for her to see the coast toward which she was swimming. After about 15 hours in the water, and within a half mile of her goal, Chadwick gave up. Later, she told a reporter, “Look, I’m not excusing myself, but if I could have seen the land ahead, I know I would have made it.”

Not long afterward she attempted the feat again. A foggy mist again obscured the coastline, and she couldn’t see the shore. This time she made it because she kept reminding herself that land was there. With that confidence she bravely swam on and achieved the goal. In fact, she broke the men’s record by 2 hours. Chadwick’s story is an illustration of perseverance.

This evening we conclude our “Guided to the Cross” Lenten series. Guided to the cross, we are “Guided to Perseverance.” None of us can match Chadwick’s swim and the mental and physical perseverance she displayed. However, we have all persevered to complete something. Maybe it was a long hike where we wondered how much longer until the end. Physically there may

have been the challenge of a race or athletic event to complete or reaching a physical therapy goal. Maybe it was the assignment at school or work that look hours, late nights or all-consuming days. Parenting is perseverance—night time feedings, diaper changes, independent two's, moody teens, financing college, . . . Perseverance is continuing on even when things are hard or look dire.

Lent is the story of the perseverance of Jesus. Early in His ministry Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness tempted by the devil. He is hungry and tired, yet Jesus never succumbs to Satan's tricks. Hours before His passion Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke's Gospel (22:44) tells us, "His sweat became like great drops of blood flowing down to the ground." Judas sells the Master for 30 pieces of silver; disciples fall asleep and flee; yet Jesus perseveres in the Father's will, allowing Himself to be arrested when He could have called down a legion of angels to spare Him.

In Caiaphas' court, Jesus does not say a word as false witnesses said all sorts of lies against Him. Jesus took each lash of the soldier's whip. He allowed a crown of thorn to be placed on His head. He heard the cries of the crowd, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him," and he took their angry intents without a wince. Jesus experienced the unimaginable torture of being nailed to a cross and suspended between heaven and earth. The physical pain was no match for the emotional pain of being abandoned by His heavenly Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

The cross is the ultimate sign of perseverance. Jesus perseveres against all odds and kept moving forward to the very moment of death. The crowd around the cross—the Roman

soldiers assigned to the gruesome task, the self-righteous Pharisees, the curious onlookers— only saw the haze of helplessness, the fog of suffering, and another cruel death. What did Jesus see? Perfectly persevering to the point of death, Jesus saw the shores of sure salvation, the firm land of forgiveness won for every person there and for every person here. If Christ had not persevered as the perfect and complete sacrifice for all our sins, we would be lost swimming in a sea of despair and death.

Through the cross, we are guided to perseverance. We are guided to “continuing on even when things are hard or dire.” As a follower of Christ and missionary to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul experienced torture and imprisonment. Following the example of Christ and sharing his own experiences, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth who were facing persecution and even death for their faith (2 Corinthians 4:16-18): “We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” We, as Christ’s followers, are not quitters. We go the distance with Him and for Him. We do not turn back to our old ways. We look to the goal of heaven with Him that awaits us even in the midst of our sufferings here on earth. Even as we feel like we are swimming against the current; even as we feel surrounded by the hazy fog and mist of earthly trials; even as the same temptations are before us; even as thoughts of despair drain our energy; through it all we are reminded that Jesus persevered until death, even death on a cross. There is peace and hope because we know Jesus reached the shore of salvation for us.

The news reporters share the conversations with those who have faced a natural disaster: a tornado that levels a town, a fire that burns tens of thousands of acres, a ravaging flood . . . and they promise to persevere: "We'll get through this! We are a strong community." The family faces a tragedy: a devastating diagnosis or the death of a loved one . . . and they too speak of perseverance: "We got each other; we are a supportive family."

As Christians we have more than family genes or community history to guide our perseverance. We have a cross. Tired, aching, doubting, hurting, wondering what is ahead if nothing seems in sight, our Father in heaven and His Son, our Savior, have given the sight of an empty cross. The cross reminds us that Jesus kept going to the cross, to the tomb, and out of the tomb, alive and victorious. The message of the cross is that we can keep going. We can buckle down and muscle through because Jesus defeated our greatest enemies on the cross: the enemies of sin, death, and the devil all of which we could never overcome.

The cross is ultimately a sign that the end of all pain and suffering will come when Christ, who was crucified, dead, buried, and rose again, returns to take us home to heaven to live with Him. His perseverance for us will be clear when we arrive in that eternal realm: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away," (Rev. 21:4). Be guided to the cross. Be guided to perseverance. Be focused on the end result. Guided to His work on the cross we too will be blessed to be welcomed, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

The safe shore is just ahead. Keep swimming, in Jesus' name. Amen.